Toxic Comfort Blanket: Imperial Delusion in Modern Britain

Buettner, Elizabeth

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One of the most difficult things for modern observers to grasp when contemplating the Enlightenment is the yawning gap between the language associated with it and the behaviour of some of its adherents. Enlightenment philosophy is often credited with putting reason at its core, arguing against, among other things, superstition and prejudice. It also emphasized liberty and equality, and is said to have sparked the late eighteenth-century revolutions in North America, France and Haiti. For all these reasons, many appear puzzled by the spectacle of enlightened figures who enslaved other human beings whom they deemed inferior, who championed the “rights of man” but had no problem seizing, by conquest, the land of people who had done them no harm — conquerors supposedly guided by reason who claimed (unreasonably one could say) to have “discovered” the land on which those unoffending people had lived for generations. The disconnect unnerves those who see things through the eyes of the oppressed of that time, or who may wish to look on the Enlightenment as an unalloyed source of the good.

While the Enlightenment (in all its different incarnations) nurtured anti-slavery sentiment, promoted personal liberty, made room for religious tolerance and provided a critique of cruel forms of punishment, like any extremely powerful idea or concept, it had negative effects that went along with the positive. Indeed, it can be difficult to grasp that features endemic to the system of thought — the impulse to categorize and put things into hierarchies, and the faith in the capacity to measure scientifically, as well as the very notion of progress — contributed to the need to classify not only ideas and things but also, alas, groups of people. Scholars have noted that it provided a basis, for those so inclined, to create a “science” of race and racial hierarchies that often justified the domination and ill treatment of people classed as “inferior”. In each case, the Enlightenment’s most important projects: the development of the modern law of nations, Europeans (Pitts mainly confines her study to Europeans) encountered when they came to the Americas, for example. In each case, the Enlightenment’s most important projects: the development of the modern law of nations, and the faith in the capacity to measure scientifically, as well as the very notion of progress — contributed to the need to classify not only ideas and things but also, alas, groups of people. Scholars have noted that it provided a basis, for those so inclined, to create a “science” of race and racial hierarchies that often justified the domination and ill treatment of people classed as “inferior”. In each case, the Enlightenment’s most important projects: the development of the modern law of nations, Europeans (Pitts mainly confines her study to Europeans) encountered when they came to the Americas, for example. In each case, the Enlightenment’s most important projects: the development of the modern law of nations, Europeans (Pitts mainly confines her study to Europeans) encountered when they came to the Americas, for example. In each case, the Enlightenment’s most important projects: the development of the modern law of nations, Europeans (Pitts mainly confines her study to Europeans) encountered when they came to the Americas, for example. In each case, the Enlightenment’s most important projects: the development of the modern law of nations, Europeans (Pitts mainly confines her study to Europeans) encountered when they came to the Americas, for example. In each case, the Enlightenment’s most important projects: the development of the modern law of nations, Europeans (Pitts mainly confines her study to Europeans) encountered when they came to the Americas, for example. In each case, the Enlightenment’s most important projects: the development of the modern law of nations, Europeans (Pitts mainly confines her study to Europeans) encountered when they came to the Americas, for example. In each case, the Enlightenment’s most important projects: the development of the modern law of nations, Europeans (Pitts mainly confines her study to Europeans) encountered when they came to the Americas, for example. In each case, the Enlightenment’s most important projects: the development of the modern law of nations, Europeans (Pitts mainly confines her study to Europeans) encountered when they came to the Americas, for example. In each case, the Enlightenment’s most important projects: the development of the modern law of nations, Europeans (Pitts mainly confines her study to Europeans) encountered when they came to the Americas, for example.
diverse political arrangements gave European governments a simple way of excluding non-Europeans, whatever their stage of development, from the presumptive benefits of international society.

Pitts’s account of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century progress of the law of nations reminds us that in the past, as today, people did not all speak with one voice on the law. Respected theorists challenged the dominant exclusionary strand in law of nations principles, arguing for a truly “universal” application of the laws that would “bind European states in their actions with [at least] Asian commercial ones”. Vattel, perhaps the first of the great international law theorists, claimed in his famous

Le Droit des gens that the law included “non-European states in both hemispheres”. But his “heavy reliance on European practice as the source of detailed accounts of legal norms”, his “tendency to reinscribe the exclusion of Muslim states on the grounds of their supposedly habitual violence”, and his “account of the state as a moral community that effaced the imperial quality of the major European powers” worked against the development of a truly universal law of nations. Edmund Burke, among others, tried to move “the boundary of exclusion further along a spectrum of development”, with societies designated as “savage” still excluded. Abraham Hayancinte Anquetil-Duperron, in discussing the application of the law of nations, was even more sympathetic to non-Europeans, launching a “profound criticise of European provincialism and racism”, but his work had “little impact in its day”.

Pitts tells a familiar story about the nineteenth century and the rise of scientific racism, though her account would have been even better had she more directly engaged with and analysed racism as a phenomenon. Murston’s “civilization and barbarism” hardened into the language of “sociology and legal positivism” that masked the naked power employed in service of empire. Despite the tremendous amount of violence that the imperial powers unleashed on the world, Europeans continued to feel, throughout the century, that they had the “right to adjudicate international legal norms and to deploy violence in an administrative (rather than political or legal) mode over those societies [they] deemed not yet candidates for legal inclusion”. This was not so long ago. The world is still dealing with the legacy of the way the law of nations was constructed.

Pitts’s history of the strengths and weaknesses of those early efforts may help us develop a law of international relations that will bring about the “greater justice and equity” that critics of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century law of nations hoped to find. Fortunately, there are many more diverse voices to be heard on this subject. Pitts has achieved much during the times of which Jennifer Pitts writes.

Writing before the 2013 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Sri Lanka, Philip Murphy, the director of the Institute of Commonwealth Studies, offered the following assessment of Queen Elizabeth II’s importance to the organization she has proudly headed since ascending to the throne: “A former prime minister of New Zealand once famously described the Queen as ‘the bit of glue that somehow manages to hold the whole thing together’. Increasingly, however, the Commonwealth resembles a dead parrot which relies on that glue to keep it upright rather than its majesty”.

Murphy’s comment generated predictable outrage from within the Commonwealth’s close-knit circle of champions, who were quick to pronouce the parrot not to be dead at all, “just resting”. In The Empire’s New Clothes Murphy takes the story further, providing both scholars and a wider readership with an expert analysis of the uses and abuses of the Commonwealth as myth as distinct from its reality. With a sardonic wit and a keen eye for absurdities that readily lend themselves to ridicule, Murphy deftly dissects how an organization long on lofty platitudes but short on resources and concrete recent achievements has evolved since the mid-twentieth century. As a leading scholar of decolonization in Africa and of the British monarchy’s dense historical entanglement with the Empire and Commonwealth, Murphy is ideally placed to provide what is a uniquely well-informed and readable assessment. The unpalatable truths he lays out, moreover, look certain to cement his persona non grata status among the small band of “true believers” – a group whose dedication to Commonwealth issues stands in stark contrast to the pervasive uninterest among the vast majority of people in Britain, for whom the Commonwealth has long meant little apart from the periodic Games and its routine appearance in the Queen’s Speeches and media coverage of royal visits to member states.

This wide-ranging study pays careful attention to the monarchy’s devotion to the Commonwealth, the Commonwealth’s contributions to progressive issues such as opposition to white minority rule in Rhodesia and apartheid in South Africa, its internal divisions, and its laudable ideals and proclaimed aspirations that many Commonwealth countries have routinely violated. Above all, however, The Empire’s New Clothes deftly underscores the recurrent links between British engagements with its imperial legacy, the Commonwealth, and the European project. Murphy charts the twists and turns spanning the early post-war period up to the early 1960s, when many leading Labour and Conservative Labour and Conservative figures viewed commitments to the Empire/ Commonwealth as a geopolitical priority that was both preferable to and in competition with European ties, to growing disenchantment with a Commonwealth that appeared to threaten British interests. By the time Britain finally gained entry into the EEC in 1973, the Commonwealth was not only increasingly undermined by centrifugal forces but had also become synonymous in domestic politics with unwanted non-white immigration in Britain. The 1948 British Nationality Act had enabled colonial and Commonwealth subjects to freely enter, work and settle in Britain, but the open door was gradually shut through a series of immigration restriction acts and changes to nationality legislation passed between the 1960s and 1980s.

By the early twenty-first century, the Commonwealth had long since shed its negative association with mass migration while the European Union steadily gained it. So, too, had the British Empire’s memory been revived yet again by Conservative and Eurosceptic voices and media outlets as a legacy Britain could be proud of and linked up with arguments about the Commonwealth’s future promise for a post-Brexit Britain. Written in the wake of the 2016 referendum and framed by it, Murphy’s account outlines how key figures in the Leave camp, many of whom had shown little interest in the Commonwealth before (or had contumaciously belittled it, as Boris Johnson did in 2002 when suggesting in the Daily Telegraph that the Queen loved the Commonwealth “partly because it supplies her with regular cheering crowds of flag-waving piccaninnies”), breathed new life into the mythical Commonwealth parrot as a serious alternative to EU membership. He convincingly refutes pro-Brexit claims about the Commonwealth’s potential as a trading partner that could effectively replace the EU or a meaningful global alliance as ill-informed fantasies, which are strongly at odds with economic circumstances and the priorities of political elites in many Commonwealth countries.

The Empire’s New Clothes succeeds in exposing both the nakedness of myths attributed to a weak and unstable organization and in reminding us of the dangerous ends to which these can be deployed. Allowing Sri Lanka to host the 2013 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting at a time when the Rajapaksa government had achieved excesses that many Commonwealth members condemned showed how a state that egregiously violated what were oft-proclaimed core Commonwealth values, namely democracy, the rule of law and human rights, could manipulate the organization to bolster its international legitimacy. The Leave campaign’s narrow victory after including Commonwealth-related claims within its cache of false promises for Britain’s future after Brexit serves as another example of how it has been abused. The announcement in 2017 that the first United States-based branch of the Royal Commonwealth Society would soon open in Mississippi, with its chairman promising to be the Republican state governor who supports Donald Trump together with keeping the Confederate battle cross on the state flag, is another example of the Commonwealth’s tarnished moral authority. Although the Queen’s death might one day weaken the Commonwealth parrot’s shaky hold on its perch, Murphy concludes with a call for more immediate action: “Our old comfort blanket is toxic. It’s time to grow up and set it aside”. This timely intervention makes a highly persuasive case to do just that. While the UK is unlikely to leave the Commonwealth, the benefits of abandoning the misleading notions attached to it are all too clear.