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Moral judgment: empire, nation and history

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The whole field of historical writing concerned with imperialism and the expansion of Europe has always been suffused with moral judgement. Many earlier historians of empire extolled European intervention in other societies as a force for moral, political or intellectual improvement. Yet, from the beginning, radicals castigated empires as immoral, bringers of racism, genocide and underdevelopment. Asian and African intellectuals, in turn, constructed historical narratives that made the liberated nation the bearer of moral progress in history. This paper argues that historians cannot, and should not refrain from moral judgement on particular issues, such as the excesses of slave trade or the official neglect that allowed the famine in British Bengal in 1943 to kill three million people. They should, however, avoid creating grand historical narratives that describe long-term changes, such as the growth of European empires, as moral or immoral, as progressive or wholly pernicious. This approach merely reduces complex developments to simple formulae and can sometimes be misused by contemporary politicians and ideologues.

In a classic essay of the 1960s, Arnoldo Momigliano distanced himself from what he called 'historicism', a tendency to see history as no more than the reflection of individual perspectives, with one opinion as equally valid as another.[1] Momigliano insisted that there were generally accepted assumptions that could be viewed as historical 'facts' and that it was necessary to make judgments as between the validity of these assumptions. Such judgments, he implied, were often moral judgments.

In the field of European expansion and imperialism, our whole historiographical tradition is suffused with moral judgment. During the Enlightenment, the theme of the triumph of civilization over barbarism was commonly used to justify the history of European settlement overseas. Even a rationalist such as Benjamin Franklin seemed to welcome the extirpation of the 'savage' Native American 'Other', although he was at the same time a fierce opponent of the slave trade.

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From the beginning there was also a counter-tradition of, in the words of Sankar Muthu, 'Enlightenment against Empire',[2] castigating European settlement as a barbaric violation of norms of humanity comparable with the slave trade. Von Humboldt and Burke, for instance, represented different aspects of this tradition. In later British historiography on the formal empires of the nineteenth century, a sharp clash developed between the proponents of imperial dominion (e.g. John Kaye, Vincent Smith), liberals who argued for indigenous self-government on the grounds of moral capacity (e.g. C. F. Andrews, Edward Thompson) and critics who believed that all empire was morally wrong (e.g. W. S. Blunt and, in some respects, J. A. Hobson, the Marxist tradition). Indigenous Indian and later Egyptian intellectuals intervened in these debates from the beginning. The later proponent of Hindu nationalism, V. D. Savarkar, wrote in 1905 of the British moral depravity and greed that caused the Indian rebellion of 1857–59, although his work was not published until after Independence.[3] Gandhi's condemnation of the British Empire and the nationalist tradition of history which sprung from it, indicted the moral corruption of imperialism more even than the distortions of its political economy. Asked what he thought of 'western civilization', he famously replied that he really wished it existed. Imperial history, in fact, has always been a moralizing field because the justification or rejection of colonial government ultimately rested on the politicians' or historians' judgment of the moral capacity of others to rule themselves; hence 'race' and moral judgment were inextricably linked.

Conversely, national independence became the ultimate good for all peoples. Historiographical traditions emerged during and after independence struggles that invested the nation with moral rectitude. India in the mid-1950s, for instance, saw a rash of studies of the 1857–59 Rebellion that sought to show that it had been a proto-nationalist rising and could therefore be teased into a teleological moral narrative that ended triumphantly in 1947. Many European and American historians of the post-colonial era supported these emerging nationalist historiographies, the Americans seeing colonial nationalist movements as the culmination of a march of virtue that had began even earlier, in 1776. But this tendency to moralize history was not limited to the nationalist 'side'. As many Indian and African historians noted, the great series of documents published by the British government's Stationery Office and British publishing houses to memorialize the Transfer of Power in India and other parts of the former colonial empire, implied that virtue was also marching on the imperial side. These massive compilations seemed to suggest that a benign metropolis was gradually ceding power to subject peoples. It wasn't that colonial peoples seized their freedom; they were handed it 'when the time was ripe'. This form of British imperial history effectively continued the liberal and evangelical tradition of the nineteenth and early twentieth century that saw a silver chrysalis of virtue within the corrupt

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cocoon of colonialism. Yet other British historians turned the tables on nationalism, depicting it in a Namier vein, as a coalition of factions hungry for office or a clutch of material grievances (e.g. Anil Seal and the so-called Cambridge School), seemingly deliberately draining the concept of both ideas and idealism.[4]

It is not surprising then that these issues of moral judgment in imperial histories have surged up anew in the context of present struggles over the nature of the 'world order'. Outside the academy as such, most British writers still take a generally positive view of Britain and its Empire. There have been several recent studies of imperial statesmen and institutions that are directed to the general reader and portray colonial rule in a beneficent light.[5] This genre has entered an academy that, until the 1990s, was dominated by left-wingers. Niall Ferguson argues that the radical critique of British, and by extension other, colonial empires has been overdone.[6] Empires were benign to the extent that they encouraged, trade, development and the spread of ideas. They were not inherently evil or arbitrary. He was echoing and extending a nineteenth century moralizing trope, which associated free trade with the expansion of virtue and Christianity, especially in regard to areas of white settlement. In another work he urged the USA to take seriously its new imperial status and to crush despotism more effectively in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and elsewhere. This again was a nineteenth century theme applied by liberal imperialists to regimes as varied as Afghanistan in the 1840s and Urabi's Egyptian revolution of the 1880s. Not surprisingly, his approach has been sharply criticized by self-styled radical historians of various hues. Ferguson's opponents argued, on the contrary, that empire was essentially 'evil' and despotic and that 'globalization' was an unjust process that degraded people outside the core of world capitalism.

Concurrently, other authors sought finally to dispel the benign myth of the 'transfer of power' that still seemed to dominate the great multi-volume histories and compilations of documents mentioned above. Caroline Elkins charted British atrocities during the Mau Mau uprising in Kenya in the 1950s[7] and she is now about to extend her reach to include Malaya during the communist emergency of the same era. David Anderson demonstrated that the same Kenyan authorities were allowed by the British government to institute a level of capital punishment that amounted to judicial mass murder. The British right wing and colonial officials of the period countered that Elkins in particular had caricatured British imperial rule in its final stages. Far from being the repository of an emerging national virtue, Mau Mau was a murderous uprising responsible for the massacre of thousands of innocents, few of whom were British stooges. Late-colonial Kenya, they argue, was in the grip of a civil war between Africans, not mainly a war between Africans and the British. While the extent of British atrocities in Kenya has certainly been underplayed in the past, it may well be true that Elkins's

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proper sense of outrage has caused her to condone too easily surviving Mau Mau veterans' claims to represent nationalist rectitude.[8] However, it is not only the British who have been faulted in their implicit claims to historical virtue. Simon Schama's recent study of slavery in post-revolutionary America and Africa, makes uncomfortable reading for a historical tradition in the United States which, at least at the high school and junior college level, still seems to present a simple national narrative of the onward march of liberty, goodness and 'democracy' (an increasingly suspect term). Following a line taken earlier by Linda Colley, Schama's work suggests, at its baldest, that the American Revolution was a revolution of slaveholders and religious bigots against a more enlightened imperial centre.[9]

My own ventures into the history of imperialism and colonial nationalism have always been marked by an extreme ambivalence about the value of moralizing in historical writing. Too often the moral standpoint of one generation becomes the authoritarian one of the next. For instance, anti-colonial Indian historians, even those of the Subaltern Studies collective, have been notably reticent in analysing the operations of the post-colonial Indian state, whether in the Indian countryside or in Kashmir and the Punjab. It is almost as if the category of 'subaltern' and the 'oppressed of the earth' suddenly disappeared with Independence in 1947. Although they often claim to dislike the unitary nation state, these authors cannot rid themselves of an underlying sentiment that associates nationalism with virtue. I cannot forget either that in my early days in the academy many of my colleagues, hot in their condemnation of British colonial rule or the American interventions in Vietnam, Cuba or Central and South America turned a blind eye to – or even openly condoned – the blatant oppression of dissent in the contemporary Soviet Union, Russian imperialism in Eastern Europe or mass killings in Mao's China. It is not clear either that the emergence of 'victimology' as a sub-category of historical writing does anything more than stir passions and discount the search for historical evidence. The history of the Nazi Holocaust is a proper and sobering field of study, in which clear analysis and moral judgment have been – indeed, must be – conjoined. The work of Christopher Browning and Inga Clendinnen,[10] among others, are fine examples of this. But there is a danger in infinitely extending the history of national or 'racial' genocides. I do not believe, for instance, that the field of Middle East studies has benefited a great deal from its fragmentation into Jewish, Armenian, Arab and Turkish factions, each busily in search of oppressors and victims. Overt moralizing, especially when tied to contemporary ethnic politics in Europe and even more so, North America, has had the tendency to suppress reasoned argument and communication and has not even gone very far in unearthing the history of those who really were oppressed. Historians should probably avoid constructing a meta-narrative of vice and virtue over long periods of time. It seems purposeless, for instance, to castigate

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in the round the British Empire or American interventionism overseas, or, for that matter, the Roman Empire. European colonial Empires and the domination of white settlers was a major condition of early modern and modern history. It is important to consider why colonial empires arose in the first place and flourished for so long. We also need to understand why, at some times and in some places, some colonial peoples acquiesced in or even supported those empires. Otherwise one reaches the fatuous extreme reached by the American anthropologist, Nicholas Dirks,[11] who, in commenting on the work of David Washbrook and myself, asserts that analysing the participation of Indians in the rise of British imperial power or pointing to some continuities between pre-colonial and colonial India is tantamount to 'blaming the victims' of colonial rule. The proper aim is to try to find out why some Indians or Africans were able to prosper to some extent under colonial rule, while many others did not. Indeed, the very concept of 'blaming the victims' is one of Edward Said's less happy legacies to the field, a glib phrase always tainted by its covert prejudice against the Jewish inhabitants of the Middle East who, whatever the history of their settlement in Palestine or its origins in imperialism and 'orientalism', now have rights like all other peoples of the region. The issue here is to try to understand all those claims to and their evolution, rather than launch into catch-all, polemical histories of virtue and vice. Yet, to reiterate, it is not only or even predominantly postcolonial historians and theorists who indulge in moral judgmentalism of an unproductive sort. Following the publication of our book *Forgotten Armies. Britain's Asian Empire and the War with Japan 1941–1945*,[12] Tim Harper and I have both received newspaper reviews, letters and verbal comments which suggest that at a popular level in the United Kingdom the notion of empire as a history of virtue still has a powerful hold. One reviewer objected to the fact that we even ventured a comparison between British colonialism in Southeast Asia and Japan's occupation between 1942 and 1945, despite the fact that many Asian nationalists welcomed the Japanese with joy in 1942. The son of a senior administrator in India condemned us for not writing adequately of the many thousands of men and women who had spent their lives working for the good of indigenous peoples as doctors, educationists, forest officials, and the like. A lady at one of my lectures remarked that she was disbelieving of, and shocked by my account of the violence that had occurred during the suppression of the Quit India Movement of 1942. After all, her father, a police officer, had once been reprimanded for lightly tapping an Indian worker on the shoulder with his hand. When Harper and I set out to research and write *Forgotten Armies*, we did not intend to write a 'black book' for the later British Empire in Asia and we have both been averse to making broad moral judgments on empire (indeed, a few Asian scholars have indicted us of being 'colonialist' historians). Yet it was very difficult to write about the late 1930s and early 1940s in India and Southeast Asia without feeling that Empire *at this time*

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and in these places had become irremediably morally bankrupt. Also, and this is critical, many of its own servants and key officials were saying so in their letters, writings and speeches; this was not simply the perception of colonial nationalists or postcolonial historians. The racism of late colonial society was clearly more pervasive than even that of the late nineteenth century precisely because it was more open and applied to new public spaces. This form of virulent racism defeated even the purported aims of Empire itself. It is difficult to imagine a clearer breach of trust and duty than the treatment of Indian refugees from Burma in 1942, huge numbers of whom were allowed to die quite needlessly on the routes out of the country or in Assam. Again, how can the three million deaths that occurred during the Bengal famine of 1942–43 be teased into a history of imperial virtue? It is true that the British government was at this moment preoccupied in the struggle with Nazi Germany, a fact that must stand on the credit side in any moral judgment. Yet the suffering in Bengal could easily and rapidly have been averted in 1943 by strong action from the London and Delhi authorities, as it was when the Viceroy, Lord Wavell, began to push for action in 1944. Ultimately, it is difficult to disagree with Momigliano that historians will always have to make judgments about historical events and that these will sometimes be moral judgments. At the same time, historians need to avoid public moralizing and the construction of long-term teleologies of virtue and vice which inevitably play into the hands of different varieties of ideologues and zealots.

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