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Anthony O'Hear

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One of the iconic films of my youth was Lawrence of Arabia, which I actually saw in France in 1964. I can still remember the dramatic scene of the taking of Damascus, with Lawrence and his rag-taggle Sharifian army sweeping through the city, cleansing it of its Ottoman oppressors. Certainly a moving and exciting piece of cinematography, representing a powerful, almost mythical, moment of modern times. Here, in short, was the nemesis of the great and centuries old Ottoman Empire.

But, as I was shortly to learn, myth is what the whole farrago was, a dangerously deceptive myth to boot. Lawrence of Arabia was not history at all, and neither was the equally mythical Seven Pillars of Wisdom. I learned the truth from a chapter in Elie Kedourie's *The Chatham House Version of 1970*, which I had been recommended by the distinguished poet Peter Levi. The chapter is rather prosaically entitled 'The Capture of Damascus, 1 October 1918', but prosaic as the title is, the contents are explosive, or would be if they were more widely known. As Kedourie painstakingly shows, Damascus had been surrounded by Australian troops on the night of September 30th, and the Ottoman forces had already been defeated and had surrendered. It seems that the victorious Australians were then told to hold back so as to allow the Arab Sharifians (Lawrence's forces) to occupy the city and claim that they had captured it, so as to corroborate the narrative Lawrence and the British foreign office wanted. Actually widespread disorder then occurred, which the Australians and French, who were also there to the chagrin of the British, had to quell. This whole charade of a Sharifian capture and pacification of Damascus seems to have been enacted in line with a British government pledge back in July 1918 to allow 'independence' to any Arab area emancipated from the Turks by the action of the Arabs themselves. This was specifically to dish the French, who had their sights set on what became Syria (and in which they were eventually successful).

Actually Syria did not become an independent county until 1920, the same year as Iraq, with Jordan following in 1921. These three countries had all been part of the Ottoman (Turkish) Empire for centuries. Until the 1920s they had never existed as the separate countries they now are. When they were founded, each of them was originally placed under a Hashemite sovereign, who were members of a leading dynasty in what is now Saudi Arabia. With Syria this was only of brief duration, King Faisal quickly being deposed from Syria before subsequently being installed in Baghdad. In other words the Arab kings of Iraq and Jordan and briefly Syria had no real connection with the lands they became sovereign over. But they were part of the dynasty with whom Lawrence had launched the Arab revolt against the Ottomans, and they were backed by the British government, indeed central to its Middle Eastern policy, which is where Chatham House comes in.

Chatham House is the home of the grandly named Royal Institute of International Affairs, and is the name by which that august institution is popularly known. Under the direction of Arnold Toynbee from the 1930s until the 1950s, and also subsequently, Chatham House became a staunch proponent of the pan-Arabism which was also dominant in British Foreign office in its Middle Eastern diplomacy. It is this version, which in Kedourie's view, would defend and promote the policies pursued in the Middle East by Lawrence himself, but also by Viscount Allenby of Felixstowe and Megiddo (the military commander actually responsible for the defeat of the Turks in

the Middle East, at the battle of Megiddo/Armageddon, hence his somewhat bathetic sobriquet), Lord Milner (from the War Cabinet) and Gertrude Bell (the highly influential Arabist and friend of the future King Faisal of Iraq). The Lawrence of Arabia film should be seen as the filmic Chatham House version in what Kedourie refers to as plodding ham-handed Panavision, albeit with a magic ending.

Kedourie himself was born in Baghdad in 1926, of a Jewish Iraqi family. His early education was in Baghdad, but he came to England for university study, first at the LSE and then at Oxford. There he wrote a D Phil thesis, on England and the Middle East, which included an unsparingly dispassionate account of British Middle Eastern policy in general and of T.E. Lawrence in particular. Notoriously it was failed by Sir Hamilton Gibb, who was the foremost British orientalist of the time. Kedourie refused to apologise or amend, but was brought back 'doctorless' to the LSE in 1953 by Michael Oakeshott, where he remained until his death in 1992.

In *The Chatham House Version*, Kedourie painstakingly demonstrated the malign effects of the Arab nationalism as encouraged by British diplomats and soldiers, and as practiced in the newly created Arab states, and indeed in the Palestinian mandate as well. All this was endorsed by mainstream British historians and political scientists from their base in Chatham House and elsewhere. Meanwhile, in Palestine before and during the Second World War the mufti of Jerusalem, Muhammad Amin al-Husseini, was an enthusiastically committed Nazi, who personally fawned on Hitler. Despite this, in the Second World War, some British policy makers of the time believed that the creation of the Arab League would eventually help to produce a peaceful settlement in Palestine. I should point out here that Kedourie was no uncritical supporter of Zionism. In a particularly poignant passage of the book, given his own history, he writes of the way that violent Zionist activity in Iraq, either by design or as the result of reactions to it, had the effect of encouraging Jews to leave Baghdad for emigration to Israel. This militant Zionism was in effect the mirror image of the countervailing and ultimately successful Arab nationalist effort to create a dominantly Arab Iraq. (p 312)

This was for Kedourie a tragedy. Under the reviled Ottomans (reviled, that is, by Lawrence, Gertrude Bell and Chatham House), what became Iraq had been a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic jurisdiction. As well as Muslims, who included Kurds as well as Iraqis, there were large concentrations of Jews and Christians, including Assyrians. But under the new Iraqi regime, 'the unvocal masses and the colonies of Jews and Christians... were handed over ... to a band of men who were, to start with, for the most part, minor bureaucrats or little officers in the Ottoman service, and who were moved with certain crude and virulent notions, spreading from Europe; ... men narrow and ignorant, devoid of loyalty and piety, of violent and ungovernable impulses'. (p 303) These men were nationalists, Arab nationalists, and they were determined to make Iraq

an Arab nationalist country, which was to prove disastrous for Iraqi Jews and Christians, including the Assyrians.

In 1933 there was a massacre of Assyrians, who were in no way defended by the British who still had influence in Iraq. The Iraqi Jews, meanwhile, had been under constant pressure ever since the creation of the Iraqi state. In 1935-6 there were violent attacks on Jews and Jewish property. In 1941 there was actually a Nazi coup d'état in Baghdad, which was quickly snuffed out by the decisiveness of Churchill, but that did little to stem anti-Jewish discrimination, so much so that by 1951 there were few Jews left in Iraq. The property of emigrating Jews was confiscated by the government, as was the property of any Iraqi Jew living abroad. None of the proceeds of these exactions, by the way, went to the relief of Arab refugees from Palestine, whose grievances the Iraqi government of the time continued to air in the United Nations. To these anti-Jewish measures, as Kedourie commented tartly, the state of Israel remained indifferent as they afforded proof, or further proof, that life in the Jewish diaspora was impossible. His criticisms of Arab nationalism did not imply that he was uncritical of Israel's own nationalistic fervour.

As a further example of Kedourie's measured attitude to contentious historical episodes, we should mention briefly his analysis of the Armenian genocide. He points out that in Armenia, as elsewhere in the Ottoman empire, 'administration was certainly corrupt and arbitrary, but it was ramshackle and inefficient and left many interstices by which the subject could hope to escape its terrors', with well understood ways of avoiding or mitigating problems. (p 293) But this all began to change when, under pressure from European powers, the Sultanate started to reform and modernize. Escape from the centre became more difficult, while at the same time, again under European influence, nationalist ideas began to infiltrate Armenian society itself, and these were often violent and insurrectionary ideas, as the corresponding ideas had been in nineteenth century Europe. 'Incidents' were manufactured to provoke counter-measures and also to provoke the interest of the great powers, including Russia. All this naturally produced reprisals from Istanbul, which became more extreme when the nationalistic Young Turks took over in 1908, as did the Armenian ripostes. In 1914 an Armenian volunteer division in Russian uniforms started operating north of Ezerum and in 1915 Armenians seized the town of Van and declared an Armenian government. Cruel and murderous deportations and massacres of Armenians then followed, both sides in Kedourie's view infected with nationalist sentiments which brooked no compromise, but which led to what amounted to genocide of Armenians. What Kedourie shows here is the often unnoticed lead up within the Armenian community itself to the genocide, and, for our purposes more importantly, the way that new and progressive European currents of thought, in this case nationalist thinking on both sides, had played a significant role in the horror that ensued.

It will already be clear that Kedourie sees much of the bloodshed he is describing as 'atrocities incident to national self-determination'; and also that this desire for national self-determination is something new in the Middle East of the past century and a half. In fact, as he argued in his 1960 book *Nationalism*, that desire is itself something altogether new, arising from a quasi-romantic desire of thinkers in early nineteenth century Europe to locate the very essence of their being in inwardly felt emotions of belonging, which will enable them to feel part of a wider and encompassing community. In nationalistic ideology this would be a real or imagined nationalist community, in which they would find true freedom. He is thinking here of mainly Germanic figures such as Herder, Schelling and Fichte, though their influence even early on extended to other spheres than the German, such as in Italy with Mazzini and in Hungary with Kossuth. In each case the nationalism was of a 'pure' exclusionary nature, marking off Germans, say, from the Czechs or Jews or Poles they were living with in the same areas. We need not go further into the roots of this thinking here, save to follow Kedourie in underlining that this strand of thought (or perhaps better of feeling) was quite new in political thought in Europe itself, as well as in the rest of the world. We should also note that it particularly appealed to intellectuals – thinkers, poets and artists – who had a limitless sense of their own worth, though a very limited capacity to express this worth in actual deeds (and an even more limited experience of the political *savoir-faire* needed to keep a population in a state of inward peace and prosperity).

In short, as Kedourie put it in *Nationalism*, the ideology of nationalism which swept Europe and the rest of the world from the nineteenth century on, was 'invented by literary men who had never exercised power, and appreciated little the necessities and obligations incidental to intercourse between state.' (p 65) It is, of course, an ideology not a practice. It is without grounding in the mess and compromise of actual politics. As we will see, Kedourie goes on to extend his criticism of nationalist ideology to any abstract political ideology which places itself above the world as it is, and strives to re-fashion the world in its own terms. Here, as elsewhere, Kedourie's thinking is aligned with that of his mentor Michael Oakeshott. For Oakeshott we should treat any political practice founded on abstract reasoning as opposed to practical experience and wisdom with deep suspicion. In riding rough-shod over the complexity of actual circumstances and of the way that in any actual situation there will be competing values and considerations, which need to be mutually accommodated, the results of ideological politics are likely to be disastrous. Any sensible political practice will be sensitive to local conditions and histories in a way that abstract ideologies are not. The results of ideologically driven policy will be unsuspected and maybe also unwanted by their progenitors. As in the case of some examples of nationalistic self-determination the proponents of ideological policy may come to look on what they have unleashed with

horror and dismay, as they see their efforts producing not peace and harmony in a land, but hostility where there had once been a degree of tolerance and laissez-faire, and maybe also discrimination, oppression and worse. But equally plausibly they may not, and the ideologists then double down on what they have started in order to implement the programme in what they would see as its pure and unadulterated form.

Kedourie's original point in all this is that a new and in his view noxious piece of theory, in this case the theory of exclusivist national self-determination, has upset all kinds of imperfect but tolerable modes of living, and led to untold harms and killings, and not of course just in the Middle East. Some of the harms that eventuated in central Europe are detailed in *Nationalism*, but in *The Chatham House Version* Kedourie extends his criticism of theory-driven politics in other directions. In several places in his writings of half a century ago he writes of the 'common fashion' of denouncing the imperialism of western powers in Asia and Africa for some or all of the maladies inflicting those countries even after imperialism. Yet, he says, it is 'a simple and obvious fact' that those areas of the world which are said to suffer from the effects of imperialism to-day have known nothing but alien rule throughout most of their history, their experience of government (being) largely the insolence and greed of unchecked arbitrary rule.' (p 286) Kedourie sees some advantages in some aspects of European imperialism, specifically a curb on unchecked and arbitrary government, and establishment of the rule of law to improve the lives of individuals.

However these advantages aside, western imperialism has bequeathed, for the best of reasons, an insidious legacy to its former colonies, a legacy which Kedourie sees as all too likely to produce further decades of unchecked and arbitrary government. And it is a legacy which Chatham House would have been proud of, because it was an ideological legacy suffused with notions of abstract right and equality, as well as of national, or perhaps better nationalistic, self-determination. (The fact that in more recent times rationalist progressivist ideology has moved away from nationalism to a globalist ideology hardly affects the underlying point, for, as far as can be seen, how the implementation of a no-borders world should be achieved is startlingly vague, while its consequential effects are entirely unknown, and may well be utterly divisive of any society on which they are foisted. The move from nationalism to globalism is just another example of a politics of rationalist abstraction, though it may be noted that what was once taken to be rationally axiomatic – nationalism – has in very short order been replaced by its polar opposite. Reason itself is strikingly flexible and forgetful.)

I will quote from *The Chatham House Version* on the crucial point about rationalistic ideology:

'The meliorism of western liberals, the activist categories and the hopeful concepts of their political science go far to explain such an attitude, as also their conviction that a

stable, universal peace will ensue only when the world is composed of democratic and progressive nation-states. Whatever the truth of this dogma, it is not one which a statesman should entertain, and indeed it is irrelevant to him whether the events with which he has to cope are milestones on a road leading somewhere, or mere variations on an eternal theme eternally repeated.' (p 1)

Kedourie published this in 1970, at a time when, apart from the Middle East, following the collapse of Western European empires, dozens of new states had come into existence, ostensibly on the meliorist principles of democratic and progressive nation-states, and this process continues to the present day. So why is it that the results of de-colonisation are so mixed, given that so many of the new states were conceived as progressive democracies? It is customary to-day to blame the failure of so many of these countries on the oppressive nature of the colonialism from which they emerged. Kedourie, who admired some aspects of Western imperialism, give quite a different answer:

'A curse the west has indeed brought to the east, but – and here lies the tragedy – not intentionally; indeed the curse was considered – and still is by many – a precious boon, the most precious the west could confer on the east in expiation of its supposed sins; and the curse itself is a potent in its maleficence in the west as it is in the east. A rash, a malady, an infection spreading from western Europe through the Balkans, the Ottoman empire, India, the far East and Africa, eating up the fabric of settled society to leave it weakened and defenceless before ignorant and unscrupulous adventurers, for further horror and atrocity: such are the terms to describe what the west has done to the rest of the world, not willingly, not knowingly, but mostly out of excellent intentions and by example of its prestige and prosperity.' (p 286)

The settled societies that had been overturned in this way would often have included the colonial dispensations from which the new independent countries emerged. Kedourie's point here is that the west, for the best of reasons, has foisted on the rest of the world western European styles of government for which that world (the global majority, if you like) was wholly unprepared. In countries where there is none of the necessary basis in experience and long, arduous tradition to operate modern democracy humanely, the West has in effect simply handed much of the spoils to 'ignorant and unscrupulous adventurers'; and through the technological supremacy it has also bequeathed its former colonies, it placed in their hands of these adventurers formerly unprecedented means of surveillance and control. This argument will no doubt be unpalatable to many well-meaning people, who will point to examples where de-colonisation with the full panoply of democratic and nationalistic human rights have worked, or at least has not simply degenerated into brutal militarism, oligarchic

corruption and capture, demagogic bullying, tribalistic takeover or theocratic dictatorship.

To these well-meaning people, I would simply point to the once fashionable and again entirely well-meaning doctrine of interventionist liberal universalism, the idea that we in the West have a duty to spread universal human rights throughout the world, as something to which all people, everywhere, should be accorded access. This idea gained widespread acceptance after the much publicized failure of the west, or indeed of the international 'community' more generally, to do anything about the appalling carnage in the 1990s, which resulted from the age old struggle between between the Houthis and the Tutsis in Central Africa, the so-called Rwandan genocide. Well-meaning and compassionate people all over the world were shocked, as well they might be. Something had to be done to prevent anything of this sort again. More generally, shouldn't the world community, or at least the enlightened section of it (i.e. the west) intervene wherever it can to ensure that human rights are protected and fostered, and flagrant abuses curtailed? Intervention in situations where human rights were being trampled on or ignored became widely acceptable, at least in theory, particularly in the optimistic aftermath of the fall of the Soviet Empire.

But the problem about Rwanda was not the awfulness of what happened, which was not in doubt. The problem, which those who lamented global inaction over it never really addressed, was that it was hard to see what outsiders could have done, and specifically could have done without making things even worse. And maybe, as is not unknown, the once warring parties then turn on their would-be saviours. As we know, this benevolent doctrine of liberal interventionism was certainly influential in gaining support for the attempts in the early years of this century to set up harmonious democracies in Iraq (again!) and Afghanistan. The one unleashed a murderous struggle between Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims (which the dictator Saddam Hussein had managed brutally to prevent), while the other, after two decades of effort and the expenditure of unconscionable amounts of blood and treasure, both western and Afghani, has resulted in the return of the very Taliban the war was aimed at dislodging. Of course, I would like to see sweetness and light in Baghdad and girls going to school in Kabul, but even if I had the right to impose on my values on the populations in question (as the UN declaration of human rights might suggest we do), we should all know by now that such things cannot be achieved by compassionate, well-meaning protocols or even less by force from outside.

And this is the curse of which Kedourie speaks, the well-meaning, largely western assumption that abstract ideas, however theoretically or philosophically cogent, can somehow be benevolently imposed on the real world and maintain their integrity or purity. The actual world in which we live is never a blank canvas on which to draw.

Whatever one wants or intends will never be achievable without mess and compromise. There is an imperfection which attends all human desire and effort, especially when it means to avoid it. Apart from anything else, there are always people and forces resistant to what one intends, and, whether well-meaning or malign, they have to be taken into account, even if simply to ride rough-shod over them. Navigating the human world successfully, to the extent that success can be achieved at all, requires experience, wisdom, and a sound knowledge of human nature and human life, to say nothing of recognizing that situations where the tolerably livable is the most that can be achieved. In *Nationalism* Kedourie insists that what is needed is 'a shrewd appreciation of the ultimate incompatibility of philosophical speculation with the civic order'. (p 99)

Oakeshott and Kedourie had this shrewd appreciation, which seems to me to underlie Kedourie's approach to history, and particularly in his critiques of nationalism and the Chatham House approach more generally, whether it still includes nationalism or not. It is this general thesis which seems to me the most pertinent in 2024, when so much political discussion is directed by abstract philosophical ideas, such as equality, human rights, imperialism, racial privilege or its converse, as if these conceptions can trump all other considerations, and be applied willy-nilly in whatever circumstances one finds oneself. The passage just quoted from *Nationalism* goes on to say that it may be of small moment when abstract and unanchored philosophical speculation was engaged in by 'men of discretion teaching only a small circle of disciples'. But things are quite different when these ideas are disseminated 'to all sorts and conditions of men', by means of books when Kedourie was alive, but now even more pervasively and immediately via the internet and electronic media. Now any half-literate celebrity or ignorant actor can tweet his musings on abstract right or wrong and their application to situations they know little about, and thus influence millions. These millions, or activist sub-sections of them, may well then be moved to activism, whether about the climate, race, colonialism, Israel, or whatever is the current focus of melioristic attention. Kedourie followed Heine in talking of a politics moved by 'the fanaticism of the Will', with its 'relentless, unappeasable, demonic intensity'. (*Nationalism*, p138)

This suspicion of an abstract ideologically driven politics has its genesis in no less a figure than Edmund Burke in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. In it he saw the politics of the French revolutionaries and their English supporters as exemplifying a new and unwelcome strain of political thinking and, worse, of practice: 'They (the advocates of rationalistically driven politics) despise experience as the wisdom of unlettered men; and as for the rest, they have wrought under-ground a mine that will blow up at one grand explosion all examples of antiquity, all precedents, charters, and acts of parliament. They have 'the rights of men'. Against these there can be no prescription, against these no agreement is binding: these admit no temperament, no

compromise: any thing withheld from their full demand is so much fraud and injustice.' (p 148) The unlettered men whose wisdom Burke is extolling are what Kedourie called the unvocal masses, who were so trampled on by the Arab nationalists of the 1920s and 1930s.

Burke was writing in 1790, even before the execution of the King and Queen of France, but, as he pointed out, a regime based on such abstract principles and reasoning, having foresworn all loyalty of feeling, of affection from tried and tested arrangements, and dismissive of any basis in a historical past, in favour of philosophical abstraction, in the end has nothing to fall back on but force. Hence what Burke saw as the inevitability of the terror in France from 1793. Of course they, the revolutionaries, claimed that unlike the King or the Church or the unvocal masses they had reason on their side, hence the cult of Reason, and their turning Notre Dame into a Temple of Reason. But an important point in any discussion of abstract 'rational' or rationalistic politics, though not taken up by Burke or Kedourie, was taken up by Aristotle long ago.

It is that reasoning in moral and political matters is by no means as straightforward or conclusive as the rationalist universalist might imply. As Aristotle has it, there is a faculty called cleverness, which can find hefty reasons for the bad and against the good. Thus the sophist Thrasymachus in Socrates's time, or Nietzsche or Sartre or Michel Foucault in our own. To reason well about human conduct we need to have the right dispositions, which incline us to the good and the honourable, and away from the dishonourable, for which we should feel shame. But having the right dispositions is not itself a matter of reason, abstractly considered. It is a matter of experience, of being brought up and feeling things in the right way. (See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1144a23 and 1103a33) No doubt it is for this reason that, despite a striking similarity of view among those who call themselves 'rationalists' in moral and political realm, usually with a progressivist and anti-religious slant, this does not mean that weighty reasons cannot be found in favour of traditional values on such matters as property, sexuality and identity. Reason in the abstract sense remains inconclusive, despite rationalist rhetoric and bullying.

So in the end the rationalist, as much as his or her opponent will have to rely on pre-rational social structures, including force. In the case of the rationalist, having undermined existing social moeurs and conventions and unwilling to rely on 'mere' feeling, force will tend appear earlier than with his or her opponent. We see this even in our own society, with current attempts to outlaw 'hate' speech advocating things the progressive rationalist does not like, which, despite the rationalist's appeal to liberty of thought where it suits the rationalist undermining of traditional values, is nevertheless a use of force to quell dissent. And that force is all too easily converted into robbery, speculation, seizure and murder, as we saw in both the French and Russian revolutions,

to name but two. In his measured, less rhetorical way, Kedourie is pointing to similar sequences of events in the Middle East after the settlements of the 1920s, and subsequently, settlements initially directed under apparently impeccable abstract principles, but which quickly degenerated into the regimes we see to-day. This, of course, has become an all too familiar picture in the post-colonial world.

In Kedourie's view, then, the west may not be to blame for the tangible results of colonialism. In any case, for us now in 2024, after so many years it would be somewhat otiose to do so. But the west is to blame for the way in which it has bequeathed an ideological form of politics and abstract political reasoning to the rest of the world, including to its former colonies. That, not physical conquest, is the curse we have laid on the world as a whole. It is from that form of politics that so many of the ills of the world of to-day stem, either directly or indirectly, and which makes them apparently so immune to amelioration.

It might be asked at this point what solution Kedourie or I would have to the many problems the world faces to-day. I cannot speak for Kedourie, but I would suggest in conclusion that the lesson he has to teach is that politics is always a messy and uncertain business. Situations are always different, being infused with different and competing values, and also with unique and different origins and histories. The wise administrator or politician will attend to the detail and the motley of each case, rather than high-mindedly reverting to abstract ideology or principle, which will tend only to obscure and ride rough-shod over the sensitivity needed to act wisely in any particular case. Even so, mistakes will inevitably be made, which might suggest that the very idea – inherent in abstract rationalising – that there is ever a definitive 'solution' to a given problem is itself a hubristic illusion. But those in thrall to such an illusion will naturally be impatient with those they see as standing in the way of what to them is obvious and reasonable, the rational way to go. Their opponents will clearly be motivated by greed or prejudice or other unworthy motives, and will need to be cleared out of the way metaphorically, if not physically. This is the characteristically rationalistic illusion, and the curse of the west.

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