Alexander Rustow. *Freedom and Domination: A Historical Critique of Civilization*

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A CRITIQUE OF CIVILIZATIONAL DOMINATION


The original three volumes (1780 pages) of this work appeared in German in 1950, 1952, and 1957. Most notes were eliminated, even though 29 pages of notes remain, and the original text was condensed to one-half of its original length in order to produce this one-volume English translation (716 pages). The original three volumes have become three parts of the present volume.

Biographical Sketch

The author was born in Wiesbaden in 1885 and died in Heidelberg in 1963. The author's early interest in philology and esthetics was changed to politics after his experience in the first world war. In the course of the 1920s he moved from socialism to liberalism, ending up with neoliberalism by the end of the 1930s. For Rustow this meant competition free of monopolies, oligopolies, tariffs, and subsidies; full equality of educational opportunity; and a confiscatory inheritance tax.

From 1933 to 1949 he exiled himself and his family from Germany to Turkey, where he started to write his three-volume work in the 1940s under the influence of neoliberalism.

Author's Foreword and Introduction

According to the author, this critique is based on his philosophy of human nature: “I affirm freedom and reject domination, I affirm humaneness and reject barbarism, I affirm peace and reject violence” (p. xxix).

I. The Origins of Domination

Civilization began with the agricultural revolution 10,000 years ago, according to the author, but history did not begin until about 5,000 years ago when nomadic peoples began to migrate into agricultural lands, to conquer the people there, and to start making a living by exploiting the surplus value of the peasants. Thus began that division and specialization of labor which characterized civilization, and its subsequent class struggles between rulers and ruled. Further migrations followed about 2000 BC and 1200 BC in Greece, the Indus Valley, Mesopotamia, Asia Minor, Syria, Egypt, Iran, India, and Palestine.
The nomadic conquerors had war chariots in 3000 BC, but they used the horses without the chariots in 1200 BC, which they continued to use until the end of the Middle Ages. Consequently, the general pattern over the first 45 centuries of history was for the mounted knights to dominate and exploit the plow peasants. The knights, however, were converted by the culture that they conquered, so that the fusion of the two cultures resulted in a higher culture than either one taken by itself. Although the noble knights ostensibly conquered the common peasants, the latter made some sort of cultural conquest in return. However, the surplus value went to the knights, not to the peasants. From a historical and sociological point of view, the "original sin" of human history was the conquest of peasants by nomads, and this original sin was "the common heritage of all civilized peoples" (p. 587). And this original sin made all subsequent history "a history of class struggles" (p. 549), that is to say, struggles between freedom for the upper class and equality for the lower class.

In the beginning (and end) of civilization there may well have been domination versus freedom, according to Rustow's thesis, but that all or even most of the dominance came from nomads may be questionable. There is some anthropological evidence to suggest that the settled farmer was more warlike than the wandering herder, which is consistent with the story of Cain, a tiller of the soil, killing his brother Abel, a shepherd.

Although domination and resistance may have characterized human history, the class struggle was not always between nomads and peasants. There were at least as many imperial expansions on the part of civilizations as there were migrations on the part of nomads. The author obviously did not mean to limit domination to nomads, but his emphasis on this theme in the first part of this book could leave this impression. However, this impression could be a function of the condensation of this book from its original three volumes.

It would be desirable for some one some time to make a systematic study of how many nomadic dominations of peasants characterized human history, compared with how many civilized dominations of gatherers, hunters, farmers, shepherds, and other civilizations characterized human history. My impression is that the latter would far outnumber the former. Perhaps historians have already done some of these studies.

II. The Path of Freedom

According to Alexander Rustow, Greece was the only ancient culture which took a chance on freedom. But this venture was questionable at best, if we can believe Thucydides' account of Pricles, the epitome of democratic Athens: "Athens, though in name a democracy, became in fact a government ruled by its foremost citizen" (p. 184). What kind of democracy is this?
Since Augustan Rome was modeled on Periclean Athens, and since it was characterized by so much peace and justice, the author proposed that the Roman Empire "was the happiest epoch in human history" (p. 220), and an "empire of freedom" (p. 223). The monarchy was said to be more democratic than the republic. What kind of democracy and freedom is this? What kind of double-speak is this? An empire of freedom seems like a contradiction of terms.

The democracy that was Greece and the freedom that was Rome fell from grace into the arms of medieval feudalism and the salvation of religion, as opposed to the natural religion of Greece and Rome. Here, the author seems to find the Middle Ages characterized by more dominance than the Roman Empire, which may be questioned.

The freedom of the Italian Renaissance was eclipsed by the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, which were darker than the "Dark Ages." The life situation seems to get worse as time goes on in Western civilization. The decline and fall of Rome seems to usher in a general disintegration of peace and freedom.

Finally, the Enlightenment came in the late 17th and 18th centuries, and this was the last of the Golden Ages, which was put to an end by the totalitarianism of France in 1792. Presumably, there was some respite from domination in the Enlightenment, but this did not last too long.

This parade of freedom versus domination contains a lot of useful and interesting information, but it fails to hang together as a coherent whole in the mind of this reader. The distinction between freedom and domination is not always clear nor consistent. Sometimes, domination seems to be called freedom. The author has also put civilization in general aside, in order to concentrate on Western civilization.

### III. Domination versus Freedom

This last part of the book covers the last two centuries, where domination seems to prevail in two different forms: rationalism and irrationalism. According to the author, the trouble with these two forms is their separation from each other, resulting in their tendency to try to dominate each other as a result of a "sinful lust for power" (p. 390). They should be working together, in which case there would be no domination.

Rationalism has taken many forms, such as pragmatism, behaviorism, materialism, mastery of nature, technocracy and progress, demand for equality, isolation of the individual, mass society, capitalist degeneration, pluralistic degeneration, cultural depletion, and nihilism. The author goes into considerable detail analyzing these rational tendencies, and their contribution to domination.

Irrationalism has also taken many forms, such as conservative reaction to the French Revolution, cult of personality, hypocrisy, totalitarianism of the general will, nationalism, militarism, communism, democratic socialism and the welfare state, bolshevism, fascism, and national
socialism. These irrational tendencies are also analyzed in considerable
detail. The author’s analysis of Marx and Communism is extremely clear,
and his analysis of National Socialism is quite comprehensive. While he
found a “basic similarity between communism and nazism” (p. 644),
Hitler was associated with the devil (p. 654), because his “end was purely
ego-centric” (p. 657), but Stalin was not.

Conclusions

After all of these exhaustive analyses and critiques, the final chapter
turned out to be little more than an anti-communist tract as the author’s
contribution to the Cold War, which was at its height in the 1950s. After
criticizing domination as the enemy of freedom throughout the three
parts of this book, the author concludes by raising the question as to
which side of the Cold War will win (p. 611) and, consequently, rule the
world?

The author admits that “The five centuries of Western colonial
imperialism are a bloody stain on the historic record of humanity” (pp.
662-663), but the fulfillment of the Western idea of freedom is required
by the author’s philosophy of human nature (p. 664). Now, Communism
is denounced and associated with the devil: “Let us not forget that this is
the enemy we are facing. Diabolic is too mild an expression for such a
degree of inhumanity, for the devil, however begrudgingly, recognizes
God’s supremacy. . . . There can be no peaceful coexistence between
humanity and inhumanity. . . . Nor must we allow the other side to
appeal to our own feelings of humanity and use them as a fifth column.
The same unnatural world situation also imposes on us a duty to defend
and arm ourselves. War is inhuman, immoral, and ultimately senseless:
pacifism is an indisputable demand of humanity” (p. 666). “But as long as
one part of mankind is highly armed, ready to commit any act of
inhumanity in its thirst for superstratification [world dominion], and
threatens the freedom of the rest of mankind, it is our foremost duty to
resist this threat and to arm ourselves at least to an equal level. There is
no doubt that in an atomic Third World War there will be no victors but
only vanquished” (pp. 666-667).

In this Cold War against Communism, we must get rid of Western
colonial imperialism in order to “deprive the Bolsheviks of one of their
most convenient and dangerous propaganda talking points” (p. 668) and
also in order to expose Soviet colonial imperialism, such as in Hungary
1956. The third part of this book was dedicated “To the Hungarian
Freedom Fighters” (p. 369). To be sure, the original sin of domination
remains in the West, and should be cleansed.

Finally, domination is not all bad: “Without superstratification
[domination] and its historic consequences throughout less than ten
thousand years there would not have been the remotest chance of the
technical and other preconditions for One World coming together” (p.
674). If we can get rid of domination now, “the blessing of the sin would
be freed from its curse" (p. 674). In other words, thanks to domination we shall now be better off if we can get rid of it than we would have been had it never happened in the first place. It's nice to know that sins can bless as well as curse. It's also a comfort to know that the force, fraud, and violence of domination were so good so far, but now that they have brought us to where we want to be in the world, we want to abolish them before they can be used against us as we used them against others during the last five centuries in order to get to the position of dominance we have now achieved, so that we can now live the good life without it.

This book is full of historical and sociological facts of great interest and importance. It is also full of hypotheses well worth further research and testing. The author's critique of civilization includes some self-criticism of Western civilization which is commendable as far as it goes. But, it could have gone a lot further, and it probably would have gone a lot further if the author had not been biased by the prevailing ideology of anti-communism, which no longer prevails.

William Eckhardt

CIVILIZATIONAL ASCETICISM AND CULTURAL HEGEMONY


Which are the most important factors in the rise and fall of civilizations? This question reminds me of my experience with a broken thermometer when I was a youngster. The shiny bits of mercury from the thermometer had scattered over the table top. Whenever I thought my little fingers were closing in on a globule, it scooted off. The keys to civilizational dynamics are similarly elusive. Marxist structuralists leave me wondering about the roles of individuals and their ideological passions. Sociobiologists slight the insights of politics and economics. Historians and economists usually ignore the natural environment and geographic location, or treat them superficially. Geographers have not concerned themselves with these problems since the days of Ellsworth Huntington. And so it goes.

Theodore von Laue's favored factor is religion and morality. He also wonders about the "collective subconscious" and the ways in which the individual psyche is directed to the accomplishment of societal tasks, a topic which he points out is not yet studied on a global scale. Right off, he eschews terms like "capitalism" and "class struggle," for, he asserts, "Social life is not shaped by the ways in which . . . human beings engage nature through production." (p. xv) I appreciate his strenuous effort to view the world of the twentieth century freshly, but one does not have to be a marxist to see the class-struggle dynamic as a very complex and important phenomenon in the structure of our politico-economic...