

Broken Rods of Empire

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Doctrines of Imperialism, by A. P. Thornton, *New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1965. 246 pp. \$5.95 (paper \$2.95).*

SOON AFTER the beginning of this century Joseph Chamberlain, in a famous speech at Birmingham, told his countrymen they must learn to "think imperially," because, he assured them, the day of small nations had long passed. All the visible evidences confirmed his statement. Most of the great and some of the lesser European powers were in a ferment of imperial activity and rivalry, and even the United States appeared to be extending an imperial dominion in the Caribbean, Central America, and the far Pacific.

Some no doubt who had heard Mr. Chamberlain in their youth lived to see the British Empire become one with Nineveh and Tyre. Today no British statesman, least of all Mr. Harold Wilson, would risk the wrath of the "emergent nations" by publicly confessing that he harbored imperial thoughts. Nor would a statesman of any other Western nation venture to do so, for on both sides of the present alignment of power and ideologies, "imperialism" is something to be ascribed to the designs or accomplishments of one's enemies but indignantly disclaimed for one's own. And here we come to the first of the many odd paradoxes suggested by Professor Thornton's little treatise:

as the number of small nations with bizarre and confusing names multiplies faster than the atlases can be revised, so do the ugly connotations of the "imperialisms" from which they have been freed or have freed themselves.

Though political history is very largely the record of the rise, expansion, decline, and dissolution of successive empires, "imperialism" is a relatively recent addition to the vocabulary of political controversy. The earliest citation of the word in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is 1857. Professor Thornton tells us that like so many other isms that haunt us nowadays—socialism, communism, statism—it is a gift from the French (*l'impérialisme*) and was first applied to the domestic and foreign policies of Napoleon III. It caught on rapidly, however, and recurs again and again, in both approving and disapproving accents, in the speeches and political literature of the later nineteenth century.

In Chamberlain's day it could be defined dispassionately as: "imperial state or authority; the system of imperial government; the principle of empire; devotion to imperial interests." By the end of the second World War it had come to mean "a lust or passion for the extension of the dominions of a state";² also to "connote any development of foreign trade that makes use of political means to attain its ends."³ Soon, no doubt, the lexicographers will include the category of "cultural

imperialism," meaning apparently the imposition of one's legal, ethical, and aesthetic traditions upon an alien race which has not shared them. A generation ago Professor William L. Langer was complaining that the semantic content of "imperialism" had become so adulterated that the term was no longer of use to the historian or the political scientist. Professor Thornton, though admitting that imperialism is "more often the name of the emotion that reacts to a series of events than a definition of the events themselves," thinks this is no reason why the term need be avoided or the emotions ignored. After all, "emotions own a formidable record, as long as that of man himself. Any 'proper study of mankind' has therefore to include it."

Empires, in our professor's view, are primarily projections of the will-to-power. Power of course is the abiding political reality, and the only relevant question about power is who shall wield it. This appears to depend to a very large extent on the attitude of the governed toward the governors. Power becomes authority to the degree to which it is accepted as such, and this is true in cultural and social matters no less than in politics.

No one wishes for liberty who has not first recognized his state of bondage. . . . In western society chains have been fashioned for everyone to wear. Every woman acknowledges the imperial authority of the dress houses of Paris and Rome. Dimensions are there decreed for them as they are in Detroit for automobiles. Domestic "taste" can be bought at the interior decorator's. The world of the theatre is ruled from three capitals. . . . Only when this acceptance is withheld, is recognized as entailing a loss of self-respect, does a "movement" against it develop, similar to the anti-colonialist movement in modern nationalism.

It is when acceptance is withdrawn from imperialism that it becomes "colonial-imperialism," or more simply "colonialism." Colonialism, the professor tells us, is "imperialism seen from below," when the sense of oppression and indignity has been aroused and leads to agitation or rebellion. He is thinking of the nationalist movements in Asia and Africa, but there are instances in which it has been the colonists or their descendants rather than native races that have risen against the disgrace of colonialism, the Americans in the eighteenth century, the Creoles in the Latin-American wars of independence, for example. Thus it is another paradox that the most recent gesture of defiance against the vestigial British imperialism has been by the white government of Rhodesia.

The main point, however, is that throughout the

nineteenth century the outcries against British imperialism came not from the Asiatic or African agitators but from British voices. The anti-imperialist tradition in England has been traced, perhaps not quite accurately, to Adam Smith whose famous attack on the colonial mercantile economy appeared in the same year as the American *Declaration of Independence*. It is also a mistake to suppose that imperial rule has been in all cases unwelcome and forced upon weak but unwilling peoples.

England absorbed an Indian Empire by force of Indian arms. Imperialist agents in Africa refused as many treaties as they signed. Traditions linger in places as distinct from one another as Angola and Borneo of white men arriving from the sea to be hailed as gods. White men, with superior *juju*, had more than magical weapons: they were thought to have a surer grasp of life and its problems. They could not be understood, but their power was clear—and, as obviously, it was underwritten by even more powerful forces that were unseen. They were men to be followed, men to be accepted, men to be feared.

It is when faith in the superior *juju* begins to evaporate, when Friday begins to mistrust Crusoe and to perceive his weaknesses, that empires must be held together, if at all, by naked force. The general disenchantment of Africans and Asians began with the first of the two great inter-imperial wars of this century. After the first war, in which European governments had summoned non-white troops to help them defeat a European enemy, the white man's prestige had fallen and his power was greatly impaired; after the second war both prestige and power were gone. For the British to have attempted a defense of their empire against the tides of nationalism then sweeping through it, says Professor Thornton, would not only have cost them the friendship of the United States, but would have

required the mobilization of a standing British Army in India and the marshalling of flying squadrons of military police, ready and willing to hold down restive colonies the world over for an unforeseeable length of time. Britain . . . would also have been forced to spend untold sums of money—money which she did not have and which no one would have lent her, and she would have had to drain the country of manpower it needed so desperately to set the lurching economy back, if not on its feet, at least on its knees. . . . She would probably have had to cope with mutiny in a conscript Army that had been promised peace, or at least demobilization when the war with Japan was over. . . . Politics was still the art of the possible, and this no

longer included the possibility of preserving an empire by force in an age when its prestige had gone.

The Malays had seen the surrender of a British imperial army at Singapore, the Burmese had seen another such army driven back to the borders of India. The Indonesians had seen the Dutch masters easily defeated in their islands. Neither Dutch nor Belgians had been able to defend their homelands against an imperial aggressor, and neither dared risk the displeasure of the successive American administrations which had bestowed their blessings on nationalist aspirations everywhere in the world. Besides, had not the war been fought for the freedom of *all* people? "It was not supposed that the kinds of freedom [the Atlantic Charter] listed as essential would ever be got beneath anyone's imperial rule, however benevolent or malevolent a doctrine its rulers laid claim to. Once again a voice came from the wings. . . this time in a tone stronger than President Wilson's, since able to call on support from an audience such as Wilson could never assemble."

The French proved more obdurate, remaining deaf to the reproaches of American journalists and publicists and to the portents of the time. They fought long and hard in Indo-China and in Algiers to recover "face" and empire, the more so, our author suggests, because it was for them a matter of *honneur* rather than any economic benefit that could be derived from a struggle so costly and so futile.

Professor Thornton's book, as the title indicates, is not so much a history of empires as a historical analysis of the concepts, principles, and arguments whereby the existence of empires has been justified and condemned. He succeeds in showing that the motives of the imperialists have not been exclusively, or perhaps even predominantly, those of territorial aggrandizement or of economic exploitation, as is commonly supposed by persons whose emotions on the subject have been influenced by "two generations of thinkers firmly encamped on the Left" or by that "liberal American tradition which sees the power of virtue but no virtue in power." The sense of mission among imperialists was at least as powerful and as genuine as the appetite of trading companies for markets, raw materials, and profits or of military and naval doctrinaires for strategic bases overseas. The "civilization mongers," as Marx called them scornfully, were wholly sincere in their belief that they were bringing European enlightenment to the darker corners of the earth; so of course were the Christian missionaries who saw in the spread of empires

the opportunity to deliver the heathen from the chains of superstition and idolatry.

The French especially took their civilizing mission with the utmost seriousness, because, as the professor seems to imply, they believed themselves to possess the only civilization really worth the name. British colonial administrations interfered with native life and customs only to the extent necessary to preserve British concepts of order and justice, which of course meant suppression of such thoroughly un-British practices as slave raiding, cannibalism, widow burning, and human sacrifice in general. Since no one is more tenacious of tribal customs than the Englishman *in partibus infidelium*, this inevitably made for the social segregation of the races. The French, by contrast, pursued a policy of assimilation, "or the making of Frenchmen out of un-French materials." It had no success among the Moslems, but in French West Africa, according to one observer, it had produced "a profusion of Catholics and anti-clericals, Communists and Gaullists, socialists, syndicalists and existentialists." But neither in the French nor British empires did the influence of European culture extend beyond the cities and towns into the vast hinterlands, or so the professor believes.

Yet there is evidence in his book that the effect of European usages, even when overlaid on a much more ancient culture and civilization, was not entirely superficial. He recalls for example how Sir Charles Napier, after his conquest of Sind for the British East India Company in 1843 was waited on by some Hindu notables who pleaded that he not interfere with certain native customs, including *suttee*, or the immolation of widows on the funeral pyres of their husbands. To this the general replied that though it was the Indian custom to burn widows alive, it was the English custom to hang the men who burned them. "Let us all," he concluded, "follow our national customs." Elsewhere the professor observes that outside of the West, feminism—"the twentieth century's first and perhaps still its most significant" anti-colonialist rebellion—"has made no progress to speak of." The end of the British *Raj*, however, has not been followed by any revival of *suttee*, and as this review is written a high-caste widow⁴ has become head of the Indian state.

The opposite of imperialism is of course "self-determination," the one consistent principle of American policy which has led our statesmen into so many inconsistencies of behavior, such as support of the Zionists against the Arabs and support of the Arabs against Israel in the Suez crisis of 1956, support of the United Nations intervention against M. Tshombe's secessionist movement in the Congo

and support of M. Tshombe against the Congolese rebels. The doctrine of self-determination was enunciated by President Wilson in 1918 and reaffirmed in the Atlantic Charter of 1941. Its chief effects in Wilsonian times were the dismemberment of the Austro-Hungarian empire, most of which was presently to be absorbed into a new and more formidable imperialism, and the creation of some Arab states in the former dominions of the Ottoman empire; but it also encouraged the rise of various separatist movements throughout Europe, even in the newly "emergent" European states. Though these movements had little success or none, they had some part in determining the alignments in the Spanish Civil War and in creating some of the dissatisfactions and tensions leading to the second World War. The insistence of the Roosevelt administration and the American propagandists that the Atlantic Charter applied to all peoples everywhere, became an embarrassment for one of the signatories. Mr. Churchill felt constrained to protest that he had not become the King's first minister to preside over the liquidation of the British Empire; yet this, as the professor reminds us, was to be his melancholy destiny, for he was again Prime Minister when the liquidation was consummated by the withdrawal of British troops from Egypt in 1954.

What has come to an end in Asia and Africa is what came to end in North and South America in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—the long historical epoch of European overseas dominion that began with the voyages of Columbus and Vasco da Gama—and with it the reign of those "imperialists who supposed that power and responsibility were mutually interchangeable terms." Meanwhile, under the mask and slogans of anti-colonialism have risen new imperialists who suppose nothing of the sort. Just how much the American gospel of self-determination had to do with hastening the end of the old imperialisms may be a matter for dispute. What can no longer be disputed is the magnitude of the effort now required to enforce the doctrine of self-determination against the new imperialists. The price in blood, treasure, and political traditions of a *pax americana* in Asia and elsewhere will be a steep one.

¹*Century Dictionary and Cyclopedia* (Vol. IV), 1904.

²A. M. Hyamson, *A Dictionary of International Affairs*, 1947.

³W. W. White, *Political Dictionary*, 1947.

⁴Mrs. Gandhi, it appears, had separated from her husband a dozen years or more before his death in order to assist her father, Prime Minister Nehru, in various political activities.