

A History of Rules

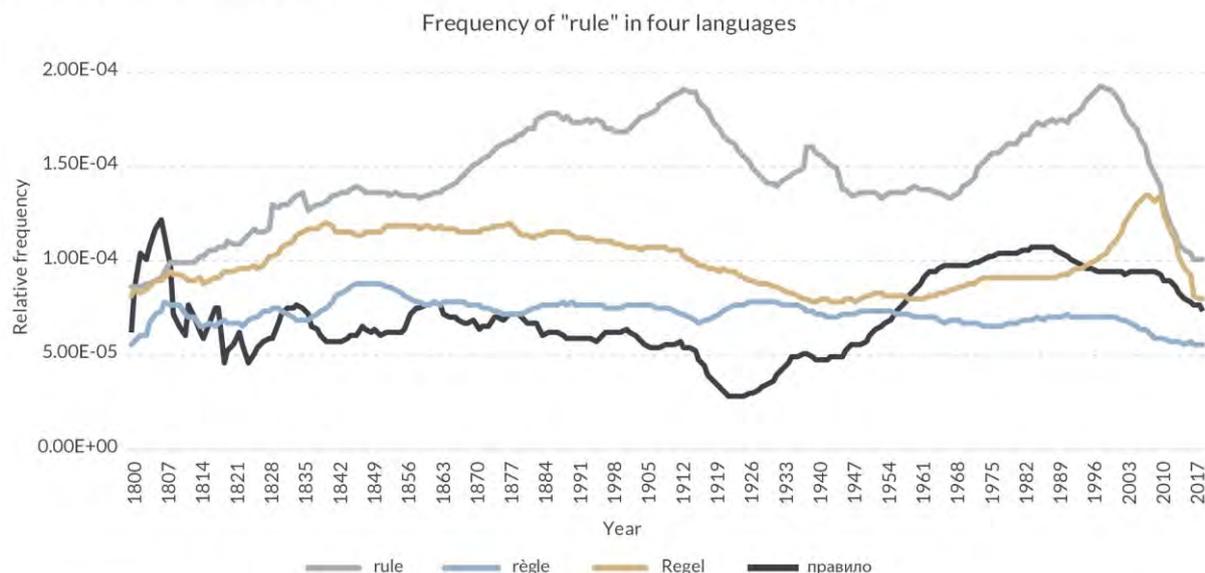
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I Introduction

Rules are fundamental to human interactions. The understanding of how they operate, and how they affect individuals' calculations, has undergone profound shifts over time. The word in major European languages (regula, regola, règle, regla, Regel, regel, rule, regola, правило) is astonishingly similar, and in every case related to an original concept of a measuring stick, a ruler that measures length. A rule is thus something we use to measure and then guide our actions. It is not a law. It helps answer the fundamental question: what should you do when you don't know what to do?

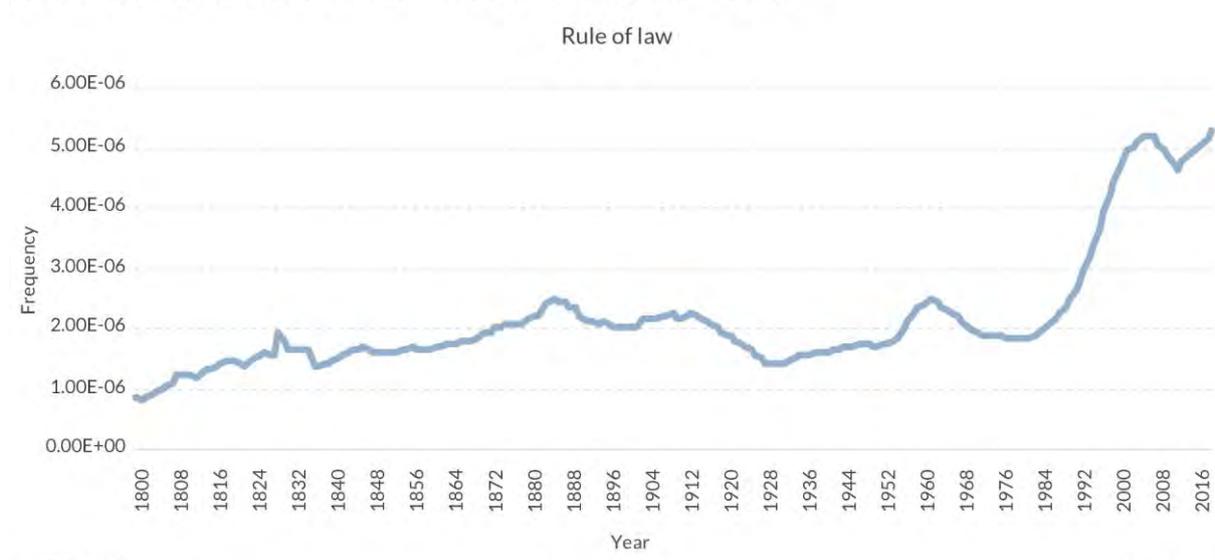
That was how it all began; but then something strange occurred. In the original version, the rule is internalized by those who follow it. Later a shift took place, from the rule to a system of rules, that were gradually transformed from guidelines to fixed constraints. In that development, there is little choice, and frustration and anger build up. Max Weber talked about the modern world as caught in an iron cage of rationality. The prisoners want to rattle at the bars of the cage. Or they dream of smashing it.

Google N-Gram Frequency Rule in English, French, German, and Russian 1800-2019



At least by one measurement, rules are becoming less important in our contemporary imagination and the world is more ruleless. The comparative frequency with which the term is used has fallen in all languages since the nineteenth century, although with some curious variations. The fall in English usage (as measured by Google N-Gram frequency) was particularly noticeable since the millennium, while in Germany the references only fall since the 2008 financial crisis. Strikingly, the only major language to show a sustained increase at some time in the twentieth century was Russian, where the rise in references to "rule" comes in the Soviet era. There was also a much shorter period of increased reference to "rule" in Germany after 1989, where the term became important in the context of unification, and in the discussion of the Maastricht Treaty, with its strong fiscal rules.

Relative Frequency of "Rule of Law" in English 1800-2019 (Google NGrams)

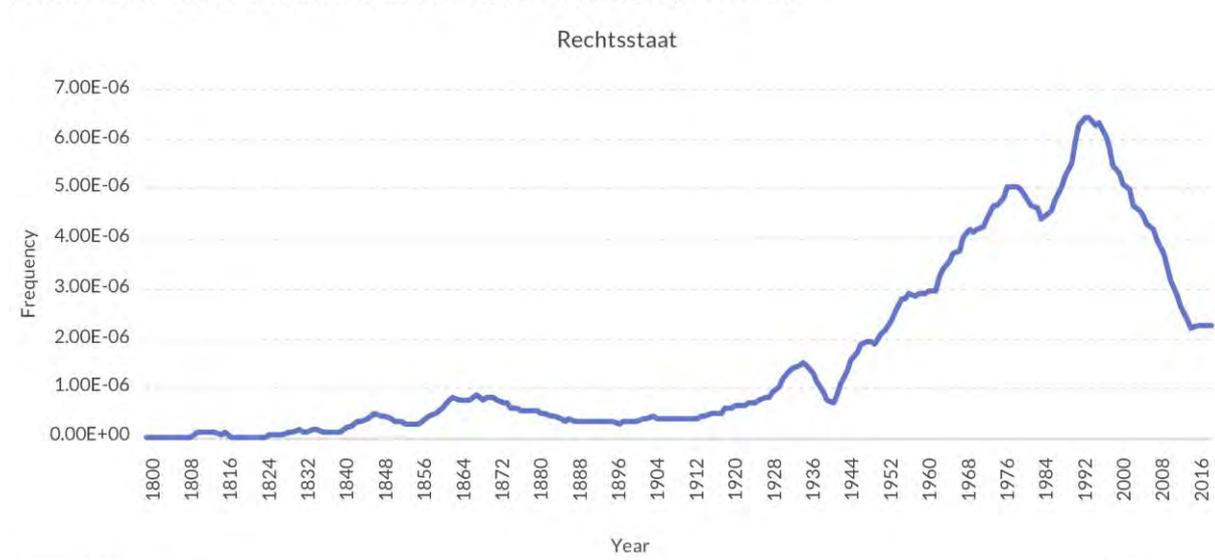


Source: Google NGram.

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"Rule of law" as a phrase in English shows the same fall in the twentieth century, but then experienced a strong surge in usage around the time of the collapse of communism. A German near equivalent, "Rechtsstaat," experienced a strong rise in the last years of the Bonn Republic, but its use declined sharply after 1993. This simple statistical exercise in the popularity of a term indicates the way in which rules became a problem for the twentieth century, and an acute problem for the world after the 2008 Global Financial Crisis.

Relative Frequency of "Rechtsstaat" in German 1800-2019 (Google NGrams)



Source: Google NGram.

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II Regula and Regulae

Originally, a rule indicated a complete pattern or model of behavior. Perhaps the classic text setting out what is involved in "rule" is given in St. Benedict's monastic rule. It contains many detailed and quite useful instructions and pieces of advice. "Not to curse in return those who curse one, but rather to bless them. To bear persecution for righteousness. Not to be proud. Not to be given to

much wine. Not to be gluttonous. Not given to much sleep. Not to be sluggish. Not to be given to grumbling. Not to be a detractor.” All these are sensible guides for how to live together collectively without building up anger and resentment, but they were also understood as a reflection of something larger. What is offered is one *rule*, not a collection of *rules*. And from the beginning, it emphasizes the importance of an outlook or a mentality that accepts instruction and bends itself to the model of the master. The Rule of St. Benedict begins tellingly: “Hearken continually within thine heart, O son, giving attentive ear to the precepts of thy master.” As late as the eighteenth century, a rule was still held up as a model, and not as something precise. As the entry in the landmark compilation of Enlightenment thought, the *Encyclopédie*, put it, “One can say that the life of Our Lord is the rule or the model of Christians.”¹⁴

What was the relationship between the overall rule and the quite helpful practices, the rather detailed and precise prudential advice for living together in harmony of the kind that Benedict’s Rule provided? At least by the fourteenth century a conceptual understanding developed of rules (plural), practical precepts on how to actually do something (as in a rule of thumb).¹⁵ This alternative social construct was something rather craftsman-like. Rules involved breaking complex processes into manageable tasks. Following these kind of rules didn’t require any deep submission, merely a practical judgment that the rules offered the most obvious way of attaining a particular goal. If you want to make a pair of shoes, it’s best to work the leather in this order. If you want to travel in continental Europe, it’s best to stay on the right-hand side of the road.

Specific rules, as opposed to the Rule, may be enforced by law, although that does not necessarily need to be the case. I do now have to drive on the right side of the road in Salzburg, and on the left in London: but there is no deep moral reason to choose one of these options rather than the other.

For a long time, there has been a controversy on how strictly laws must be enforced, and whether and how they should or can change with altered conditions. The economist John Maynard Keynes is said to have said, “When circumstances change, I change my mind. What do you do?” Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethic* (Book 5, Chapter 10) explains how the legislator cannot possibly anticipate every circumstance, and thus that a rule needs to have greater flexibility: it should not be an iron road but rather a malleable piece of lead as used by sculptors on the island of Lesbos to carve rounded arches: “For what is itself indefinite can only be measured by an indefinite standard, like the leaden rule used by Lesbian builders; just as that rule is not rigid but can be bent to the shape of the stone, so a special ordinance is made to fit the circumstances of the case.” The demand expresses an eternal issue: everything human changes, and so we also need to see with a new framework.

Does the law apply to all people? In pre-modern Europe, it did not, and life was governed instead by a frustrating then plethora of particular laws, exceptions, and privileges (private law). Making the framework more intelligible was the task of reform – and of the French Revolution. The concern was to find a general set of rules of conduct that would no longer provide particular exemptions, that would be universal and would not discriminate: but how could that admirable goal be accomplished? Did universality not require a rule that was more rigid so that it could not be broken, or

¹⁴ Diderot, Denis and Jean le Rond d’Alembert (eds.). *Encyclopédie Ou Dictionnaire Raisoné Des Sciences, Des Arts Et Des Métiers*. 14: Reggi – Sem, Paris: Briasson; Neufchastel: Faulche, 1765, p. 10.

¹⁵ See Daston, Lorraine. *Rules: A Short History of What We Live By*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022.

bent, or reshaped by the particular and corrosive sectional interests of the powerful? And if that was the case, would not the subsequently formulated system of rules be unacceptably and unbearably rigid, and incapable of encompassing responses to the invariably changing realities of the world?

III Exceptional and Charismatic Rule Creation

The world of a complex system of rules produced the perception that Rule was characteristic of exceptional people: Confucius, Jesus, St. Benedict, Mohammed, etc. They could provide a unique model so powerful that its inspiration was clearly of divine origin. By the nineteenth century, and the Romantic era, there was a conviction that rule was something that could be reshaped by genius. Rules were then reinvented by charismatic figures of genius: most obviously in the political realm, men on horseback, George Washington, Napoleon Bonaparte, Toussaint Louverture, Simón Bolívar. They set a model of how to remake politics and institute new rules: the US Constitution, the Code Napoleon. Soon the cult of genius was translated into a new vision of how the outdated might be overcome or transformed into something more vibrant, more current, more appealing.

A famous version of this nineteenth century transformation of rule by genius is the musical parable provided by the composer Richard Wagner. The Meistersinger guild in Nürnberg had a long and complex *Tabulatur* or set of rules on how songs might be composed and performed. But for the Romantics, creation was a different exercise. In Wagner's recasting of the Meistersinger tradition, an artist or an outsider or a genius should not be bound by the rules. When Walther von Stolzing asks Hans Sachs "Wie fang ich nach der Regel an?" ("How do I start according to the rule?"), Sachs replies, "Ihr stellt sie selbst, und folgt ihr dann" ("You make it up, and then follow it"). The genius should let memory and inspiration guide him.

In parallel, some nineteenth century thinkers envisaged rules as emerging by themselves out of the process of social interaction, and hence capable of being analyzed and formulated. Karl Marx wanted to establish the laws of motion of modern society. Most analysts now agree that that quest was a failure. One of Marx's leading modern biographers, Gareth Stedman Jones, points out: the work did not identify "the laws of motion" of capital.¹⁶ Jonathan Sperber concurs: Marx the economist was engaged on an Odyssey but never reached his Ithaca.¹⁷ Engels had reacted to an outline of *Das Kapital* with the ominous warning: "IT IS A VERY ABSTRACT ABSTRACT INDEED."¹⁸ A parallel effort ran in a different direction: to emphasize the subjective character of decisions while preserving their analyzability and knowability. At the origin of the marginal or subjectivist revolution in economics as pioneered by Stanley Jevons, Léon Walras, and Carl Menger was a failed German civil servant, Hermann Heinrich Gossen (1810–1858). He believed that his book *Die Entwicklung der Gesetze des menschlichen Verkehrs, und der daraus fließenden Regeln für menschliches Handeln* (*The Development of the Laws of Human Relations, and the Therefrom Resulting Rules of Human Conduct*) (1854) would make him a new Copernicus, but instead he died broken, demoralized, and unknown. The title, however, was programmatic. Out of an analysis of human behavior, it would be possible to ascertain a pattern of rules of conduct.

¹⁶ Stedman Jones, Gareth. *Karl Marx: Greatness and Illusion*. London: Allen Lane, an imprint of Penguin Books, 2016, p. 429.

¹⁷ Sperber, Jonathan. *Karl Marx: A Nineteenth Century Life*. New York: Liveright Publication Corp., 2013, p. 420.

¹⁸ Stedman Jones, Gareth. *Karl Marx: Greatness and Illusion*. London: Allen Lane, an imprint of Penguin Books, 2016, p. 403.

The twentieth century, and especially the second half of the century, produced an explosion of rules. Business relations, law, administration, all are highly codified. At their core is a strong version of rationality, and rationality is seen as a structure that can be analyzed in terms of a collection of very specific rules. This version of rationality did not, however, think in terms of an overall rule.

The codification of complex rules systems works because underpinning it is a fundamental scientific assumption: that it is possible to identify basic human responses and reactions. Even more dramatically, then, behavior is subject to a study of its underlying logic. Here is the real iron cage. The world was bound together by a common rationality. John von Neumann and Oskar Morgenstern described a solution of “rational behavior” as a “complete set of rules of behavior in all conceivable situations. This holds equivalently for a social economy and for games.”¹⁹ The result has been described as “Cold War thinking” or “Cold War rationality.”²⁰ It was remarkably effective, in that it kept a very dangerous world peaceful, because each side, though divided by ideology, knew it could calculate in the same way. The analogy was often made between statecraft and playing a game of chess: both have very clear rules. You can in consequence guess and anticipate what the opponent is likely to do. Meetings in the 1990s between intelligence officials on both sides of the now-ended Cold War were occasions on which the operators were astonished by how similarly the other side had thought and analyzed, and the western spies praised the high level of mathematical education and training on the eastern side. The vision was clear: we all share the same rule because we are rational beings.

IV International Relations

Thinking about rules is at the heart of the analysis of the modern state system, as well as of the ordering of domestic politics. International relations have long been thought of as essentially anarchic, because there is no legislator. In a ruleless world, conflict erupts. But there was always a sense that some sort of rules might be needed. Up to the Reformation, peace was seen as divine; the pope presented himself as a mediator. St. Benedict’s Rule includes the precepts: “Not to prolong the duration of one’s wrath. Not to retain guile in one’s heart. Not to make a false peace.” At Tordesillas in 1494, Pope Alexander VI, probably the most sexually debauched pope in history, managed a negotiation dividing the world between the Spanish and Portuguese monarchies along a meridian 370 leagues west of the Cape Verde islands. A few years later the treaty was ratified by a bull of Pope Julius II, probably the most warriorlike pope in history. Papal authority was contested. After the Reformation, scholars worked on trying to establish a natural law interpretation of the origins of international law. In the nineteenth century, diplomats and political leaders began to think of an alternative system of negotiation and ordering. The last international treaty that included an explicit *invocatio dei* was the treaty that ended the Austro-Prussian war of 1866.²¹ The Treaty of Frankfurt of 1871, at the end of the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-1 had no such provision.

Generally, the rules approach to international relations demands participation in the formulation of the binding rules of a broad group of countries, views, and interests. Without such participation, the

¹⁹ von Neumann, John and Oskar Morgenstern, *Theory of Games and Economic Behavior*. Princeton University Press, 1953 [1972], p. 33.

²⁰ Erickson, Paul, Judy L. Klein, Lorraine Daston, Rebecca Lemov, Thomas Sturm, and Michael D. Gordin. *How Reason Almost Lost Its Mind: The Strange Career of Cold War Rationality*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2013.

²¹ Pelc, Krzysztof (McGill University). “‘In the Name of the Holy Trinity’: Credibility Under Anarchy Through Three Centuries of Treaty-Making.” Princeton University International Relations seminar, April 11, 2022.

rules began to lack legitimacy. The more a generalized relativism guides our approach to rule-making, the more we insist on process as the way of creating legitimacy. But these processes are actually deeply divisive in practice, and the most intractable tussles of recent years arise out of arguments about the rule-making process in such institutions as the United Nations, the World Trade Organization, the International Monetary Fund, or the European Union. A tremendous amount of ingenuity is spent on devising organizational and institutional solutions: reform of the Security Council of the United Nations; extending the Group of Seven to encompass Russia in a G-8 and then China, and then, more recently, excluding Russia; reshaping of the international financial institutions (the so-called “international financial architecture” debate). The logistics of voting arrangements in international and supranational organizations is hotly contested: the weighted votes at the IMF and the World Bank, the difference between permanent members of the Security Council and the rest, or (in the European setting) the different weights given to big, medium-sized and small countries in the Nice Treaty of 2001 and the proposed revision in the 2004 constitutional treaty.

There is in each of the much-discussed cases of an alleged need for institutional reform a sort of expectations trap. International rule-making looks more crucial, so we have greater hopes about what international negotiation can produce. What happens when there is then a failure, induced in part because of excessively high hopes? When the hopes initially placed in rules are disappointed, we react by seeing power in its full *Realpolitik* nakedness. *Realpolitik* frequently overrides rules, or, as a rather old British pun from the age in which Britain was the dominant world power had it, Britannia waives the rules in order to rule the waves.

There are more fundamental grounds for the push against from a rule-based order. In the logic of the Cold War, the other side is ideologically opposed but thinks in the same way as we do. In the late twentieth century and the early twenty-first century, this version of rationality came under attack. There were three drivers of the process of the disintegration of rationalism. One is a revival of the nineteenth century cult of the Great Man, or now of the Strong Man, acting decisively and impulsively to transform the world to his own advantage and that of his country (the use of the masculine pronoun is intentional: Golda Meir, Indira Gandhi or Margaret Thatcher never intended to be Strong Men in this sense). The second is the global financial crisis, which was widely interpreted as an indication of the failure of the rules (capitalism, or so-called neoliberalism) on which the international order was built. The third and most profound comes from reflection on the verbal basis of rule-making: we need words to formulate rules, but the meaning is gradually sucked from them, and the words themselves become destabilizing.

V The Madman

The first challenge follows from the romantic idea of a Genius remaking rules. Genius is closely allied to madness. A mad person is not a rule follower. But a Madman can effectively gain advantages by subverting and undermining the system, so that the rules don't any longer work as they were expected to work, and the social contract behind the rules falls away. The Madman can subvert the rational world by behaving unpredictably. It is impossible to read the Madman in the way that one can read a conventional opponent in a game of chess. The idea of the madman in politics is an old one, and there is obviously even a rationality in being unpredictable. In its modern form, Richard Nixon came to be the principal celebrator of a new style of leadership. The most famous articulation was recorded by Bob Haldeman, who recalls Nixon saying: “I call it the Madman Theory, Bob. I want the North Vietnamese to believe I've reached the point where I might do anything to stop the war. We'll just slip the word to them that, for God's sake, you know Nixon is

obsessed about Communism. We can't restrain him when he's angry and he has his hand on the nuclear button and Ho Chi Minh himself will be in Paris in two days begging for peace."²²

Donald Trump, who was widely thought to be crazy and unbalanced, certainly used that perception for political advantage in domestic but also in international politics. Previous political leaders had distinguished between strategic opponents, who were an appropriate target of unpredictable action, and friends, who demanded consistency. Trump threw away that distinction. The tone of his remarks in dealing with North and South Korea was remarkably similar. He expressed his views on the North: "North Korea best not make any more threats to the United States. They will be met with fire and fury like the world has never seen."²³ But the line on trade negotiations with South Korea was not at all dissimilar when he told US Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer how to negotiate. When Lighthizer said, "Ok, well I'll tell the Koreans they've got 30 days," Trump retorted "No, no, no. That's not how you negotiate. You don't tell them they've got 30 days. You tell them, 'This guy's so crazy he could pull out any minute.'"²⁴

In 2022, Vladimir Putin is playing with these tropes. Stories that he is sick, or has become deranged in the course of Covid isolation, and that he might be thinking about nuclear action, they all have a specific purpose of influencing his antagonists. So do television commentators setting out how easily and rapidly Russia can deliver nuclear warheads. Signs of derangement at the top will mean a scaling down of western assistance to the victim, and heightened concern with not provoking the aggressor. The operation spreads deterrence easily and effectively, and induces the opponent to self-deter.

These strategies look, at least to some at the time, as brilliant. They are not: Nixon and Trump destroyed their own credibility; Putin's madness discredits the Russian system, and makes it more vulnerable to internal as well as external challenge. The outcome is self-destruction as the fundamental problem of autocrats, and especially mad autocrats, becomes more apparent, that they cannot receive good advice because they are too terrifying. Madmen also cultivate the idea of exceptional politics, politics that breaks down the system, the establishment, the normal (see below).

Can the Madman strategy be defused by more accurate and more detailed information? Would that let more people reach more grounded (and more rational) verdicts and opinions on their political leaders? How might such information be checked, supplied, coordinated, and distributed? This constitutes an urgent task for international agencies.

VI The Emergency

The second challenge comes from the perception that sound craftsman-like rules are good for normal times, but not in exceptions. The German legal philosopher Carl Schmitt conjured up a highly influential story of the state of emergency in which a system of rules is ignored and then destroyed. "The rule," he said, "proves nothing; the exception proves everything." In a famous

²² Haldeman, H. Robert (with Joseph DiMona). *The Ends of Power*. New York: Times books, 1978, p. 83.

²³ Trump Threatens 'Fire and Fury' Against North Korea if It Endangers U.S. *New York Times*, August 17, 2017.

²⁴ <https://www.axios.com/2017/12/15/scoop-trump-urges-staff-to-portray-him-as-crazy-guy-1513305888>, [retrieved: June 28, 2022].

phrase, he argued that “In the exception the power of real life breaks through the crust of a mechanism that has become torpid by repetition.”²⁵ In a crisis, we have to throw the rulebook out of the window.

For Reinhard Kosellek, the great historian of concepts, “crisis” becomes “a structural signature of modernity.”²⁶ Crisis, Paul Krugman said twenty years ago, is the price of globalization.²⁷ He was writing in the wake of the East Asian Financial Crisis, but the discussion of the ubiquity of crisis is not confined to finance and economics. The response to globalization can be a financial crisis, but also a political or social crisis, a moral crisis, a psychological crisis, a climate or environmental crisis, or even a medical crisis. The proliferation of the language of crisis itself constitutes a crisis.

A French sociologist, Edgar Morin, the major theorist of modern complexity, concluded that in the twentieth century, every domain was haunted by the idea of crisis: capitalism, society, the couple, the family, values, youth, science, law, civilization, humanity.²⁸ While the nineteenth century had “Questions” (the Eastern Question, the Polish Question, the Jewish Question), the twentieth century had Crises. Crises become endemic in international relations, in economic management, and they prompted a thinking in terms of ruleless emergency responses.

The discussion of exception versus normality is central to the debate over much of our economic and monetary policy. In normal times, modern central banks follow a highly rule-bound practice, that has been highly effective in removing the threat of inflation. Some central bankers even believed that their institutions could basically be replaced by a computer and a handful of economists. German economists in particular celebrated the centrality of rules in making economic order. But that prevalence of rules only held in normal times. Financial historian Charles Kindleberger argued that crisis management depended on the ability of brilliant men to devise innovative and novel solutions, and that the pedantic following of rules was unwise and counter-productive. “With strong and cohesive leadership, near unanimity of experts and understanding or pliant followership, men can be trusted to perform better than rules.” This was the Marshall Plan scenario, but – as Kindleberger implies – it rests on the use of political power to override the rules, the phenomenon that Kindleberger labels, rather euphemistically, as “strong and cohesive leadership.”²⁹

It is very much in the spirit of Kindleberger that the great US central banker Paul Volcker responded to the 2008 financial crisis: “To meet the challenge [of the failing financial system], the Federal Reserve judged it necessary to take actions that extend to the very edge of its lawful and implied powers, transcending certain long embedded central banking principles and practices. ... The immediate response to the crisis has been to resort to untested emergency powers of the Federal Reserve. Out of perceived necessity, sweeping powers have been exercised in a manner that is

²⁵ Schmitt, Carl (transl. George Schwab). *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005 [1922], p. 15.

²⁶ Koselleck, Reinhart (transl. Michaela W. Richter). *Crisis*. In: *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 67, No. 2 (2006), p.372.

²⁷ Krugman, Paul. *Crises: The Price of Globalization?* Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City (August 24–26, 2000). In: *Global Economic Integration: Opportunities and Challenges*, pp. 75–106.

²⁸ Morin, Edgar. *Pour une crisologie*. In: *Communications* 25, 1976, pp. 149-163.

²⁹ Kindleberger, Charles P. *Rules vs. men: lessons from a century of monetary policy*. In: Buchheim, Christoph, Michael Hutter, Harold James (eds.). *Zerrissene Zwischenkriegszeit: wirtschaftshistorische Beiträge: Knut Borchardt zum 65. Geburtstag*. Baden-Baden: Nomos, 1994, p. 175.

neither natural nor comfortable for a central bank.”³⁰ The problem is that after an emergency moment, it is very difficult, painful and costly, to return to normality, and everyone thinks of all the benefits they get by still living in a world of exceptionality. At the same time, exceptional states that endure too long are deeply corrosive. There is always a danger of thinking that something simply must be done, and it may well be that doing something is more harmful than doing nothing. So a second rule for a more stable global framework would be that in order to reenter the world of normality, the capability to produce viable and accepted rules is required.

VII How We Need Words to Make Rules

Conflicts and clashes over rules involve the use of words as weapons. The same date, 2007, marks the beginning of the Global Financial Crisis, with a new sense of the exceptionality of the rulebook, and the introduction of the iPhone, a smartphone that transformed social media, and with that people’s relations to each other. It helped to accelerate an inflationary use of language. New social media consequently erode the value or meaning of political terms.

It is striking how the language that western countries use to defend Ukraine – resist aggression, prevent genocide of Ukrainians in eastern Ukraine, stop a fascist variant of authoritarianism, keep multilateralism – are played back by Putin and Russian propaganda in a bizarre version of an echo-chamber. Putin was fighting the special military operation to stop NATO aggression, Ukrainian Nazism, genocide in eastern Ukraine, and to rescue multilateralism from unilateral domination by the United States. Russian propaganda is using George Orwell as an instrument against the West. Maria Vladimirovna Zakharova, the director of the Russian Foreign Ministry’s information office, explained that Orwell’s warning in “1984” was directed against western liberalism, not against Soviet or Nazi distortions of truth.

We know the famous opening of St. John’s gospel. In the beginning was the word. A vocabulary is a way of summing up ideas, and ideas package our collective visions of reality. They translate experiences from an individual perspective into a more general, or even universal, understanding. Ludwig Wittgenstein famously made a central point of his philosophy that “the limits of my language mean the limits of my world.”¹ Humans have always been divided by languages: one of our most powerful myths is the story of the Tower of Babel, or how God destroyed an edifice that would create a universal language or understanding because that would give the humans power themselves to be God (“let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth”). Since then, there have been attempts to create a universal language – Esperanto and Volapük – but they have been largely forgotten. Instead we have largely assimilated the idea that translation is possible, even if it involves the loss of all sorts of nuance. In particular, in trying to understand how people express their thoughts about states and governments – and how an international society is created by interactions among states as well as clashes of ideas – particular ideas are continually being translated, frequently poorly or inadequately. The losses in translation, though enormous, are also often not fully recognized.

Translation is often presented as an easy exchange, much like trading with money, which establishes equivalences between goods, services, or even promises. But words that are standardly fired as munition in today’s culture, policy, and economic wars have become so indistinct that they are used not for exchange, but instead to blur the arguments and blame those with opposing views:

³⁰ Remarks by Paul A. Volcker at a Luncheon of the Economic Club of New York. New York, April 8, 2008.

genocide, aggression, multilateralism are only a few examples. The terms are batted back and forth between advocates and critics. After their original success as a way of capturing the predicament of the moment, their meanings snowball, picking up more and more connotations until they either become icy or begin to melt. They are no longer precise analytical tools.

Over a century ago, the philosopher William James created widespread outrage when he suggested that the test of ideas lay in how they were evaluated, or in what he provocatively called “truth’s cash-value in experiential terms.”³¹ Ideas had no innate quality for individuals, but only generated their worth by being accepted in a broader environment, in other words through general circulation in a marketplace. The presentation was excoriated by Princeton philosopher (and future university president) John Grier Hibben, who claimed – immediately after the destructive financial crash of 1907 – that it “would certainly precipitate a panic in the world of our thinking as surely as would a similar demand in the world of finance.”³² The debate is just as current today, and many people are panicking.

The consequence of linguistic uncertainty is a growing amplitude of interpretation. This represents a vast extension of Aristotle’s concept of the slightly bendable rule (the Lesbian rule of the stonemasons). This is a rule that words have made completely elastic. The result was neatly analyzed by Wittgenstein, in one of the most striking formulations in the *Philosophical Investigations*:

This was our paradox: no course of action could be determined by a rule, because every course of action can be brought into accord with the rule. The answer was: if every course of action can be brought into accord with the rule, then it can also be brought into conflict with it. And so there would be neither accord nor conflict here. That there is a misunderstanding here is shown by the mere fact that in this chain of reasoning we place one interpretation behind another, as if each one contented us at least for a moment, until we thought of yet another lying behind it. For what we thereby show is that there is a way of grasping a rule which is not an interpretation, but which, from case to case of application, is exhibited in what we call “following the rule” and “going against it”. That’s why there is an inclination to say: every action according to a rule is an interpretation. But one should speak of interpretation only when one expression of a rule is substituted for another.³³

Can there then be any way of reinterpreting the original sense of a rule that would allow a building of a common gauge of conduct? Perhaps we need to clean up the words we use in order to be sure that we can debate with each other meaningfully and reach a consensus. A proposal then: for a new international institution of mediation, translation and interpretation, a body modeled somewhat after the Académie française which discussed and defined the basis of French vocabulary. That was a vision of Enlightenment, but it occurred on a national level; it needs to be extended to the world. We could think of this body as the Academy Wittgenstein.

³¹ James, William. *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*. Portland OR: The Floating Press, 2010 [1907], p. 138.

³² Grier Hibben, John. *The Test of Pragmatism*. In: *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (July 1908), p. 369. See also Cotkin, George. *William James and the Cash-Value Metaphor*. In: *ETC: A Review of General Semantics*, Vol. 42, No. 1 (1985), pp. 37-46.

³³ Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2001, p. 201.

VIII Recommendations

1. How to resist the Madman subversion of rule? More detailed, precise and specific information is helpful in providing citizens with a basis on which they can evaluate the effectiveness and competence of their public authorities. It needs to be available more readily across the world.
2. How to resist the propensity to think of everything as a crisis? A greater appreciation of the structures that hold people / society together, and of the complexity of those structures, might provide a framework for contemplating the world as a sphere of normality and regularity.
3. How to resist the destructive plasticity of political language? We should institute a global forum (a Global Academy) in which the terminology – the word – that holds the world together is debated, clarified, and even defined.

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