

Interpretation

A JOURNAL OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Fall 1991

Volume 19 Number 1

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- Manuscript Editor Lucia B. Prochnow
- Subscriptions Subscription rates per volume (3 issues):
individuals \$21
libraries and all other institutions \$34
students (five-year limit) \$12
- Single copies available.
- Postage outside U.S.: Canada \$4.50 extra;
elsewhere \$5.40 extra by surface mail (8 weeks
or longer) or \$11.00 by air.
- Payments: in U.S. dollars AND payable by
a financial institution located within the U.S.A.
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Composition by Eastern Graphics, Binghamton,
N.Y. 13901
Printed and bound by Wickersham Printing Co.,
Lancaster, PA 17603

Inquiries: Patricia D'Allura, Assistant to the Editor,
INTERPRETATION, Queens College, Flushing, N.Y.
11367-0904, U.S.A. (718)520-7099

Book Reviews

Kirk Emmert, *Winston S. Churchill on Empire* (Durham: Carolina Academic Press and the Claremont Institute for the Study of Statesmanship and Political Philosophy, 1989). xx + 157 pp., \$18.95.

WILL MORRISEY

Winston Churchill claimed, "There is no halfway house for Britain between greatness and ruin" (p. 3). In fact there is; its proprietor is Margaret Thatcher. Britain has lost and gained: markets replaced colonies; Englishness replaced 'civilization'; corporations replaced viceroys. If household management or economics has not quite replaced politics, the mold that shaped Churchill has broken. There is no halfway house for a Churchill between greatness and ruin.

Americans think of Churchill as a wartime ally against rightist tyranny and a peacetime ally against leftist tyranny, as a courageous prophet of liberty finally honored in his native land. Churchill's defense of the British Empire strikes Americans as contradictory to this spirit, something to be deplored or at best apologized for. Professor Emmert's study has the merit of recognizing that Churchill's "commitment to empire was central" to his political career (p. xi). Emmert shows that Churchill's commitment arose not from mere traditionalism or even from ambition, simply, but from an "aristocratic or Aristotelian" understanding of the demands and responsibilities of political life (p. xvi).

"True" imperialism develops both "manhood" and commerce in the imperial nation (p. 1). By renouncing its continental ambitions and building the strongest navy in the world, Britain increased its own security and encouraged limited government in England while freeing the army for overseas conquests. Continental nations expended substantial public revenues on self-defense; the British navy defended the island nation inexpensively, leaving money available for private investment and international commerce. The navy protected British shipping and forcibly opened new markets. Military 'necessity' refocused, from national defense to imperial defense. Imperial defense requires expansion, as increased territory increases the scope of security needs. "[W]ar and change, not peace and permanence, are the constant companions of empire" (p. 8). A moderate, civilized empire must "pursue a policy which is difficult to distinguish from that of an aggressive, intentionally expansive nation." Even a civilized empire "must act in much the same manner as a tyrant" (p. 9). Nor did Churchill try to hide under the cloak of 'necessity'; he freely observed that the natural desire "to be predominant" fans imperialist ambitions. Civilization "re-

strains and rechannels these instincts into more pacific activities, but it cannot eliminate or fully control them” (p. 10).

Churchill parted from Machiavelli in upholding an “eternal standard of right and wrong independent of and superior to climate, custom, and caprice” (p. 11), a standard beckoning citizens to honor. Honor is a mean between “narrow self interest and moralistic excess” (p. 12). “Churchill proposed civilizing empire as the cure to the disease of tyrannizing empire” (p. 13), of which he saw three kinds during his career: the “scientific barbarism” of the Kaiser’s Germany; the “animal form of barbarism” of Bolshevik Russia; and the racist barbarism of Nazi Germany (p. 15). Barbarism begins with human life itself. A prepolitical war of “all against all” reflects mankind’s “strong aboriginal propensity to kill” (p. 16). Primitive peoples lack shame and moral indignation, engage in treachery and violence, and cannot reason. They emerge from the most primitive barbarism when, tiring of perpetual insecurity, they establish tyrannies. In their credulity, primitive men also give way to “religious fanaticism grounded in a claim of prophetic revelation”; this religion impedes civilization’s development by encouraging “degraded sensualism” and by retarding the mental faculties (p. 17). As civilization develops, however, intelligence usually outruns morality, leading once again to barbarism.

Churchill considered courage to be the foundation of civilized or fully human life. Courage is “the first of all human qualities” because it “guarantees all the others” (p. 19). The courage of barbarians is reckless or “wild courage”—passionate, unruly, rash (p. 20). Civilized courage is calm, a sign of self-mastery and endurance. “In the civilized man, Churchill suggests, reason rules the bodily desires and man’s spiritedness. Thus, under stress, the civilized man is persevering, serene, deliberate, self-controlled and proudly self-sufficient” (p. 22). Habituation forms civilized courage; the force of discipline and of circumstances supplements habit. Habit should be reinforced by vanity, the desire to establish a good reputation, but this must not be overemphasized, as it will promote timidity in the face of public disapproval. The sentiment of nobility, whereby “vanity is transformed into justifiable pride” (p. 25), best anchors habitual courage.

Churchill recognized that the increasing egalitarianism of modern civilization threatened these Aristotelian virtues. He therefore “stressed increasingly in his speeches and more popular writings the kinship of civilization and freedom or self-government” (p. 25). Attempting to preserve as much of the older moral order as possible, he traced British rights, liberties, and constitutional safeguards to “ancient Greece and Rome” (p. 26); he represented the Roman Empire in Britain as “a golden age for Britain” (p. 9), a time when the British themselves benefited morally and politically from rule by civilized imperialists. The virtues of justice, prudence, moderation or self-government, and goodwill or toleration, along with civilized courage, make individual and political freedom possible; most of these are classical virtues. Christianity too has its place

because “philosophy”—these are Churchill’s words—“cannot convince the bullet” (p. 129, n.81). Prayer and belief in providence may not convince the bullet, either, but they serve as helps to steady the man facing the bullet. “Churchill understood that the morality that guided the [British] Empire and the rest of the civilized West had both classical and Christian roots” (p. 29); although the statesman will conduct himself according to the classical standard of gentlemanly honor, he will also nourish Christianity as “the most politically salutary religion available to modern civilized statesmen” (p. 30). Modern science also needs cultivation; even more it needs restraint. “The first civilization that has indissolvably married human excellence and physical power rather than leaving them to come together occasionally and by chance” (p.31) must take care that scientific or intellectual development does not overwhelm moral virtues, destroying the conditions of its own existence.

Emmert discusses Churchill’s view of civilizing empire’s effect on rulers and the ruled. “[A]ll human beings have an obligation to improve themselves which takes precedence over any rights they might claim to liberty or self-government” (p. 33). Primitive contentment is no more fully human than is primitive strife, and both prevent or retard the development of civilization. “The precariousness of [the] natural way to civilization, its long duration, and the likelihood it might miscarry led Churchill to reject it in principle as an alternative to imperial rule” (p. 34). Empire as it were assists nature by “rapidly increasing capital wealth and by expanding human desires” (p. 36), first by encouraging small entrepreneurs, then larger scale commercial projects. At the same time modern civilization’s technology goes beyond assistance to the subjugation of nature for use by man. Capital investment should be limited to avoid exploitation; Churchill preferred a limited state socialism, limited because an excessively powerful local government would overawe the native population and demand independence from the Empire, breaking the civilizational bonds that alone justify empire. Christian missionaries posed an especially difficult problem; Churchill applauded them only in such places as Uganda, where they cooperated fully with the imperial government.

Altruism and philanthropy should not move imperial rulers. Nor should selfishness. “At its best, empire is not a burden to be endured”—or a tyranny to be exploited—“but an opportunity for individual and national self-improvement” (p. 53). Barbarians have no intrinsic rights; rather, civilized nations owe it to themselves to treat barbarians justly. In this Churchill found himself opposed by the democrats and state socialists who gained power after the First World War. Democrats reduced politics to economics, “denied that man was a political animal” (p. 55). Socialists sought to politicize the private. Churchill defined politics in two distinct, complementary ways: as a means of collective action to satisfy the individual’s need for security and well-being and as an effort to realize the distinctively human potential for reasoning and reasoned speech. Imperialism satisfied man’s political nature in both senses, immediately for the

rulers and ruled with respect to 'low' politics, and immediately for rulers, eventually for the ruled, with respect to 'high' politics. Empire "calls forth certain virtues, and thus a specific type of human being" (p. 63). Its ordinary citizens strengthen their self-respect; its extraordinary citizens fulfill their magnanimity, their greatness of soul in the Aristotelian sense. Empire counterbalanced the leveling effects of mass democracy. "[S]ince the maintenance [of Empire] necessitated a considerably greater degree of moral and political virtue from the nation's foremost citizens, in looking up to these leaders the British citizenry was taught to admire the considerable virtue they embodied" (p. 64). For the foremost citizens themselves, "ruling imperially" afforded the chance to achieve the fullest humanity by engagement in "the fully civilizing activity" (p. 64).

"By the late 1920s, Churchill had concluded that the coming of mass democracy had transformed and degraded British politics" (p. 70). Majoritarianism replaced deliberation and consent, and "the advent of political equality undermined [the] conventional acknowledgments of political authority which in the best cases were indications of natural preeminence and in most cases made mediocrity more serviceable" (p. 71). As technology purveyed mass tastes, politics itself became more 'technical' or technocratic as middle and lower classes improved their standard of living but declined in the exercise of civic liberty, prudence, and initiative. The British political system liquefied (in Churchill's metaphor). Institutions, hierarchy, structure weakened against the ebb and flow of public passions. Churchill attempted to use imperialism as a bulwark against this tide, but as the spirit of party triumphed over the spirit of Parliament, the Empire itself became a bone of political contention. A politics of individual rights and self-interest overcame the politics of honor and "noble self-regard" (p. 81). "[I]t was not possible for long to rule according to 'new principles' at home but 'old principles' abroad" (p. 85). Churchill gradually came to hope for a British Empire of self-governing dominions, a "voluntary association of like-minded nations" or "English-speaking peoples" (p. 99)—less a political than a cultural empire modeled on Demosthenes' pan-Hellenism.

The tension in Churchill's thought between "his acceptance of human equality" and "his admiration for excellence and for the accomplishments of the unequal few" would have disappeared had he "fully embraced one principle or the other." "This Churchill would not do, probably because he thought that neither in itself reflected the full truth about human nature" (p. 107). The limitations of imperial rule reflect the contradictions of politics itself, limitations and contradictions suggesting that political life is not the human life, at least not simply or comprehensively. For Churchill this truth led to an appreciation of the powers of observation and memory called for by painting. He also "noted a certain similarity between a philosopher and the uncivilized" man (p. 37), both of whom enjoy their leisure and want few things. He called the

uncivilized man an “unconscious philosopher” (p. 37). Philosophers might well be grateful to Churchill and in their own way return his admiration. In opposing tyranny masquerading as final knowledge about the human things, Churchill protected philosophy from lapsing into a state of unconsciousness, perhaps even from a death that would have killed the soul instead of liberating it from the body. And there may be more. Professor Harry V. Jaffa, who contributes an illuminating Foreword to this volume, has spoken of the way the example of Churchill’s statesmanship could inspire a philosopher’s soul in dark times, leading him to reconsider the classical philosophers who distinguish political from philosophic life without segregating them. Professor Emmert’s thoughtful scholarship, so profoundly at odds with current academic passions and prejudices, brings Churchill’s example to view, not vividly and partially as his own writings did, but wholly or essentially, delivered from the partisan distortions of his time and ours.