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World Order in History: Russia and the West

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Reviewer:

Geoffrey Hosking

This is a very puzzling book. To judge by its title and some of its contents, its subject is the attempt to create a world order on the basis of two competing principles, adumbrated respectively in the West and in Russia. Those two principles are summed up in the figures of Montesquieu and Marx, whose ideas on social order are briefly set out in the first two chapters. Then we jump, with minimal explanation, to an examination of the views of certain 20th-century historians on their own craft and in particular, on the possibility of writing a universal history. The book then ends with a plea for a pure history, comparative and open-minded in its approach, to avoid the rude xenophobia which has plagued the 20th century.

The introduction and the conclusion are both rambling and inconsequential - indeed the conclusion on its own occupies a fifth of the book's entire length - and do not help the reader to pin down just what the theme of the book is supposed to be.

Allowing for this impenetrability, let me just point up one problem which seems to knock the book off course. Montesquieu and Marx cannot be presented as equivalents in the search for principles of world order. Montesquieu had a theory of social order - one resting on the division of powers and the importance of strong intermediary institutions - which was to prove extremely influential in the American and French

revolutions, and which inspired Catherine II in her programme of establishing a framework of law for Russian society.

In Marx one can find nothing equivalent. His work consists of a detailed description of the workings of a capitalist system, followed by an apocalyptic vision of the socialist revolution which will sweep it aside. Nowhere did Marx set forth the structural principles of a socialist society. The nearest approach which Dukes can cite is the familiar passage about

'... society regulating the general production, making it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, breed cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, just as I like without ever becoming a hunter, a fisher, a herdsman or a critic'.

As a prescription for a world order this is rather thin, and anyway does not differ from that of Montesquieu. As Dukes remarks in his footnote, 'Communist society here seems bourgeois or even feudal'.

In view of the vapidness of Marx on the subject, it is scarcely surprising that by the second half of the 20th century, as Dukes notes 'The USA had ... established hegemony in the world system; in other words it had become the 'universal indicator' to which Europe and the USSR would react.' The Soviet union, at least from its Marxist heritage, had nothing equivalent to offer.

Comparing Montesquieu with Marx, in short, turns out to be an unprofitable activity. This is a pity, as I think I see a potentially fruitful theme lurking behind the book. The Soviet Union took as its social model, not the theories of Marx or even of Lenin, but the practice of Asiatic societies, deployed by the Tsars and revived by Stalin, which combined authoritarian state direction with social units or cells based on mutual responsibility and mutual surveillance. These social cells are remarkably resilient and over the centuries have enabled human beings to survive long periods of extreme adversity. At the moment state socialism seems discredited, above all as an economic system, but the cells on which it rests can be detached from it and steered in a different direction. Given a non-Marxist framework, the Asiatic model seems to be proving highly successful in generating economic growth and social cohesion in the Pacific Rim countries. What this development bodes for the world's future, I do not know, but in considering it, as Huntington, Fukuyama and others have done, one would at least be dealing genuine alternatives for a future world order.

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