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Patrick E. Kennon, *Tribe and Empire: An Essay on the Social Contract*

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Patrick E. Kennon, *Tribe and Empire: An Essay on the Social Contract*, Xlibris, 2000, 272 Pages Hardcover: \$25.00; ISBN 07388-3979 5 Soft cover: \$16.00; ISBN 07388-3980-9

In 1995, Patrick E. Kennon, a retired analyst for the CIA, published the slightly notorious "Twilight of Democracy." In that book, he argued that what this world needs is fewer elections and more bureaucrats. In "Tribe and Empire," he is at it again, this time with special reference to the future of the nation state and the prospect for world government. The book is infuriating, but it's hard to put down.

According to Mr. Kennon, this is how things stand today:

"Now, as we enter the twenty-first century, the future of the nation-state is much in doubt...Indeed, tribalism has revived with a brutal savagery from Rwanda and Cambodia to the newly dissolved USSR and the newly unified Germany ... At the same time, a kind of shadow empire is being embraced by elites around the globe. UN bureaucrats and Greenpeace activists, Carlos the Jackal and Mother Theresa, Toyota and Amnesty International, the Cali drug cartel and the World Bank, people who worry about the dollar-yen ratio and people who worry about the ozone layer, all of these consciously or unconsciously look to empire for their profit or salvation. All of these have largely given up on the nation."

This assessment is plausible, though scarcely original. What is novel, or at least entertainingly idiosyncratic, is Mr. Kennon's attempt to account for globalization and its attendant anarchic backlash in terms of classical Social Contract theory.

In the struggle between the tribes and the empire, the author is emphatically on the side of the empire. While the philosophers of the Enlightenment tended to relegate international relations to the state of nature (Kant was an exception), in this book the author argues that Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau were too pessimistic in limiting their analysis to national communities. According to Kennon, there is an ethical trajectory that leads away from the local and toward the universal, from the political and toward the administrative, from predation and toward commerce. The book saunters in a one-worldly direction, as you might expect, but without the moralizing or hysteria that characterized similar analyses in the early nuclear era. In fact, the book sparkles with a merry cynicism about God, man, and history in general. In effect, what we have here is a brief for Toynbee, written by Talleyrand.

The pure forms of human life, according to Kennon, are the "tribe"

and the “empire,” terms that he conflates with “community” and “society,” respectively. These dualities all correspond to life before and after the Social Contract. Although temperamentally closest to Hobbes, the author allows that Rousseau’s version of social contract theory (an early version of it, at any rate) best describes the way history actually works. In this view, the fundamental principles of a society are promulgated by a Lawgiver (not to be confused with a ruler), whose ideas become the General Will when people acquiesce in accepting them as their own.

The Lawgiver may, no doubt, be a corporate body (such as the Founding Fathers), and the “contract” that the Lawgiver promulgates may be accepted with something close to real consent, as Locke would prefer it. Be that as it may, it is the contract that turns mere *homo sapiens* into human beings. In the tribe, every man is equal, every man is a warrior, and there is the war of all against all.

In society, in contrast, there are no enemies, only superiors and inferiors. Community is familiar and exclusive, governed by a traditional morality that is not subject to analysis. In society, however, there is ethics rather than morality, and right and wrong are subject to pragmatic reformulation. The most significant thing about ethics is that it is universal in principle: everyone, near and far, should ideally be treated according to the same rules. The political form that has substantially fulfilled this ideal is the “empire,” something that has in fact existed at various times and places. For his illustrations, the author turns mostly to the non-European societies of the Americas. This is not an altogether fortunate choice.

His model of pre-contract man is the Yanomamo Indians, about whom there has been so much controversy of late that anything said about them is best presumed false until proven otherwise. Far more interesting are his remarks about the civilized pre-Columbian societies, particularly the Adena-Mopewell culture of what is now the eastern United States, and the better-known Olmec of Mexico. While the degree of political centralization in these regions varied over their long histories, it is reasonably clear that they once constituted “ecumenes,” civilized worlds of common culture, religion, and commerce. As in Eurasia, the earliest civilizations spread by the obvious attractions of civilized life, rather than through conquest. In these ancient embodiments of the social contract, the center of a civilization could be an almost undefended “city on a hill.” It was only later, in the “classical” periods of the ecumenes, that cities became fortresses.

While the tribe and the empire constitute the pure types of polity, humanity has been ingenious in “non-political” terms. Readers of Mr. Kennon’s *Twilight of Democracy* already know the holy horror with which he regards politics as it is generally understood. Politics is an essentially national thing, the means by which one composite national warrior confronts another. In a national society, good leadership is vital, but it is often lacking. That is why national survival is a matter of luck. The American Civil War was brought on by the incompetence of politically partisan nation-builders. The Union was saved, at appalling cost, only by the fortuitous advent of a ruthless mystic to the presidency. (Lincoln is not one of Mr. Kennon’s heroes.) Good government, humane government, cannot work like this. It depends, not on the genius of charismatic leaders, but on bureaucratic routine.

Government by reliable routine has been the distinguishing feature of the empire wherever it has existed. Politics went on, of course, in Antonine Rome or Ming China, but as self-contained court intrigues and bureaucratic squabbles. It was no longer in a position to derail the essential operation of the state. Kennon’s ideal government, in fact, seems to be something like the current incarnation of the European Union, with its powerless parliament and splendidly paid bureaucrats. The mandarins in Brussels are often crudely corrupt, and they don’t respond to emergencies particularly well. They are, however, quite certain not to lead civilization over a cliff in pursuit of some manifest destiny or other, something that the national societies that preceded them did in almost every century.

Tribe and Empire does not argue that the empire is the necessary destiny of the current world system. Certainly the author seems fairly sure there will not be a worldwide American Empire. The world today is arguably an American ecumene, characterized as it is by the nearly universal presence of English, fast food and reruns of “Bay Watch.” The government of the United States is still significantly political, however, and must defer to the reluctance of the people to shoulder the burdens of empire. (The people had been more willing to support a *de facto* empire during the Cold War, which was arguably in the purely national self-interest.) Nonetheless, Mr. Kennon seems equally sure that the term of the Nationalist Contract is about to expire all around the world. Since the alternative to empire is tribalism, which in the 21st century means nuclear-armed successor states, the Imperial Contract looks like a better deal every day.

World empire, however defined, is easier said than done. The problem with Rousseau's version of the Social Contract, which the author assumes would have to underlie such a system, is that it is less a real contract than an exercise in successful marketing by the Lawgiver. As a practical matter, the contract may bring peace, but it has to be peace in the name of something. The contract is essentially religious, even if its terms are secular. Kennon remarks that fear of ecological catastrophe might be the platform for the Lawgiver of a truly universal empire. This was pretty much Al Gore's argument in *Earth in the Balance*. Not everyone will find this coincidence encouraging.

Pretty much everybody has some piety that is punctured in this book, with greater or less justice. We have already noted Kennon's assessment of Lincoln. On the other hand, the author is onto something when he asserts that the Founding Fathers, with their international perspective and their pre-nationalist political theory, were *on* the side of empire, at least in comparison to the true nationalists of the Age of Jackson. Still, in this book as in his former one, Kennon classifies Israel as a "Herrenvolk Democracy," a characterization that is more piquant than illuminating. His characterization of papal infallibility as a form of "shamanism" does not make much sense, even using his peculiar definition of shamanism.

The book also has more basic flaws. The anthropology, though interesting, seems a bit dated and not always obviously relevant. More important, the author's Whiggish take on Western history is wildly misleading, not to say wrong. However, such objections miss the point of the exercise. *Tribe and Empire* is a prose poem by a very witty man, in which he tries to get a grip on the world his former employers tried so hard to shape. Probably they didn't encourage this kind of speculation in the CIA. At least I hope not.

——— John J. Reilly