

'AN INSULATED ISLAND RACE ?'

**THE DISCIPLINE OF HISTORY AND EUROPE: A REPLY TO PETER ROGERS'
ARTICLE 'UNDERSTANDING BRITISH DOUBTS ABOUT EMU - THE NEED
FOR HISTORICAL AND ECONOMIC KNOWLEDGE'**

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"Want it again, Paki ?"

"You stupid white bastard"

These are the reported words of two Manchester schoolboys, one with a bloody knife, the other about to die from his wound. Six months later, the mother of the murdered Pakistani child, was quoted as saying "It might take a hundred years to change the world. But schools can change overnight".

"No-one any longer believes", asserts Rogers "that 'wogs begin at Calais'". His optimism may be misplaced. We live in a post-imperial island, divided by race, nationality and class. We live in an island where the notion of a common inherited culture has been replaced by a competing and complex patterns of inheritances, contested not simply in the pages of academic journals, but on the streets of decaying cities racked by unemployment, economic decay and social dislocation. Traditions clash. In the playgrounds of urban schools the ideologies of nationalism slide into crude racism. In relocated factories and workshops the ideologies of reborn economic liberalism justify new forms of exploitation. In the popular press the concept of national sovereignty become a cloak for crass xenophobia. A nation which has 'lost an empire , yet not found a role' turns in on itself. For Rogers, however, this introspection is an eventuation of distinct traditions and directions of British constitutional development:

"We Englishmen are Very Proud of our Constitution, Sir,....It was Bestowed Upon Us by Providence. No other Country is so Favoured as This Country...."

"And other countries," said the foreign gentlemen, "They do how ? "

"They do, Sir," returned Mr Podsnap, gravely shaking his head; "they do -- I am sorry to be obliged to say Sir -- as they do"

[Charles Dickens, Our Mutual Friend]

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Mr Podsnap returns periodically; and he is a ghostly presence behind the shoulder of Dr Rogers arguments. Rogers outlines a critical approach to EMU based on a version of the historical past. For Rogers, the critical moment in this history is the Henrician Reformation, enacted [his emphasis] by

Parliament. It is an event - a moment - which determines subsequent historical development, and the subsequent political stability ensures that "No other European country has had a similar, or even comparable, constitutional development either in length, in depth or in nature....So...her interest and her energy have led her away from Europe".

I do not find the conflation of 'length, depth and nature' helpful: the length of British constitutional development, the early, though partial victory of the bourgeoisie is beyond question, but this is not to say that the experience of British development has been deeper or richer than the more recent revolutionary experiences of, say, France between 1789 and 1796, or in 1848, or Poland between 1981 and 1989. Indeed, the length of the 'uninterrupted' constitutional development of parliamentary institutions in Britain is not unproblematic; what would, say Wilkes have made of the later 1980s as a supine and whipped House of Commons was called to give legislative force to the measures of a reactionary executive? In the twentieth century, mainland European consciousness was twice scored and traumatised by total war and by the Holocaust in ways which may render less likely a conservative outcome than the British experience in 1940 - 1944. The point is that length does not equate with depth of experience; the intensity of change may be more important. The traumatising of European political consciousness in the crucible of total war might be described as the critical event of European political development since the Enlightenment, and to militate against what Rogers calls to witness as the "'track record' of disunity -- the disaster and destruction which national rivalries have caused.

History always impinges on the present, but the ways it which is does so and the processes by which we internalise our inheritances are not determined. Conor Cruse O'Brien writes (1972) of the people of Northern Ireland 'imprisoned' by history. Rogers 'imprisons' us in his account of History, an account launched with the Acts of Appeals and traced through British constitutional development confirmed by the settlements of 1660 and 1689. The developments thus launched are for him immediately unique and being unique unchallengeable: the course of British development is not only distinctive but gloriously distinctive. It is in many ways an ahistorical version of history, indeed, in remarkable ways given the argument it is adduced to support, an Althusserian version. History might indeed, as Fukuyama (1990) has argued in another context, be said to have ended. But there are other versions of History, in which processes are made and re-made by the interaction of events and interpretations, where 'longer-run' historical processes impinge on but do not determine the outcomes of the actions of men and women. Upon these actions the inheritances of the past are an influence, but merely one: the present is never, to again borrow Althusserian terms, 'overdetermined'.

Beneath all this is a further complication. History, as Rogers himself has acknowledged in a distinguished and highly effective essay, is a far from unproblematic concept (Rogers, 1975). What is

History ? It is both process and structure; it is both the record of what has happened and the process by which we discover what has happened. In our versions of History, we recast the past continually. The significances of the past alter and they are shaped by our inheritances, by our experiences and by the subsequent eventuation of events. Meanings are not static. Meanings can be given, changed, taken away. In a small market town of Wymondham, near where I live is a modern housing estate. One of the small closes on the estate is called Vimy Ridge. I suspect that in no other western European country could a street be built in a quotidian housing development with that name. In no other country could the experience of slaughter be translated with ease into a street name. History in this instance is neither evoked nor acknowledged, nor used but quite clearly unacknowledged and abused. The meaning of the place name is altered, and its historical significance taken away.

We are an offshore island, and our development has been intertwined with the development of western Europe in multi-faceted ways. In 1975 E.P. Thompson opposed British membership of what we then called the 'Common Market' in a characteristically forthright essay, drawing in important respects on some of the arguments about the distinctiveness of British cultural and political developments, in particular on the distinctive characters of the working class. There was a chance, argued Thompson, that if we remained outside the 'Common Market' that we might in this island effect for the first time in human history a peaceful transition to democratic socialism. It would, he argued, be a messy, untidy socialism, unrecognised by formalist socialist theorists. When I re-read Thompson's essay last week, I did so with a heavy heart. I read it from the perspective of 1992, over a chasm of seventeen years which saw Thompson's faint optimism deluged by politics of economic decay. That decay far from producing the collapse of capitalism as Thompson had expected brought to power stridently right-wing and reactionary governments in Britain which were able to revitalise capitalism through the global relocation of capital, and, in the process to largely extinguish the vigour and self-confidence of British working class institutions.

In this process, History played its part. Patrick Wright has written of the ways in which an interpreted and imagined past has repeatedly been called to witness the ideological purposes of particularly conservative forces in an "old country". "The past", he observes, became a "lost inheritance which in its re-discovery (the *Mary Rose*, the sovereignty of the Falkland Islands, the 'Victorian values' of Thatcher's 1983 election campaign) justifies our mythical consciousness" (Wright 1985, 178-9) Throughout the later 1970s and early 1980s, Wright traces the ways in which a national past, an image of 'Deep England' was repeatedly mobilised to create mythical images of national identity and national consciousness, a "strikingly fictional, even delirious conception of history....not conceived as a process which moves forward irreversibly through continuity and discontinuity : it appears to flow

backwards rather than forwards in time" (Wright 1985, 175-6). Wright distinguishes two sense of 'history': "

in empirically oriented history...historical development moves forward through qualitative change and transformation. Precisely because it takes place in a transformative process, a distinction is established between past and present. The 'historical past' is alienated from the present: it becomes other to the extent that it is transcended and therefore no longer identical with the present. This way of conceiving of the relation between past and present is founded on a properly historical consciousness....In the mythical conception however, 'History' can be reversed and run backwards because it has identity rather than difference as its theme. What existed then can be retrieved and recognised now because it remains truly 'ours'....As an essence that is embodied in such ceremonies the nation is immutable -- either it finds its witness in the present or it is lost and betrayed.

Historical process, following Wright, is not derived from the restatement and reenactment of historical detail, nor is the past to be called in witness to the present; quite the reverse, historical process is a lived and continuing experience. The conditions are never precisely repeatable: this is not 1533 or 1924, and the past will not repeat itself as either tragedy or farce.

Rogers concludes his argument with a more specific analysis of the Delors Stage III process which embraces the free movement of goods, services, labour and capital between the partners. Rogers insists, on the basis of the analogy of the gold standard that this "could be achieved without proceeding to a common currency". He is almost certainly correct, and right-wing economic commentators in Britain and North America would agree. But historical knowledge is not simply a matter of locating appropriate analogies. It is a matter of interrogating situations, the actors involved and the assumptions made by them. There are a range of possible responses to the Delors proposals. It would be possible to accept the construction of a continent-wide free market in goods, labour and capital as the *raison d'être* of EMU. The British government's enthusiastic advocacy of a 'soft' Maastricht, in which community jurisdiction is economic and not social, in which subsidiarity is interpreted at national, but only at national and not regional or local levels, suggests that it is a version of EMU which they find acceptable. But there are other possible responses. We might argue that the free movement of goods, services, labour and capital carry with them obligations in respect of the definition of the common rights of labour and common expectations of goods and services, common obligations of capital. We may argue that the free movement of labour and of goods are necessary but not sufficient elements of a 'common European home', that common security and cultural exchanges are equally important. And we can do this increasingly in the dying decade of the twentieth century as a lived response to the traumatising experiences of the last ninety years, on the basis of a common historical experience. If we are able to do so then we may invest history with meanings which permit

dialogue and debate, and we may ensure that speculative builders in Norfolk market towns think more carefully about the names they give to streets in their developments.

What is at issue is not 'national identity' since in a multicultural, polyglot society of competing value systems and conflict over scarce resources 'national identity' is highly problematised. What is at issue is the conception of our past and our relationship to it, the past as process or the past as myth. What is at issue is the version of our past we want to present in the negotiating chambers of Brussels and, more pressingly, the school yards or Manchester: a society with a past to be protected, defended and preserved or a society conscious of its place in the historical process but "which may also sometimes leave old wrecks to disintegrate in peace on the seabed" (Wright, 1985, p. 190)

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