



**WEEKLY UPDATE
SEPTEMBER 19 - 25, 2021**

THIS WEEK

NO BOS MEETING

**APCD MEETING LIGHT
BUT IS IT MORE SYMBOLIC THAN REAL?**

PLANNING COMMISSION MEETING LIGHT

LAST WEEK

BOS

BEHAVIORIAL HEALTH CONTRACTS APPROVED

**COUNTY PASO BASIN SGMA WATER PLAN FACES REJECTION
BY STATE – AGENCIES WORKING ON FIXES**

COUNTY DIVORCE FROM IWMA RE-AFFIRMED

NEW WATER SUSTAINABILITY DEPARTMENT CREATED

LAFCO CANCELLED

EMERGENT ISSUES

COVID DECLINES AGAIN IN SLO COUNTY

COLAB IN DEPTH

SEE PAGE 11

REFLECTIONS ON THE CALIFORNIA RECALL

BY JOEL KOTKIN

THE WEST ISN'T DYING – ITS IDEAS LIVE ON IN CHINA

What the Western world confronts is not the threatening advance of alien civilisations, but its own dark shadows moving through China and Russia.

BY JOHN GRAY

THIS WEEK'S HIGHLIGHTS

ALL MEETINGS ARE 9:00 AM UNLESS OTHERWISE NOTED

In General: This is a very light week in terms of agency meetings.

No Board of Supervisors Meeting on Tuesday, September 21, 2021 (Not Scheduled)

The next regular meeting is scheduled for Tuesday, September 28, 2021.

San Luis Obispo County Air Pollution Control District (APCD) Meeting of Wednesday, September 22, 2021.

There are no major policy items on this agenda, which mainly consists of reports. The real action is probably in Executive Session, when they discuss the pending Friends of the Dunes lawsuits

related to the Coastal Commission ordering the eventual closing of the Dunes to off road-riding and freestyle camping.

Item C-3: APCD Performance Measures. The item contains a list of the performance measures which the APCD has adopted. There are 30 in all. They contain response, enforcement, and pollution reduction data as well as others pertaining to the administrative management of the agency. These can be observed by clicking on the link below.

[MetaViewer.php \(granicus.com\)](http://MetaViewer.php (granicus.com))

Some samples:

Performance Measure	Good	Fair	Poor	Comments
Grants and Incentive Programs	✓			<p>From existing and current year program approvals, \$1,701,180 has been expended to date for all active grant programs in FY 2020-2021 resulting in significant voluntary emission reductions, including the following projects:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 40 old car buybacks (\$49,000), • 35 conversions of fireplaces and wood stoves (\$71,990), • 11 tractor replacements (\$840,040), • 3 school buses (\$506,550), • 1 marine repower (\$50,000 – partial payment), and • \$183,600 on electric vehicle infrastructure. <p>Staff maintained active participation in the CAPCOA Grant Committee, including working with CAPCOA, CARB and legislative staff to comment on legislation and related programmatic impacts. Requests for proposals, screening of projects, contract development, and payment for completed projects were performed in a timely manner, and staff continued to monitor implementation progress of active projects from past grant cycles and compile applicable reports to the State. Staff also maintained active participation on the CAPCOA Wood Smoke Reduction Working Group and participated in the CALeVIP South Central Coast 2021 project partnership.</p> <p>During FY 20/21, your board also authorized \$1,040,961 in new grant funding for APCD's continued implementation of our grant programs.</p>

Note that most of the ratings are good on a 3-rating scale. This means that the measures are too easy and they are not stiffening them to provide cheaper, faster, and better service and outcomes. For example, in the table below annual permit renewals are to be completed in 45 days. Why would it take so long, given that most of them are annual and have been in the workload for years?

The inspectors come out and sniff around the barrels of red wine to determine if the wine is generating any smells or pollution? They check of see if the fermentation gasses are within legal bounds? How long should that take at a winery where they have been inspecting for years? Ditto

for the dry cleaners, auto paint shop, and bakery. God forbid the scones are generating too many emissions.

<i>Compliance</i>				
Performance Measure	Good	Fair	Poor	Comments
Permit Renewal and Compliance Inspections	✓			Approximately 1,064 permits were renewed during FY 2020-2021, with over 95% of renewals completed within our goal of 45 days. Over 1,295 compliance inspections and investigations were also completed in FY 2020-2021. The COVID-19 emergency continued to affect renewal completion times and inspection procedures for some sources, with staff adjusting to ensure safety protocols are implemented and minimizing risk while determining compliance.
Enforcement and Legal Actions	✓			All minor violation settlements have a goal for completion within an average of 90 days or less. Major violation settlements are to be completed within an average of six months or less. The District issued approximately 45 violations in FY 2020-2021; 100% of settlements have or will meet established completion goals.
Complaint Response	✓			Staff strive to respond to all air quality and other complaints within one day, and to complete related investigations, final actions, and reports within 10 days of the complaint. The District responded to approximately 158 complaints in FY 2020-2021, this is significantly less than the 263 complaints received in FY 2020-2021; all current complaint investigations are on target for timely completion. Smoke complaints represent about 35% of the total, dust complaints about 27%, and odor complaints 29% of the total.
Asbestos Program	✓			All work and reports on asbestos abatement projects were accomplished on time within our performance goals. Approximately 70 new projects were processed in FY 2020-2021, with staff performing 25 additional project reviews for changes to initial project applications. Staff continue to update and improve the more user-friendly web interface for homeowners and contractors, providing a central location for all asbestos related brochures, information, and resources.

Most of the measures are measures of activity – that is, how much work they do and how long it takes. A major policy question is: What is the impact? In other words, what if we didn't do this? Are the incidences of pulmonary disease down as a result? Are people living longer? What exact measured problems are we attempting to solve? Is CO₂ declining?

The APCD expends about \$5.8 million per year of tax and fee money levied on general citizens, business, and agriculture.

Planning Commission Meeting of Thursday, September 23, 2021 (Scheduled)

The meeting contains a very short agenda and no major policy items.

LAST WEEK'S HIGHLIGHTS

Board of Supervisors Meeting of Tuesday, September 14, 2021 (Completed)

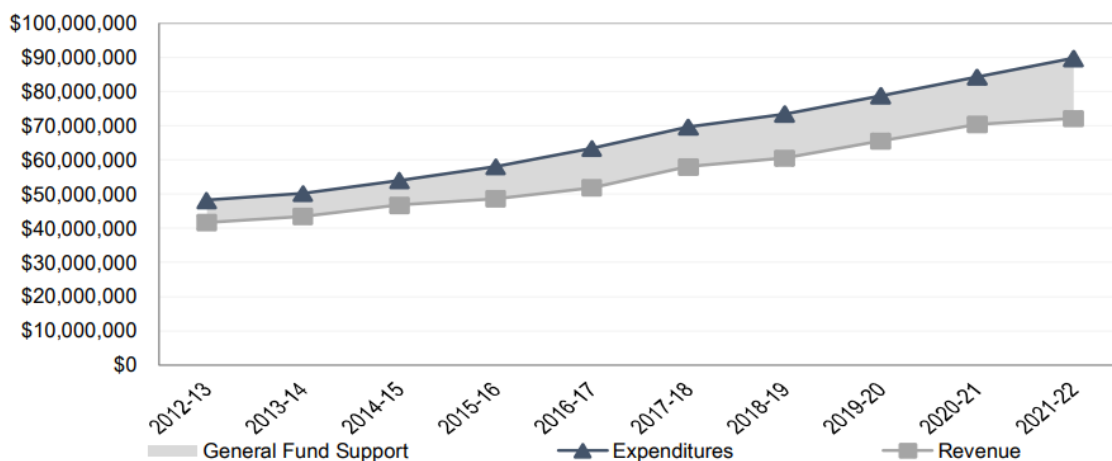
Items 10–15 - Each of the items covers a contract with a not-for-profit or for-profit mental health services providers. The contracts were routinely approved on the Consent Calendar. In total, the cost is \$13.2 million. To the Behavioral Health Care Department's credit, all the contracts are very detailed, and all contain performance measures, including number of patients served, unduplicated counts, minutes and hours of service rates, a variety of preventative activities, and so forth.

Background: Data contained in the contracts is significant in that it encapsulates, the large group of people receiving various mental health services.

The question then arises: Why? Is this another pandemic, which unlike COVID, SARS, or Flu, has been going at an increasing rate year after year? Is society becoming sicker? Like those who worry about the asserted societal destruction that could be wrought by Climate Change, is there an expanding increase of the incidence of mental illness, which could ultimately endanger the society?

The Behavioral Health Department's budget history illustrates growth of the problem as well the relative expansion of the general fund contribution.

Ten Year Budget History



Again and as we are always asking, what is the problem, how big is it, how many are affected, who are affected, where does it occur, and what are the trends? The real important analysis is then, what are underlying causes? Simply treating the patients is like trying to stop the bleeding at the wrist. The tourniquet needs to be further up the arm.

Undoubtedly, the decline of the nuclear family, the growth of zoning laws which make it hard to take care of grandma and granddad, spread of value relativism, easy access to narcotics, byzantine factory-like public schools, cultural decay, and all the rest would be the actual issues.

Item 22 - Submittal of a resolution declaring the Board’s intent to formally withdraw from the Integrated Waste Management Authority (IWMA) and directing the County Administrative Officer to submit the resolution to the IWMA to trigger the notice requirement for withdrawal. The Resolution passed 3/2, with Gibson and Ortiz-Legg dissenting.

Background:

The County hired a consultant who determined that it will cost the County between \$1,585,400 and \$2,084,000 to operate the system on its own and if no other jurisdictions switch over to the County as customers. There are also variables derived from whether the remaining IWMA will grant the County its cumulated share of the financial and physical assets of the IWMA. The rate impacts are forecast as:

Table B – Required Revenue Needed, Full Cost Recovery from IWMA

Customer Sector	Hauler Revenues	Additional Needed Fee Revenue	Required Rate Adjustment Percent
Residential	\$7,147,000	\$696,400	9.7%
Commercial	5,870,800	782,700	13.3%
Rolloff	<u>3,883,800</u>	<u>106,300</u>	2.7%
Total	\$16,901,600	\$1,585,400	9.4%

However, the analysis is not apples-to-Apples – See the table below on the next page.

Table 7 – Estimated Annual Expenditures

Description	Education & Outreach	Contamination Monitoring	Monitoring & Reporting	Compliance Review & Enforcement	Household Hazardous Waste	Program Administration	Total Estimated Expenditures
Program Manager II	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$162,200	\$162,200
Solid Waste Coordinator II	163,300	0	163,300	163,300	0	0	489,900
Solid Waste Coordinator I	0	134,000	0	0	0	0	134,000
Department Overhead	26,800	22,000	26,800	26,800	0	26,600	129,000
Division Overhead	<u>35,200</u>	<u>35,200</u>	<u>35,200</u>	<u>35,200</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>35,200</u>	<u>176,000</u>
Subtotal - Personnel Expenditures	\$225,300	\$191,200	\$225,300	\$225,300	\$0	\$224,000	\$1,091,100
HHW Contractor					\$400,000		\$400,000
Property Lease Expense					105,000		105,000
Contract Services						200,000	200,000
General and Admin Expense	25,000	25,000	25,000	25,000		25,000	125,000
Dept Accounting Support						25,000	25,000
County Legal Costs						50,000	50,000
Office Rent						30,000	30,000
Vehicle Maintenance	8,000			8,000			16,000
Department Overhead	1,500	1,100	1,100	1,500	22,200	14,500	41,900
Countywide Overhead	<u>5,900</u>	<u>5,000</u>	<u>5,700</u>	<u>5,900</u>	<u>12,000</u>	<u>13,000</u>	<u>47,500</u>
Subtotal - Operating Expenditures	\$40,400	\$31,100	\$31,800	\$40,400	\$539,200	\$357,500	\$1,040,400
Total Estimated Expenditures	\$265,700	\$222,300	\$257,100	\$265,700	\$539,200	\$581,500	\$2,131,500

The lower section of Table 7 (Operating Expenditures) itemizes the estimated operating expenditures. The major categories of these operating expenditures include:

A problem with this table and the related supporting analysis (from which the rates were derived) is that the net costs of the implementation of SB 1383 are included. Thus, the policy makers and Board of Supervisors cannot ascertain how much of the cost is base-cost of the existing program versus base-cost plus the new SB1383 costs. Even if the County remains with the IWMA, its residential and commercial customers will experience significant new costs in any case.

Thus, there needs to be an apples-to-apples analysis. The report text actually admits this problem:

Finding 7 – For the County to perform the responsibilities currently undertaken by the Authority, and to comply with SB 1383, it will require five (5) additional positions in the Public Works Department. Table 6 on the following page shows the five (5) new positions that would be required for the County to perform the responsibilities now undertaken by the Authority and those that will be required by SB 1383. An outline of the expected responsibilities of each staff member is listed below.

This structural aspect to the report presentation effectively camouflages the true breakdown of the cost increase. The Board should request a separate breakout.

There are also questions related to the cost of the Household Hazardous Waste (HHW) program. Currently and over all, the IWMA cost is about \$900,000 plus per year. The consultant assigns a projected cost to the county customers of about \$400,000 per year if the County leaves the IWMA. But the unincorporated county customers constitute only 25% of the base. In fact, the IWMA itself has now stated that the 25% estimate is too high, because the consultant did not accrete the data by service provider. Accordingly, the County's cost could be substantially lower. Also related to the cost is the method of collecting the paint, oil, chemicals, sharps, and other components of the waste. Separate recycling centers are set up, staffed, and run by a private sector company, expert in disposing of the stuff. In some jurisdictions the regular refuse route trucks contain side bins in which the HHW can be deposited, eliminating the need for a separate contractor. The private haulers would have to be compensated, but the economies of scale and the elimination of special sites could reduce the cost.

Item 23 - Submittal of a report on the implementation of Sustainable Groundwater Management Act efforts in eight local groundwater basins and authorize staff to coordinate with the City of Paso Robles on transferring ownership of water monitoring facilities from the City to the County. The report was received and did not seem to generate any controversy.

Background: The report is presented each quarter and details progress in development and implementation of State mandated Ground Water Sustainability Plans (GSPs) for each of the 8 basins in the County subject to SGMA.

Deeply buried in the small print of the Report is the troubling news that the State Department of Water Resources (DWR) has found deficiencies in the Paso Basin GSP. The report states in part:

- *On June 3, 2021, DWR released their initial review of the Paso Basin GSP and provided a Consultation Letter outlining GSP deficiencies that may preclude DWR's approval. Unless the GSP deficiencies are addressed before DWR finalizes their designation (due by January 30,*

2022), it is anticipated the GSP would be considered “incomplete” and the GSAs would need to address the deficiencies within 180 days or be referred to the State for potential intervention.

The deficiencies are not specified in this report. Thus, it is not known how severe they are or how much effort will be required to obtain agreement from the various Basin managing agencies to make modifications that will satisfy DWR.

This circumstance could ignite a whole new round of controversy about the Basin.

Item 32 - It is recommended that your Board approve a policy which will permanently direct the Auditor-Controller-Treasurer Tax Collector to prepare a fiscal impact statement, to be printed with ballot materials, for any future locally initiated ballot measures deemed to fiscally impact the County of San Luis Obispo. The new process was adopted unanimously. This is a great idea that eliminates a step which now requires that the Board direct such analyses on each separate measure every time one comes up. This will make it automatic. The write-up states in part:

As part of a discussion during the June 22, 2021, Board of Supervisors meeting, staff was asked to draft a policy to direct the Auditor-Controller-Treasurer-Tax Collector (ACTTC) to conduct fiscal analyses and prepare fiscal impact statements for any future county ballot measures initiated locally that are deemed to fiscally impact San Luis Obispo County.

Statements will be included with printed ballot materials. Relying on appropriate professional standards, the reports would provide the Auditor-Controller-Treasurer-Tax Collector’s assessment regarding the changes in revenue and costs that may result from the proposed ballot measure, if such measure were ultimately approved. The goal of this policy is to create a consistent, apolitical, financial analysis of proposed changes after considering all potential costs and fiscal impacts to the County and its economy

Item 33 - Hearing and Passage of Ordinances to Create a New Groundwater Sustainability Department and a new position of Director of Groundwater Sustainability. Surprisingly, the item was approved unanimously and without friction.

Background:

The Board approved creation of a new County Department of Groundwater Sustainability and a new Director of Groundwater Sustainability position. The item write-up does not present data on the ultimate size, staffing, or costs of the new proposed Department. Nor does it contain information on any parallel reductions in the Public Works Department as its Water Division functions are shifted to the new Department.

New departments usually require administrative, clerical, and financial control support. No information is presented as part of this item on any of those details or what the total annual budget might contain. No organization chart for the new Department detailing the staffing or functions is provided. The Groundwater Sustainability Director (GSD) will lead, plan, organize, and direct the overall operations and activities of groundwater resources management. The Director is also responsible for the Department’s budget development, accounting, and administration.

Additional responsibilities include working with local agencies, consultants, the public, and Groundwater Sustainability Agencies (GSAs) to carry out the implementation of the GSP and groundwater management actions in other basins (e.g. San Luis Obispo and Los Osos), managing and directing resources for the efficient performance of operations, and communicating with local and state agencies.

This position will also manage consultants providing various technical, administrative, financial, regulatory, legal, and environmental supports for GSP and groundwater management implementation activities, such as funding, management, area-specific mandatory pumping management, monitoring, reporting, and outreach.

A review of the Budget document demonstrates limited staffing summary information. (Total Expenditures: \$767,109 Total Staffing (FTE): ?) Staffing is reflected in Fund Center 405 – Public Works. Why would the Board consider this item, absent that data? This situation seems all too similar to the approval of a reorganization of the Planning and Building Department in July that lacked a description of the problems which the effort is meant to correct.

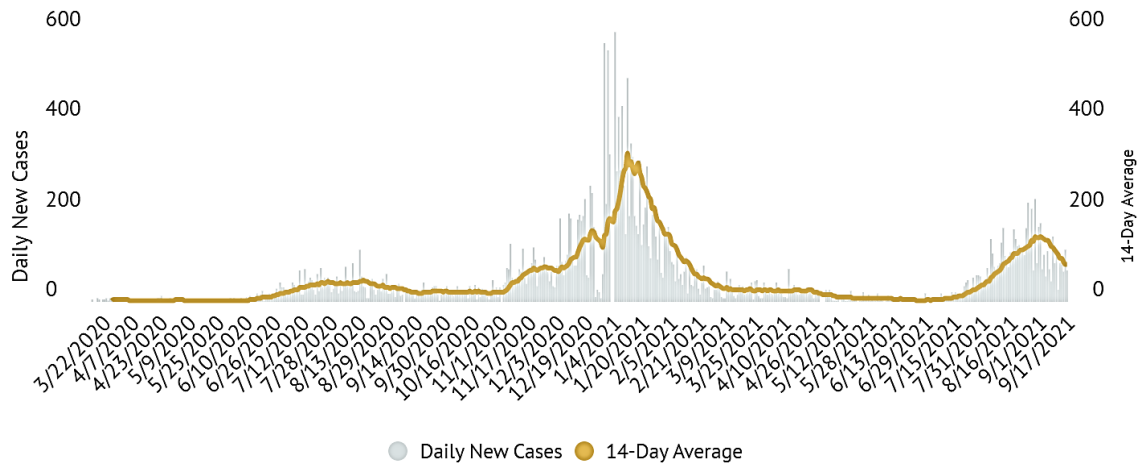
What is Really Happening? Is this proposal possibly part of a deal by the administration to allow the CAO to have appointed John Diodati as Public Works Director in exchange for transferring water management functions out of the Department? It is known that Supervisors Arnold and Compton were not keen on having Diodati appointed as permanent Public Works Director due to his alleged past support of having the Paso Basin water districts controlled by large operators who favor water banking. However, as of this writing, several Supervisors indicated that they were not aware that this proposal was being brought forward. Last month Diodati was appointed as permanent Public Works Director without any Board objection or public controversy.

FY 2021-2022 Estimated Annual Expense						
Action	Classification	FTE	Salary	Benefits	Total	Step Estimate
Add	Groundwater Sustainability Director	1.0	\$110,004	\$65,835	\$175,839	Step 6 for 8 months
	Net Change	1.0	\$110,004	\$65,835	\$175,839	
Estimated 2022-23 Expense						
Action	Classification	FTE	Salary	Benefits	Total	Step Estimate
Add	Groundwater Sustainability Director	1.0	\$165,006	\$98,752	\$263,759	Step 6 for 12 months
	Net Change	1.0	\$165,006	\$98,752	\$263,759	
Estimated Annual Expense at Maximum Step						
Action	Classification	FTE	Salary	Benefits	Total	Step Estimate
Add	Groundwater Sustainability Director	1.0	\$165,006	\$98,752	\$263,759	Step 6 for 12 months
	Net Change	1.0	\$165,006	\$98,752	\$263,759	

EMERGENT ISSUES

Item 1 - COVID Status. The infection rate plateaued at week 6 of the run up and seems to have turned down at week 7. The downward trend has continued for week 8.

Daily New Cases (and 14-Day Average)



32 (14 ICU) **

SLO County Residents with COVID-19 in Hospital

Item 2 - More Border Chaos



COLAB IN DEPTH

IN FIGHTING THE TROUBLESOME, LOCAL DAY-TO-DAY ASSAULTS ON OUR FREEDOM AND PROPERTY, IT IS ALSO IMPORTANT TO KEEP IN MIND THE LARGER UNDERLYING IDEOLOGICAL, POLITICAL, AND ECONOMIC CAUSES

REFLECTIONS ON THE CALIFORNIA RECALL

BY JOEL KOTKIN

What started as a lark, then became [an impossible dream](#) — a [conservative resurgence](#), starting in California — ended, like many past efforts, in electoral defeat. With his overwhelming victory in the recall election, California Governor Gavin Newsom and his backers have consolidated their hold on the state for the foreseeable future.

One can quibble about the political wisdom of the recall gambit, particularly given that Newsom was up for reelection next year. But the main reason for the stunning defeat lay with the state's highly bifurcated political economy, which might sustain a progressive mega-majority in the Golden State, but also alienates some voters—and limits the national appeal of the progressive governance model that Newsom embodies.

The sinking of the state's once-buoyant middle class undermines the base for a two-party politics in California. The kinds of taxpayers who called the state home during the 1980s and 1990s are leaving, and few families are moving in. Many of the leading companies that employed middle-class workers—McKesson, Hewlett Packard, the oil and aerospace industries—are fleeing at [a quickening pace](#).

California today works primarily for two key Newsom constituencies: unionized public employees and pop culture, tech, and financial leaders. [Money](#) from these groups gave Newsom [a massive advantage](#) in advertising and organizing. Newsom's coffers exceeded those of the nearly bankrupt recall campaign and all the prospective candidates combined by almost [three to one](#). The combination of tech IPOs and federal money has also financed [massive relief funds](#) for a third Newsom constituency—California's [highest percentage-in-the-nation](#) poor population—allowing the governor to act like a [modern-day Boss Tweed](#).

This electoral triangle remains too entrenched to dislodge, at least for now. Massive spending secured the votes of disengaged voters, even as the [San Francisco Chronicle](#) warned about “an alarming enthusiasm gap” among Democrats. The effort to reach enough of these voters clearly worked.

The media played its assigned role. The overwhelmingly progressive press never much liked Newsom, but the threat of a potential Republican governor in the person of Larry Elder, the leader among the challengers, drove them to partisan distraction. [Paul Krugman](#) framed the recall as an assault on California's “progressive success story.” The [New York Times](#)'s [Ezra](#)

[Klein](#) referred to Newsom as a leader of “substance,” just months after he’d observed that the state has [deteriorated](#) so badly that it makes “liberals squirm.”

With the recall threat gone, Sacramento insiders expect more progressive moves—such as attempts to tax wealth, including unrealized gains, from the upper-middle class. More pressure will be brought to bear to restrict the use of [contract workers](#), particularly with the recent court overturning of Proposition 22. The state will accelerate its program of ever-more stringent restrictions on water and energy use.

In this environment, California’s blue-collar workers face a grim future unless they’re employed by the state. Progressive success drives out the very businesses—manufacturing, suburban homebuilding, the once-robust [oil-and-gas sector](#)—that historically employed middle-income workers. Indeed, the lack of stable jobs and a dependence on low-paid service workers contribute to the state’s highest-in-the-nation [unemployment rate](#). One out of every three households, notes [the United Way](#), find achieving even basic security “elusive.”

Newsom’s victory is more of a reality check for the Republican Party than an endorsement of progressive policies. Voter dissatisfaction, particularly among minorities and the young, has not waned. [Polls](#) show that many Californians don’t see Newsom as effective at battling such problems as deepening income inequality, homelessness, [rising crime](#), fires, and the pandemic. Some longtime progressives broke with the governor. But the state Republican Party could not capitalize—a sign that it remains largely marginal, particularly in the highly populated coastal areas, where dislike of Donald Trump has tarnished its brand.

To shift emphasis from Newsom’s failures, the local and national [media](#), the state’s political establishment, and academics denounced the recall push as an operation carried out by [Trumpian extremists](#). By the end of the election, the ongoing wildfires were being cast not as an indictment of Newsom’s [failed forest-management policies](#) but of Republican inaction on climate change. Unrelated events—such as Texas Republicans passage of a restrictive abortion bill—may have helped Newsom, too.

The story may not be quite over, though. In 2020, voters defeated a [tax increase](#) backed by Mark Zuckerberg and other tech leaders and shot down [an affirmative action](#) measure supported by virtually every element of the state establishment. The reservoir of resentment and potential future turmoil remains deep. Even before Covid, 53 percent of [Californians](#) were considering leaving; almost two-thirds thought the state’s best days were behind it. The [New York Times](#) may see California as [a multicultural exemplar](#), but a 2019 [University of California, Berkeley poll](#) showed that 58 percent of African-Americans, 44 percent of Asian-Americans, and 43 percent of Latinos were considering leaving the state. A recent poll from Sacramento’s [Chamber of Commerce](#) showed that roughly one-fourth of the workforce was contemplating a move out within three years.

Californians sense that the status quo does not work in their favor. In this sense, Elder’s taking of roughly 40 percent of the vote in the now-discarded replacement primary may prove a first step to restoring two-party politics in the state. Elder’s sometimes-extreme libertarianism eventually got him in trouble, but a self-made African-American with a keen taste for political debate made for an appealing contrast with John Cox, the GOP’s weak 2018 gubernatorial candidate. Elder connected with Latinos and some younger people, and he made a brilliant contrast with the

haughty Newsom and his wealthy supporters. Maybe Elder is not the ideal candidate, but he opened a class-based political approach that could bear fruit with the right spokesman.

When Elder spoke out for agency and aspiration as opposed to victimhood, he borrowed a Republican theme that worked well in 2020, particularly among [Asians](#) and [Latinos](#). [As late as July](#), before the media, advertising, and voter-turnout tsunamis formed, both those demographic groups favored the recall. Even the reliably progressive [Los Angeles Times columnist Gustavo Arellano](#) admitted that, among Hispanics, Newsom was about “as loved as a stale Mexican coke.”

If they want to become relevant in the state again, though, Republicans need a constructive agenda. The next opportunity could take place under more difficult circumstances for progressives. The expensive and unreliable electrical grid will continue to cause problems. The state is in such trouble that it has been forced to [propose building](#) five “temporary” [gas plants](#) to keep the lights on.

Meantime, green-driven reluctance to stop water releases to the ocean risks taking jobs from workers in the now politically marginalized interior. Some [6,600 Central Valley farmers](#) have already been told not to expect deliveries this year. [Pension debt](#) will mount; schools will surely not improve with the state’s new ethnic studies curriculum. As the expansion of the welfare state competes with the demands of the public sector, the financial crush could lead to a [tax hike](#)—forcing California Democrats to choose between their wealthiest backers and the union–social welfare juggernaut.

In the near term, Newsom’s recall victory could be seen as a boon to President Biden. Yet short of a massive federal bailout, the bill will come due for governance failures in this remarkably gifted state. And if the Biden agenda doesn’t survive next year’s midterms, neither can the wan hopes of extending California’s agenda nationally. Governor Newsom has survived the recall, but that doesn’t mean that the Golden State is destined to become the role model for the country—it might not even represent the inevitable future for most Californians.

This article was originally published by City Journal Online on September 16, 2021. Described by the New York Times as "America's uber-geographer," Joel Kotkin is an internationally-recognized authority on global, economic, political and social trends. His new book, The Human City: Urbanism for the Rest of Us was published last year by Agate Press. He is co-editor, with Alan Berger of MIT, of the forthcoming book Infinite Suburbia, a book of essays by 52 authors.

Mr. Kotkin is the Presidential Fellow in Urban Futures at Chapman University in Orange, California and Executive Director of the Houston-based Center for Opportunity Urbanism (opportunityurbanism.org). He is Senior Advisor to the Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute. He is Executive Editor of the widely read website www.newgeography.com and writes the weekly "New Geographer" column for Forbes.com. He is a regular contributor to the Daily Beast and Real Clear Politics.

He is the author of seven previously published books, including the widely praised The New Class Conflict (Telos Press), which describes the changing dynamics of class in America.

COLAB NOTE: THE ARTICLE BELOW IS A LITTLE LONGER THAN OUR USUAL CHOICES BUT WELL WORTH SOME TIME. ITS ANALYSIS IS OUTSIDE THE BOX.

THE WEST ISN'T DYING – ITS IDEAS LIVE ON IN CHINA

What the Western world confronts is not the threatening advance of alien civilisations, but its own dark shadows moving through China and Russia.

BY JOHN GRAY

East is West: the totalitarian regime of Xi Jinping and the authoritarianism of Vladimir Putin are both informed by ideas that emanated from the West.

The retreat of the West began with the fall of communism in 1989. Our triumphal elites lost their sense of reality, and in a succession of attempts to remake the world in their image went on to vacate some of the planet's most strategically decisive regions. The end result of their attempt to export their system of government is that Western states are weaker and more endangered than they were at any point in the Cold War.

Yet viewing this debacle as a defeat for Western ideas and values is a fundamental error. Western ideologies continue to rule the world. In China Xi Jinping has embraced a variant of integral nationalism not unlike those that emerged in interwar Europe, while Vladimir Putin has skillfully deployed Leninist methods to resurrect an enfeebled Russia as a global power. Ideas and projects originating in the illiberal West continue to shape global politics. At the same time, in an intriguing synchronicity, Western liberalism has itself become illiberal.

The geopolitical descent of the West was visible in the aftermath of the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and is palpable in the withdrawal of American-led forces from Afghanistan. Iran is now the predominant power in Iraq. With the Afghan state and regular army melting away following the US withdrawal, the future will be decided by the Taliban and neighbouring states that are sucked into the ensuing power vacuum. After years of Western intervention and the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people, in Syria Bashar al-Assad is still in power and Russia is the deciding force. Following the Western-engineered overthrow of Muammar al-Gaddafi in 2011, Libya is an ungoverned space and a gateway of people-smuggling into Europe.

In recent months the pace of Western retreat has accelerated. Joe Biden's meeting with Putin in Geneva in June gave the Russian president what he most wanted. Accepting that the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline will be completed, Biden has empowered Russia to cut off energy supplies in transit countries. Ukraine has been left twisting in the wind, and Poland and the Baltic states are exposed to increasing Russian power.



The rationale for what is, in effect, a major geopolitical defeat is presumably to allow Germany to secure its energy supplies in return for supporting US efforts to contain China. But the chances of Germany risking its commercial relations with China have always been small. Last year, Germany exported almost €100bn of goods to China – roughly half the value of all EU exports there. China has not only become the biggest German export market, on some measures, but also the fastest-growing.

German foreign policy is dictated mainly by domestic factors, and industrial lobbies will ensure that trade links with China are not compromised. For the influential Greens, Germany's exit from coal and nuclear energy transcends any geopolitical cost. In conjunction with the French president, Emmanuel Macron, Angela Merkel has made it clear that Berlin wants détente with Russia. In any great-power struggle, Germany – and thereby the EU – will likely aim to stay on the sidelines, neutral or non-aligned, while in practice inhabiting a Russian zone of influence. No longer as constrained by European diplomacy after Brexit, Britain is resisting this tendency. But without support from the major European powers it is not clear how much the UK can do beyond protecting its own national interests.

The decomposition of the West is not only a geopolitical fact; it is also cultural and intellectual. Leading Western countries contain powerful bodies of opinion that regard their own civilisation as a uniquely pernicious force. In this hyper-liberal view, which is heavily represented in higher education, Western values of freedom and toleration mean little more than racial domination. If it still exists as a civilisational bloc, the West must be dismantled.

This hyper-liberalism is not presented as one among a number of standpoints that can be examined and questioned in open debate. It is a catechism policed by peer pressure and professional sanctions. Those who enforce it like to dismiss practices such as “cancellation” as nightmares of the fevered right-wing mind with no basis in fact. At the same time, they believe disagreement is an exercise in repression.

In the hyper-liberal credo, only what are regarded as simple, self-evident, morally impeccable truths can be tolerated. Assessing the costs and possible benefits of Western empires for the peoples they governed is not far from being a prohibited enterprise, as is examining the involvement of non-Western states in slavery. Some on the right have compared such ideological restrictions to those enforced under communism. The difference is that in Western societies these curbs on free inquiry are self-imposed.

The upshot is that the liberal West is more a subject of historical investigation than a contemporary reality. Those who believe humankind is converging on liberal values overlook the fact that Western societies are fast discarding them. The “arc of history” points to a model that no longer exists.

This does not mean hyper-liberalism has won. Democracy, insofar as it still functions, imposes limits on ideological orthodoxy. The marketplace, for all its excesses, produces alternatives. Venues encouraging intellectual pluralism continue to survive; some, like this magazine, thrive.

Hyper-liberalism is the ideology of an aspirant ruling class that aims to hoard wealth and position while flaunting its immaculate progressive credentials. Intractable culture wars and an epistemic crisis in which key factual and scientific questions have been politicised are a part of a

bid for power by these counter-elites. But except in New Zealand and English-speaking Canada, there is no sign of them achieving hegemony.

Even so, schools are pressured to teach a single version of history, private corporations sack employees for deviant opinions and cultural institutions act as guardians of orthodoxy. The prototype for these practices is the US, which regards its singular history and divisions as defining every modern society. In much of the world the woke movement is regarded with indifference, or – as in the case of France, where Macron has denounced it as “racialising” society – hostility. But wherever this American agenda prevails, society is no longer liberal in any historically recognisable sense.

The evanescence of Western liberalism does not mean we inhabit a post-Western world. Arguments for Western decline are usually rehashed versions of the Harvard political theorist Samuel Huntington’s speculations about clashing civilisations, joined with prognostications of inescapable Chinese supremacy. Such claims have force insofar as they reflect the sharp contraction of Western power. But they miss the most remarkable feature of the contemporary scene: the continuing dominance of modern Western ideas. Not those of liberalism as traditionally understood, but mixtures of fascism, communism and integral nationalism.

Both China and Russia – avowed rivals of the West – are ruled by ideas that derive from Western sources. (The same is true of Narendra Modi’s nationalism in India and some Islamist movements.) What the West confronts is not the threatening advance of alien civilisations but its own dark shadows.

The formative influence of Western ideas on China’s leadership is illustrated by the references to the ancient Greek historian Thucydides that used to be common among official spokespeople. China, they would assure Western visitors, had no intention of falling into “Thucydides’ trap” – the tendency of rising states to seek to dislodge established powers from their dominant position, leading to war. Since Beijing’s switch to “wolf-warrior diplomacy”, a more assertive and aggressive form of statecraft, some have questioned the significance of the Thucydides trap in Chinese thinking. But Xi Jinping referenced it explicitly in a talk I heard him give in Beijing several years ago. He appears to have become more confident since then.

The study of Western classics is actively promoted in Chinese universities. The texts are often taught in their original Latin or Greek (a practice no longer required at Princeton, where some consider it racist). China’s meritocratic intelligentsia is also notable for having a grasp of Western political thought that exceeds that of many in Western universities. The works of Alexis de Tocqueville, Edmund Burke and Thomas Hobbes, as well as 20th-century thinkers such as Michel Foucault, have been closely studied. The German jurist Carl Schmitt (1888-1985) has been accepted as having the most to teach regarding China’s political development.

Schmitt gained recognition in the German academy by examining the influence of theological ideas on Western jurisprudence. During the 1920s he fashioned a set of ideas in which the Enabling Act of March 1933, which formally established the Nazi regime, could be formulated and justified. Law was created by sovereign political decisions, and whoever decided when a “state of exception” or regime crisis existed was the sovereign. In 1932 he published *The Concept of the Political*, arguing that politics was not a dialogue among members of a shared

community with divergent interests and values, but a struggle between enemies – in other words, a mode of warfare.

Joining the Nazi Party weeks after it came to power, Schmitt distinguished himself by endorsing the burning of books by Jewish authors . But he seems not to have been sufficiently anti-Semitic for his Nazi patrons, and in 1936 was accused of opportunism and had to resign from the party. At the end of the war he was arrested by Allied forces and spent a year in internment. He never recanted from his theories, elaborating on them in the decades that followed.

Uniform vision: Carl Schmitt believed the sovereign should promote the homogeneity of a people. Credit: getty images

Schmitt’s theory of law is not wholly original, or necessarily anti-liberal. A similar view can be found in the work of Hobbes. The difference is in their view of politics and the state. Whereas Hobbes believed the purpose of the state is the protection of individuals from violence and insecurity – a fundamentally liberal position – Schmitt charged the sovereign with promoting the homogeneity of the people.

It is this aspect of Schmitt’s thought that appears to be most attractive to the Chinese leadership. If the state and the people are one and the same, minorities can be suppressed, or obliterated, in the name of public safety. The forced assimilation of Tibetans, Kazakhs, Uighurs and other minorities into a uniform Han Chinese culture is not oppression, but a necessary means of protecting the state from forces that would destroy it.

The German jurist’s ideas are well suited to legitimating Xi’s increasing repression. In 2020 the Beijing law professor Chen Duanhong drew on Schmitt’s thought in a speech in Hong Kong to support the recent “national security” law, maintaining that the exercise of China’s sovereign authority to extinguish liberal freedoms in the former British colony is no more than the state securing its future.

Schmitt supplies a template for Xi’s integral nationalism. The construction of homogeneous nation-states did not begin with National Socialism. It had a European point of origin in revolutionary France. In the early 1790s, the Jacobins used an idea of the nation to crush a popular rising in the Vendée region of western France, in a campaign of repression that may have cost in excess of 100,000 lives. The construction of the French nation-state continued in the 19th century through the institutions of military conscription and national schooling, eradicating the diversity of languages and cultures that existed under the *ancien régime*.

Ethnic cleansing became central to nation-building in the wake of the First World War. The collapse of the Austro-Hungarian, Ottoman and Romanov empires enabled the emergence of nation-states asserting a right to self-determination – a development reinforced by the US president Woodrow Wilson in the Versailles settlement of 1919. His goal was to reconstruct Europe as a community of civic nation-states. But there were internal minorities in many of these states, and in the years that followed large population transfers occurred. Huge numbers fled or were expelled – as many as 1.5 million Greeks from Turkey and around 400,000 Turks from Greece, for example.

The process continued during the Second World War, with the Nazis killing millions in the territories they occupied in eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, and attempting the complete extermination of the Jewish people. Stalin deported peoples whose loyalty to the Soviet state he

mistrusted (such as the Chechens and Crimean Tatars) from their homelands to Central Asia, many of them perishing during the journey or soon after their arrival.

The nation-state is a Western invention. Nationalism emerged in China towards the end of the Qing dynasty (1644-1912) as a response to the humiliating subjugation of the country by Western powers. Seeking to confer “Chinese characteristics” on his project, Xi Jinping has cited Han Feizi, a third-century BC aristocrat in the Han kingdom and a proponent of the Legalist school of philosophy, in which law is used to fashion a strong centralised state.

As in interwar Germany, Schmitt’s thought facilitates a shift to totalitarianism. The distinction between authoritarian and totalitarian states is nowadays dismissed as a relic of the Cold War. Yet it captures a crucial difference between illiberal regimes. Authoritarian states are dictatorial in their methods but limited in their goals, whereas totalitarian states attempt to transform society and intrude into every area of human life. Bismarck’s Prussia and late tsarist Russia fall into the former group, and National Socialist Germany and the Soviet state throughout most of its history into the latter. Xi’s China has moved into the totalitarian category. Through the 95 million-strong Chinese Communist Party, which celebrated its centenary on 1 July this year, the state aims to be omnipresent throughout society.

China represents itself as a “civilisation-state” based on Confucian ideas of social harmony. Yet Xi pays tribute to Mao Zedong, who between 1949 and the mid-1970s laid waste to Chinese civilisation in the pursuit of an ugly occidental utopia. The move to a more limited authoritarian regime that seemed to be under way in the time of Deng Xiaoping, who led the People’s Republic between 1978 and 1989, has been reversed, and totalitarianism renewed. China is the site of an experiment in coercive nation-building whose closest historical parallels are in interwar Europe.

Putin’s Russia and Xi’s China are often understood as similar types of regime. There is some basis for this as both are vehicles for Western projects. Lenin always maintained that the Bolshevik takeover continued the Jacobin tradition in the European Enlightenment. A type of pedagogical terror was a feature of the Soviet state from the time of its foundation in 1917. Even after the Sino-Soviet split in the 1960s, Mao continued to emulate the Westernising Soviet model.

But the differences between Russia and China today are profound. Putin’s Russia is an authoritarian regime in which the state, though violent, is weak. Its spine is the former Soviet intelligence services; but sections of them are semi-privatised, some working in opaque collusion with organised crime. Amorphous private armies operate in Russia’s near-abroad and other zones of global conflict. Putin’s authority appears to be unchallenged in the Kremlin, but he exercises it with the tacit consent of oligarchs who in turn depend on his patronage.

There are signs of decay in the regime. An earlier phase of Putinism in which the population was controlled through “post-modern” media techniques and the management of apathy has given way to one that relies more on the threat of force. Nonetheless, the control of the population by the state is less comprehensive than at any time under the Soviet system until it began its slide into anarchy with Gorbachev’s liberalising reforms from the mid-1980s.

In 2017 the Kremlin declined to celebrate the centenary of the Russian Revolution, with Putin reportedly asking, “What is there to celebrate?” The view of some regime-friendly Russians that Putin, an archetypal product of the Soviet system, is an essentially anti-communist leader is not wholly groundless. Yet the core institutions and methods through which he governs are Soviet inheritances. The “little green men”, for example – Russian irregular forces that effected the invasion of Ukraine – were following the Bolshevik practice of maskirovka (deception). His cyber-warfare applies a similar strategy.

The fantasy of world revolution has long since been abandoned, along with the goal of transforming society, but the state through which Putin rules remains Leninist in its structure.

The belief that challenges to the West emanate from outside the West is a source of some comfort to liberals. The role of an earlier generation of liberal and socialist thinkers in downplaying the colossal human toll of communism in Russia and China can be forgotten. The West’s complicity in present-day crimes can be evaded.

The attempt to erase the Uighurs as a people is the most obvious example of ongoing oppression in China. Confining them in concentration camps, demolishing their mosques and cemeteries, deporting them to work in factories (some of them reportedly in the supply chains of Western brands) and subjecting women to rape, involuntary abortion and sterilisation are crimes against humanity. But any campaign against them soon confronts China’s economic power, which has the potential to derail the global market the West has constructed and on which it now depends.

Despite the Uighurs’ plight being raised at international meetings, there is little real support for them. In most Muslim-majority countries, many of them indebted to China, Uighur cries for help have been greeted with silence. A world in which hyper-liberalism coexists amicably with the restoration of slavery may well be the next stage of social evolution. The Uighurs are on the wrong side of history.

The suppression of minorities in China is instructive because it undermines a consoling liberal narrative: the modern world is based on scientific and technological innovation, which requires an open society. Dictatorship is not just wrong but inefficient and unproductive. Only liberal societies have a long-term future.

China has dispelled this legend. During the post-Mao period a dictatorial regime presided over the biggest and fastest process of wealth-creation in history. As a result of the shift from authoritarian to totalitarian government under Xi, innovation may slow. There are already signs this may be happening. But countervailing forces in the West could yet give China the advantage.

In California, proposals are under consideration that would discourage the teaching of calculus in high schools. In Canada, Ontario’s proposed “equitable” maths curriculum “recognises that mathematics can be subjective”. Deconstructing education in this way, during a time of intense geopolitical rivalry in science and technology, does not look like a winning strategy.

Whether Western elites are capable of strategic reasoning at this point is unclear. Many of their key policies are performative in nature. Schemes to achieve net zero carbon emissions are extremely costly, and will not prevent accelerated global warming. The vast sums would be more

reasonably spent adapting to the abrupt climate change that is already under way. But that would demand realistic thinking, which Western opinion-leaders reject as defeatist if not immoral.

A world-view that gripped sections of the Western intelligentsia throughout the modern period and dominated the post-Cold War world is disintegrating. Stories showing humankind evolving towards liberal values are parodies of monotheism in which a mythical logic in history replaces a redemptive providence. Knock away this myth, and the liberal way of life can be seen to have been an historical accident. In time the regimes created by Xi and Putin will crumble. But if the long drift of history is any guide, they will be succeeded by anarchy and new despotisms.

While Western liberalism may be largely defunct, illiberal Western ideas are shaping the future.

The West is not dying but alive in the tyrannies that now threaten it. Unable to grasp this paradoxical reality, our elites are left looking on blankly as the world they have taken for granted slips into the shadows.

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