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The Language of Virtue



James Watt CVO served extensively in the Middle East, including most recently as British Ambassador to Egypt (2011-14), Jordan (2006-11) and Lebanon (2003-6). His 37-year diplomatic career covered many of the major political and security questions of the day, providing wide experience also of economic, business and development issues.

From a Western viewpoint, never has the international scene looked more provisional, more uncertain. Some of the confusion is self-inflicted (Trump, Brexit). Some results from a century of political failure and social crisis inflicted for the most part by outsiders (the Middle East). Western weakness has been exploited (Ukraine, Crimea). Western control of global economic governance is challenged by the greatly increased size and trading weight of developing economies. Foremost among these of course is China.

Success attracts success. China's growth, and under Xi Jinping its self-confident use of economic power to pursue its interests abroad, have served as a magnet for admirers - or opportunists - throughout the developing world. The recent BRICS summit in Johannesburg was another showcase for *de facto* Chinese leadership, modestly clad in the garb of equality and cooperation. The Belt and Road Initiative holds out the promise of massive investment in logistical infrastructure, even if serious doubts have emerged (Sri Lanka, Pakistan) as the adverse financial terms become clear. For China, and for its fellows in contesting Western dominance of the world, the confusion in the existing international order is a long-awaited opportunity. China has a sense of strategic direction, though the jury is out on whether it will replicate all the errors of 19th century European imperialism, or merely some of them.

Since world politics began to be internationalised from 1919 with the founding of the League of Nations, the new structures were used by their main creators, naturally enough, to serve their own interests. Britain was successful in the interwar years in underpinning its late imperial reach by bending the League to its purposes. In the climate of idealism created by Wilson's Fourteen Points, the most potent tool available to Britain was the language of virtue that its liberal traditions (whatever its imperial realities) allowed it to speak. This was essential for handling the pressure of public and parliamentary opinion for a new moral order, one which rejected the unaccountable foreign policy-making of pre-war Europe. It was also valuable in justifying to the world at large the positions Britain took: a moral discourse is the

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essential feature of what we now call the public diplomacy narrative. It may not convince many, but without it the task is exceptionally hard.

What has become of moral discourse, in the present flux of the world order? Who owns it? We can set aside the phenomenon of fake news and social media manipulation, which feed on moral discourse like vultures, but do not generate it. What do global audiences care about, and who do they believe? The West has dominated the post-war narrative with its doctrine of liberal values, arguing that not only were they right in themselves but that economic success itself depended on their application. Two developments have challenged those claims. The first was the West's own betrayal of its principles: on too many occasions the self interest of the powerful, and disdain for the victims of collateral damage, has showed through. The second dates from more recently: the growth of Chinese capitalism owes nothing to a democratic system of government, let alone liberal values.

Some commentators decry these developments as the death of the liberal world order. More accurately, it is the end of Western domination of the world order. Western liberal triumphalism has had to face a reality check: the Arab Spring probably ranks as the moment when Europe in particular had to confront its limits. Europe overwhelmingly still believes in liberal values. But its voice has become meek. Its leaderships have tended to shrink their discourse to populist soundbites addressed to nativist constituencies. There may be a deeper corrosion at work: Europe's great universities, until now the source of powerful and challenging thinking across a wide spectrum of the humanities and social sciences, are gradually being turned into corporatist production lines.

Liberals in the United States have long been on the defensive. Their discourse is drowned out by the bully-pulpits of the right, and the tone is set by presidential tweets. The liberal fight-back continues. But for now, to the ears of the world, America has wilfully given up that advantage of the powerful - a more or less plausible narrative that shows why their global leadership is best for the uncommitted masses.

That prize, including a claim to the virtuous liberal *acquis*, has been left discarded on the floor. It was no real surprise, then, when Xi Jinping emerged at the 2017 Davos meeting as the champion of free trade. Nor that at the recent BRICS summit the 102- paragraph communiqué is full of the kind of classic language of international agreement that had been reached previously in the era of Western leadership. The communiqué is artfully pitched, its title being *BRICS in Africa: Collaboration for Inclusive Growth and Shared Prosperity in the 4th Industrial Revolution*. Like any successor to power, the new incumbent has to both proclaim a new and better world, and quietly draw on the legitimacy of what went before.

Some will claim that China's use of liberal language is too transparent a falsehood, given what we know of the country's highly controlled political system. But global audiences are not just applying the test of liberalism. Prosperity, jobs, a future, are what matter more: shared prosperity is a slogan hard to beat. Deeds speak louder than words, though. In some countries, not least in Africa, the reality of China's approach to economic partnership is setting off a sharp reaction.

For now, though, there is no contest. The West has simply walked off the pitch, too confused to remember why a language of virtue plays a vital part in great power competition. Amnesiac too about what its own historic values are. Let us hope it is just that, and not irreversible dementia.

Insightful Reading

“The Guardians: The League of Nations and the Crisis of Empire” by Susan Pedersen, Oxford University Press (OUP).

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