

LIBERALISM AND COLONIALISM



ARTHUR SHENFIELD

EDITORIAL NOTE:

Libertarians debate the “proper” attitude to adopt towards imperialism. There are varieties of imperialism and an appropriate response would acknowledge their *content*. One problem is the failure to realise that imperialism means value dissemination. Libertarians are imperialists, unless they believe in Libertarianism In One Country: but then what of free trade? It is curious, as Tony Hollick points out in *Free Life* Vol. 3, No. 3/4, to find libertarians, who are no respecters of states, being prim about interventionism. British Colonialism was an intervention in world affairs that enhanced liberty under the rule of law. I am pleased therefore that Professor Shenfield has allowed us to reprint this essay.

Mark Rogers, Editor

INTRODUCTION

This paper was written in 1957 (and delivered to the Mont Pelerin Society Conference) before most of the European colonies had obtained independence, and before Castro seized power in Cuba and prepared the present menace to Western security in the Caribbean.

The great majority of the African successor states have borne out my forebodings. With few exceptions they have descended into an odious state of tyranny and self-induced poverty. Even among the exceptions not one enjoys as much liberty as before independence.

The Caribbean situation has developed in ways which were not foreseen in 1957. The most important change has been the establishment of an outpost of the Communist Empire in Cuba. Jamaica managed to rescue itself from the totalitarian embrace, but Grenada had to be rescued by American arms. Guyana has been turned into one of the most odious of tyrannies under the title of a cooperative socialist state. For the rest, the ex-British successor states, notably Barbados, have so far displayed a good measure of stability in adherence to their British heritage of law and liberty.

Of the Dutch territories, Surinam has perhaps become an even more odious tyranny than Guyana. Though Curaçao and Aruba have remained in a respectable condition, Curaçao, for several centuries stable, prosperous and liberal in the best Dutch tradition, has not in recent years been without some social turbulence.

Martinique and Guadeloupe, the principal French territories, have been saved from ex-colonial decay by the grant to them of the status of Departments of metropolitan France. However even there, in the spirit of the blindest form of anti-colonialism, there are sections of the people who wish to jettison this very favourable status.



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FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY

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ARTHUR SHENFIELD

The word "colonialism" has acquired a peculiar meaning in recent years. It is not used to describe aggressive imperialism. It was not applied for example to the Hitlerite empire nor is it to the expansion of Russia to the Elbe. It is reserved in the main for the relatively liberal, rapidly abdicating empires of the West, though anything which is a mark of Western power, such as a sphere of influence as distinct from territorial dominion, or the authoritarian and non-abdicating but non-expansionist Portuguese empire, is included. In the West and its extensions, it is anti-colonialism, not colonialism, which is aggressive, and anti-colonialism which is the problem.

In the case of the British Empire abdication has been effected in such apparent harmony that it has been possible to represent it as constructive statesmanship of the highest order. The Indian sub-continent has been kept in the Commonwealth; Ghana has been taken in ten years through the full process of development to independence that took many decades for the "old" dominions; and Nigeria, Malaya and the rest will soon put the seal upon what is described as a work of unique political genius.

The Effects of Nationalism

It would be pleasant to believe that this is more than a British myth and that Britain has thus clearly shown how to turn the edge of anti-colonialism, but it would be very premature. The liberal has seen anti-colonialism before, in his heartland, in the form of nationalism. Anti-colonialism and nationalism are not quite his offspring, but they have long and often taken shelter under his roof. Their effects are likely to be the same. Nationalism weakened the West from within and laid it open to the attacks of its enemies; it is likely to take more than sweet reasonableness to prevent anti-colonialism from continuing the process.

Consider, for example, what would have happened in 1941/42 in India and Burma had they been independent. The Japanese would most probably have reached Suez and the war would have been lost, or at best disastrously prolonged. In a world in which the West is at bay, no liberal can support the replacement of Western dominion by power vacua. If self-determination may be acceptable as a liberal doctrine — and it cannot without qualification the security needs of the West must override it where necessary. Indeed, like other more genuinely liberal things, both the reality of self-determination and the hope of it, depend upon the

preservation of the security of the West. In a world completely safe for liberalism it might be right for the West to give up its bases and depart from its positions of power. In the world as it is, to do so is to betray the hopes of liberalism.

The Decline of Liberal Administration

External danger is not the only ill which anti-colonialism may bring to the liberal or partly-liberal world. First, the quality of government in the newly self-governing countries is certain to suffer, and the common man will find his world less liberal than it was.

It is possible to contend that the probable, even the certain, deterioration of the quality of government is an insufficient argument against self-determination, and this contention we shall have to examine. But delusions as to the facts must be exposed. In Britain, for example, it is often said that as corrupt practices were common enough in British public life, indeed amongst the highest in the land, before the 19th century, experience of self-government can be expected ultimately to produce the same public rectitude in the ex-colonies as arose in Britain itself.

This is the wildest of hopes. No reasonable policy can be founded upon it. First, the change from debased to elevated standards of public conduct is a rare event, unlikely to be repeated except in the most favourable circumstances. Mere disgust with the corrupt does not bring corruption to an end. When one plunderer is ejected from a Latin-American governor's palace he is normally succeeded by another; or if there is an interval of pathetic groping for clean government, it is short. The overthrow of a city boss in the United States used normally to be followed by the rise of another; and the decay of boss rule in American cities is not the result of simple disgust with bossism. It is the result of certain social and economic changes which cannot be expected to be paralleled in the centres of anti-colonialism; and in any case it is debatable how far American civic life is genuinely cleaner than in the great days of the boss.

Secondly these colonies have had experience of a high standard of public life. In the British colonies it has been there for all to see and the speed with which decay has set in, even before the British lion has finally taken himself off, is an ominous sign of the strength of the influences which make for debasement.

Take for example a part of the British commonwealth which I happen to know very well, the British West Indies. Although those colonies have for a long time been economically backward by the standards of the North Atlantic, they have been affiliated with European civilisation for up to three centuries and a not inconsiderable non-European middle class has arisen which has learned to admire the principles of English law and ways of British public life. Nevertheless I would confidently predict that, while the forms of liberal democracy may conceivably persist in the British Caribbean as long as the present prosperity for primary producers continues, at the first whiff of depression these colonies will one by one succumb to the rule of the Latin-American boss-type. Indeed even now the boss can be seen emerging. The people believe it to be natural, and in a sense right, that politicians' hands should be dirty. There is a famous story, which is at least *ben trovato*, of a British West Indian politician in office who, haranguing a crowd and dealing with an accusation that he was robbing the people, asked the crowd which they preferred, to be robbed by him or by his accusing rival; to which the crowd replied "You, Chief."

Take Pakistan and India as further examples. Pakistan has produced some fine men at the top, well trained in the ways of the former British rulers. Yet public life in Pakistan is not far off Indonesian levels in corruption, though not in chaos. It is true that India, although her international behaviour is greatly inferior to that of Pakistan, has a more wholesome public life. But how long that will last after the generation of British trained and influenced civil servants and public men have gone is a question which can receive only a gloomy answer.

The Prevalence of Statism

But even if the public life of these countries could be wholesome, it would still soon become illiberal. The crudest notions of economic nationalism and etatism are in the ascendant in them. Of course here the ex-colonies take their cue from Europe itself. Indeed it is Europe's precept as well as example which guides them. Here perhaps the worst offender, for she could have been the most enlightened, is Britain. Long before Britain herself abandoned free trade she thought it proper, indeed evidence of a high disinterestedness, to allow the Indian empire to use the tariff as an instrument of economic development. British statesmen and publicists have for many years told the primary producing colonies that industrialisation is a worthy object, but have taken no steps to see that their pupils understood what impoverishment would result from industrialisation by tariff, import quota, subsidy, and other forms of state intervention.

Furthermore for at least a generation the British Colonial Office has eagerly propagated trade unionism in the colonies, partly on the footing that if unionism

were to arise at all it should be shown how to conduct itself in what British unionism claims to be its own temperate, civilised manner, but mainly because unionism has been regarded as "a good thing". Untold harm has been done by this. It is not merely that unions will impoverish the ex-colonies. Much more important is that they are tailor-made for the tyranny and corruption of the political boss. Jamaica, for example, is a striking case of government by politicians who have trade unions in their pockets, who use tariffs and quotas to protect their members' privileges and produce an unemployment-ridden high-cost economy as a result. Equally with unionism Britain has fostered marketing boards, price controls and other instruments of dirigisme in her colonial territories, which anti-colonialism eagerly adopts and extends. By and large the liberal empires originally freed their dependent peoples from economic exploitation. Now anti-colonialism will show them what exploitation really means. Of course these economic influences are the work of the socialist, not the liberal, Western emancipator; and the decay which they will produce in the colonies will be an extension of the decay which the revolt against liberalism has produced in the West itself. But the liberal must take their likely persistence into account in assessing the case for self-determination and clearly he must put them in the balance against it. If he believes that the rule of law should be enjoyed by all, he ought to show little enthusiasm for a self-determination which is likely to destroy it.

If these considerations were all, the verdict for the liberal would be easy. No surrender to anti-colonialism! Up with the Belgians, and even the Portuguese, who have not forgotten how to rule! Down with the Nassers and Nehrus! Down even with the Neguib and Bourguibas, for fear of the Nassers that have succeeded or will succeed them! Down with the Nkrumahs and Azikiwes! Down with all the simple-minded in Washington who will ruin us all with their 1776 fixation!

The Difficulties of Policy Formation

Unfortunately, I need hardly say that it is not so simple. First the defence of the West does not necessarily mean resistance to anti-colonialism at all times and in all places. A point may be reached where resistance must pass into repression bitter enough to poison the West itself and sap its own liberalism. Justice may be with the French in Algeria, but it may no longer be possible to impose French rule without ruining France herself. There are times and places where a sphere of influence is still possible but dominion is not. The defensive value of the Bagdad Pact may be overrated but nothing better may now be available from Turkey to Pakistan. And further, the defensive argument cannot be universally applied because there are some areas of the world which are still safe and will not be rendered seriously unsafe by the worst va-

garies of anti-colonialism. Thus if all the Caribbean fell to the level of Haiti it would be a sad disgrace for the West, but it would hardly give the Pentagon the jitters. Possibly the same applies, at least for the time being, to West Africa.

Secondly the deterioration of the quality of government is an argument of uncertain weight. Clearly this argument must be used with circumspection even if we are entitled to rule others for their own good.

But I need hardly tell liberals that it is not easy for them to advocate the rule of others for their own good. In this context this is partly because, as John Stuart Mill long ago said of British rule in India, alien rule is weak at the heart however much more beneficent it is than native rule. But mainly it is because the pretensions of virtue of rulers are always suspect to the liberal even if he understands the dangers of "one man one vote". We have here in fact the dilemma of liberal-democracy. The liberal does not have to be a democrat but it is uncommonly difficult for him not to be. In this context he does not have to allow the claim of dependent peoples to choose to misrule themselves but it is by no means easy for him to refuse it. Only a sophisticated liberalism is fully seized of the dangers of self-determination, but it is not possible to teach liberalism to the ruled and dependent and make sure that it will be sophisticated. As everybody knows the British empire in India introduced Western liberal ideas to the Indian intellectuals, but the result is not a liberal India.

Thirdly, once the metropolitan country has withdrawn from a colonial area it may not be able to go back without aggression. But it is not easy to show that there is any principle in continuing to rule some people simply because they are now ruled and not attempting to rule others simply because they have ceased to be ruled. There is in fact an important and valid principle in this but few will see it. Hence it is difficult to defend a line drawn on this basis.

Amid these complexities an inexpugnable liberal policy is not easy to find. The West has retreated too far in recent years to be in a position to apply entirely firm or consistent measures in dealing with the varied manifestations of anti-colonialism. However, one feature of policy ought to be clear. Even though the West is obviously only partially and imperfectly liberal, it must be regarded in practice as the citadel of liberalism. The liberal should therefore be eager to see the West make it plain that it intends to defend itself. Positions of power, whether they are colonies, bases or spheres of influence ought to be retained, except where the strategy or tactics of defence makes them expendable; and the liberal must cease to be apologetic about this when it comes into conflict with demands for self-determination.

The problem of the quality of government and the fate of the common man under self-determination is more

perplexing. It is probably too late to found any policy upon claims which might be made for superior quality in government by the leading metropolitan countries; though on the other hand there is no reason why the metropolitan countries should be modest about their achievements or why they should be tender to tyrants or plunderers if such men succeed to their power.

However, though the West may be no longer able to impose good government (and in particular the rule of law) in the internal affairs of its ex-dependants, it can and should make certain standards of behaviour a condition of the assistance by means of investments which is loudly and insistently demanded of it by them.

The Myths of Underdevelopment

The widespread view in the West that it must assist the "under-developed" countries (in which category it does not include truly under-developed countries like Canada) largely rests upon a foundation of fallacies.

First, that rich countries are under a duty to assist poor countries. This is of a piece with the state-imposed levelling between rich and poor within the West which is familiar to us. If it were fully applied it would reproduce the ills which levelling has caused in Europe on a disastrous scale.

Secondly, that the "underdeveloped" countries must be given a higher standard of living to prevent them from joining the forces of communism. It is of course extremely doubtful whether political adherence to the West can be bought at all, but if it can capital investment is not a suitable method of purchase. And furthermore it is not always true that a rise in the standard of living fortifies resistance to communism. In the ideological climate of our times it may produce a desire for a further quick rise which is in fact impossible under any system but which communism may plausibly offer to deliver.

Thirdly, that the West needs to invest in the "underdeveloped" countries for the sake of the expansion of its own economy. This is, of course, to endow any investment with the virtue which properly belongs only to investment governed by business prudence, free from the danger of expropriation and promoted with an eye to an economic, not a political, return.

Investment promoted under the influence of these fallacies will weaken, not strengthen, the liberal world. If investment of a truly business character is not possible, so be it. But there is good reason to believe that, if it became clear that the capital of the West could be obtained only by those who respected the rights of capital, there would be a very salutary influence on the internal conduct of affairs in the prospective borrowing countries. But for that, of course, the West must itself learn again to understand and respect the rights of capital owners.