

An insulated island race revisited - a rejoinder to Dr Husbands

The title of Christopher Husbands' reply (Vol 13, No 2, 1992, pp 117) to my article on Britain and EMU (Vol 13, No 1, pp 30-35) is appropriate enough - or would be if the question mark were removed. It is a pity that the same cannot be said of the reply itself, which seems to be a remarkable combination of irrelevance and misunderstanding.

To deal with one or two peripheral matters first. I find it bewildering to have a mid-nineteenth century source - and a fictional character at that - quoted against my suggestion that "no-one now believes - at least one hopes not - that wogs begin at Calais". Dr Husbands omits both my qualification and my timing, - of course many Englishmen believed this (or something very like it) in Mr Podsnap's day - and does not grasp that the point concerns solely British attitudes to Europeans, which makes all his talk of events in Manchester school yards quite beside the point. Dr Husbands feels it necessary to instruct us about the polyglot and multi-cultural society we now inhabit. It may astonish him to learn that many of us are already aware of these blindingly obvious facts, and deplore as strongly as he the kind of event he describes. But that polyglot and multi-cultural nature is quite irrelevant to my article. At the very outside, ethnic minorities make up less than 10% of Britain's population. Even if they were completely unaffected by the insularity of British attitudes (which is uncertain), that still leaves a huge majority in Britain for whom those attitudes are more or less potent. In her latest speech in the House of Lords Lady Thatcher made this quite clear when she spoke, passionately, of Britain having far more to lose (from Maastricht) than anyone else because British institutions are so much older than those of other countries.

Dr Husbands finds my 'conflation' of length, depth and nature of historical experience unhelpful. So would I if they were in fact 'conflated': but it was just to consider each separately that they were listed independently. I did not think it necessary to be more explicit, given the audience for whom I was writing. What I am saying is this. The English experience has not only been long and deep, but of such a nature that it disposes many English people to shy away from "Continental entanglements" almost as a reflex reaction. So, I repeat, the length, depth and nature of that experience is of central relevance to my article which I fear is more than can be said of Dr Husbands' remarks. His article is lengthened and burdened by a good deal of redundant quasi-philosophical baggage which seems to me to add nothing but name-dropping. So my position is Arthusserian. Big deal. But what matters is whether my argument is valid, not whether my approach is like someone else's.

To turn to more significant points; Dr Husbands believes that, for me, "an event - a moment - (the Act in Restraint of Appeals) determines subsequent historical development". Of course, I do not believe anything so silly. All English kings, at least since Henry II, had been more or less jealous and resentful of Papal influence and interference in England. Restraint of Appeals stood in a long development and is predominant because of the particular circumstances - need and opportunity - of the 1530's. And historical development was not determined by any one event or at any one moment; indeed, not determined (if by that he means made inevitable) by anything.

Dr Husbands speaks, amazingly, of the "political stability" subsequent upon Restraint of Appeals. What can he mean? The upheavals of Edward VI? Revolt and mass executions under Mary Tudor? The continual plots and foreign threat of Elizabeth's reign? The deepening constitutional conflict of the next 50 years, culminating in the execution of the King and the establishment of a Republic? I

repeat: what can Dr Husbands mean? Surely he realises that continuity is not synonymous with stability but is compatible with turbulence, and that one aspect of English continuity is a continuing tradition of radical dissent? (No informed person doubts what "Wilkes would have made of the 1980s ..." He would have said (amongst other things!) that the power of the executive has increased, is increasing and ought to be diminished.)

Indeed, the whole of Dr Husbands' fourth paragraph ("History always impinges on the present ...") is a travesty of my position. Assuming, as I do, that it is not deliberate misrepresentation, his misunderstanding seems almost complete. I do not 'imprison' anyone in my account of History for I take it as a truism that no one version is definitive. The point is that the sketch I offer is current (albeit in rather less high falutin' form) and affects perception and thought, which is what matters for my article. It is absurd to state that I view anything as unique (except in the trite sense that everything is what it is, and not something else!) or unchallengeable: I do not see how a 'development' can be "unchallengeable" - surely he means "an account of a development" and of course I do not think that accounts are unchallengeable. To say that I "view the course of British development as not only distinctive but gloriously distinctive" is simply false. I have not said this and have never dreamed of such a thing. The point I am making about English constitutional development is its continuity and there is nothing "glorious" (or inglorious either) about this. What matters about continuity is, wonderful to relate, that it is continuous. All people's frame of reference within which they think and act is coloured by their history - or to be exact, by the version of their past which they have internalised - and the continuity and nature of English history results in a different (not superior) frame of reference, and consequently, to a different mental set with which to interpret and handle present experience.

This is the point, and Dr Husbands comes close to echoing the distinction, in this crucial respect, between Britain and her neighbours when he points out that Britain's (wartime) experiences in the 20th century have been less traumatic than those of other European countries and are, therefore, likely to produce an outlook towards unity different from theirs. I really cannot see how, as Dr Husbands claims, this militates against my point - which is that different historical experiences are likely to produce different present perceptions, attitudes and goals. I would have thought it exemplifies it: but even setting that aside, my stress on the length and continuity of British experience in no way implies that other influences, such as intensity of experience over short periods, may not also be powerful in shaping attitudes. Of course, they may: but my article was concerned with what seems to me to be true in the British case, not with the general problem of causation in History. In the present example, ironically enough, the two factors - length and intensity - go together as far as Britain is concerned. While her wartime experiences were less traumatic than those of other countries, they were still intense enough, and enabled her to think of herself as, once again, the liberator from outside. Of course, this fitted exactly with, and reinforced, her long-standing sense of difference and detachment.

Dr Husbands several times insists on the "problematic" nature of History by which I take it he means that more than one valid version or interpretation of the Past is possible. I am amazed that he thinks it necessary to point this out to colleagues, and nonplussed that he should use it as an argument against me when he himself kindly states that 'problematic' is what I believe History to be! The important point is not whether different valid versions of the Past are possible - of course they are - but whether my outline sketch of English/British constitutional development and conduct of foreign policy has sufficient validity and relevance to the contemporary debate over Europe to fulfil its purpose of explaining (in part) "anti-Europe" attitudes in Britain. Of course factors other

than historical ones help to explain present attitudes - again, one is amazed that Dr Husbands thinks it necessary to point this out - but my article was solely concerned with the historical component, so to speak, of the attitude. This is all the article was concerned with and comment, if it is to be pertinent, must concentrate upon that claimed validity and relevance.

Dr Husbands' misunderstanding is clearest in his conclusion. He appears to imagine that I support the attitudes I describe and/or that I view a 'mental set', once formed, as incorrigible and thus imprisoning. Quite the reverse; I do not share an "anti-Europe" view: I state it - on the ground that the first step in refuting an argument is to understand it, and to state it fairly. (My rejection of "mere sentimental and nostalgic chauvinism" - indeed the very fact that I used such a phrase - should have made clear to Dr Husbands where I stand on his process/myth dichotomy.) I am seeking to explain an attitude towards Europe which I do not share by trying to describe the development of the "mental set" which, in part, produces it. As for the incorrigibility of mental sets, his (or rather Mr Wright's) concept of 'History as process' seems close to my position, since it seeks, as I do, to subject 'mental sets', and the analogies upon which they largely rest, to rigorous scrutiny. (Indeed such scrutiny is a large part of what drawing an analogy entails - I really cannot follow Dr Husbands when he sets up "interrogating situations, the actors involved and the assumptions made by them" as something different from 'locating appropriate analogies'. This is how 'appropriateness' is tested for and established (if it is). Obviously, this entails the testing of mental sets to see whether they really 'fit' current circumstances and, if not, their modification. (So much, incidentally, for my 'imprisoning' of people within 'my' version of History.) It seems clear to me that circumstances have changed to the point where neither the constitutional nor the foreign policy assumptions which have guided British thinking for so long are any longer adequate or even valid. But one cannot know or measure that change without

knowledge of the circumstances which formerly existed and caused the "mental sets" to be built up in the first place. In other words, we need historical knowledge. In the light of that knowledge we may believe that our traditional 'mental sets' are, in Dr Husbands' words, "old wrecks to be left to disintegrate in peace on the sea bed". But before we can persuade those who do not agree with us, we have to show that we understand their position and can answer it. For this, again, historical (and economic) knowledge is essential.

So the conclusion Dr Husbands reaches to refute my argument is in fact almost a re-statement of it. His idea that we really disagree must, therefore, be mistaken. What a pity that so much ink should be needed to make this clear to him.

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