Identity, Modernity and the Claim to Know Better: Post-Colonial Tragedy from a Cosmopolitan Point of View

John Dunn

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol16/iss16/2

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the All Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Comparative Civilizations Review by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.
IDENTITY, MODERNITY AND THE CLAIM TO KNOW BETTER: POST-COLONIAL TRAGEDY FROM A COSMOPOLITAN POINT OF VIEW

JOHN DUNN

In the world today cultures confront one another more explicitly and more painfully than they have ever done before in human history. They do so for the most part not in the modes of invasion and subjugation so common in the past: not through the direct application of physical violence, but through the subtler and more elusive dynamics of an interchange which, in appearance, may well be confined to purely cultural terms. The union of cultural destruction with physical coercion does, of course, still figure in modern history, sometimes, like in Tibet, or perhaps Afghanistan, through the mechanics of territorial conquest, sometimes through the incorporation of more marginal peoples, like the Montagnard tribes of Vietnam or the Kung San Bushmen, into the pitiless routines of modern wars of decolonization, sometimes, still more wretchedly, with the weakest of modern peoples, as in the Amazonian jungles, through the steady erosion of their habitat or through genocide itself. Much modern historical agency remains intractably criminal, as it has been ever since human history began. But for most Third World societies today, the deepest fear about their present and future is not a fear of invasion or recolonization by West or East or even by one another, but the nagging suspicion that cultural confrontation itself, within the economic and political ecology of the modern world, will necessarily and uncontrollably maim their identity as societies. This is not a foolish or superficial anxiety, however paranoid or ludicrous the expressions which it may sometimes receive.

What I would like to do in this lecture is to consider very briefly the rationale of this fear and then to ask what implications this rationale may have for the attempt to understand the political
history of the modern world in terms which are not parochial to some particular component area within it. To dramatize this question I shall discuss at some length the political experience of a single country, Ghana, which has suffered direly from the glibness of modern political understanding. I pick this country partly for the trivial motive that I happen to know something about it, but more importantly because of the scale of human tragedy which it represents and because of the very limited understanding of the causation of this tragedy which either Ghanaians or foreign interpreters have managed to piece together. The purpose which I have in mind in considering these two questions together is to press the issue of how far an understanding of modern history can be genuinely cosmopolitan in content and how far an apparently cosmopolitan style of understanding (which is as available to the Soviet Union or the People's Republic of China as it is to France or the United States of America) must represent simply the decking of a parochial and ethnocentric vision in a spuriously oecumenical guise. Both cosmopolis and oikoumene, of course, are Greek words; and the suspicion readily arises that the leading candidate for a genuinely cosmopolitan vision may well prove to be simply the vision we ourselves happen to enjoy. But agreeable though it would be to be entitled to equate our own point of view with, in Henry Sidgwick's memorably absurd phrase, "the point of view of the universe," such an equation is a little too good to be even plausible and a lot too comforting to run any risk of being true.

For a perspective to be genuinely cosmopolitan it would certainly have to be accessible in principle to some of us (however protracted the passage of cultural reconsideration which might prove necessary for us to attain it in practice). But it would also have to be accessible in principle to at least some of the denizens of all other human cultures extant today (if perhaps in some cases after even longer travails of cultural reconsideration). And, from our point of view more urgently, it would also have to be a point of view which in no way privileged the purely historical contingencies of our own identities. We may enjoy (and thus far in fact we have enjoyed) some measure of real historical privilege. But we cannot simply be cultural privilege incarnate: Nature's—and History's Chosen People. Cultural relativity, the all too evident truth that the world simply does look very different as seen from differ-
ent societies and at different times, is an ambiguous but incontestable fact of modern experience. What is not clear is precisely what epistemic force and ethical significance there is good reason to attribute to this fact. In its face, for example, does the idea of a genuinely cosmopolitan point of view, tenable at a particular point in time, even make sense? Or is this idea a phantasm, a vanishing conceptual after-image of a mode of understanding which is disintegrating before our very eyes?

If we thought of a cosmopolitan sense of history as being necessarily shaped, like any other human sense of history, within a geocultural vision, a representation of human life from a distinct position in space and in terms of a particular linguistic and social tradition, what geocultural vision could possibly serve the purpose? There is an anodyne answer to this question which certainly has something to it: that a cosmopolitan geocultural vision is one which incorporates the merits or benefits of all the distinct geocultural visions which make up the present human community. But this answer also is a little too glib to be valid; and it notably fails to address the issue of which linguistic and social traditions can serve to exemplify this cosmopolitan point of view at its culturally most commanding. (Once, the language of cosmopolitan understanding might have been, for example, Chinese or Mongol, Greek or Egyptian, Arabic or Latin, French or American or Russian or even Esperanto. But what exactly might we reasonably suppose it to be today?) The idea of a geocultural vision evokes a visual metaphor: human history seen from a particular set of map coordinates. And this visual metaphor in its turn suggests a comfortable additivity to the contents of the cosmopolitan point of view: human history seen from all the sets of map coordinates in the now inhabited globe, taken together. The need to add is apparent enough. What is less clear, perhaps, is the conceptual possibility of simply adding viewpoints. Are viewpoints in any sense entities which can be added to one another? The need to add merely reflects the liberal truism that all human societies have always possessed and will, as long as human history continues to occur, always continue to possess, their own experiential and existentially actual truth. Whatever precisely does make human history, all human beings have their own history and nothing ever discovered in Paris or Washington or Moscow or Riyadh about what does make human history can remove their experience from the
centre of this history which is truly theirs. But what this liberal truism implies is not the availability in principle of a cosmopolitan geocultural perspective but only the inevitability in practice of more parochial geocultural perspectives.

And if for a moment we shift attention away from the purely visual metaphor and think instead of geocultural perspectives as conceptions of the world (more or less theoretically integrated complexes of beliefs and sentiments) which human beings happen to inhabit (within which they must actively live) the prospects for additivity look a good deal more forlorn. For in the encounter between human cultures or geocultural perspectives it is necessary to consider the efficacy of a culture in two very different dimensions: in terms of its powers of cognitive incorporation and in terms of its capacity to maintain identity. In the real political and economic ecology of the modern world, of course, these dimensions are linked casually with one another, as they have been for many millennia in the past. But neither is simply reducible to the other; and we are beginning at last, through the work of thinkers like Habermas and MacIntyre, Taylor and Richard Rorty, to recognize that the fantasy of subordinating the maintenance of identity to cognitive incorporation has been linked intimately with one of the deepest antinomies of western reason. The antinomy in question is that between ethical richness and epistemic parsimony, an antinomy central to the Enlightenment project of interpreting nature univocally and authoritatively as norm for human culture and thus for human social and political organization as a whole. The pragmatist tinge of modern Western philosophy of natural science, following in particular Quine, encourages us to think of the dimension of capacity for cognitive incorporation as objective and relatively stable, if ontologically elusive. Man's capacity to explain, predict and control non-human nature (and even the less obtrusively human bits of human nature) has increased and is increasing. Short of Armageddon, it makes little sense practically or morally to expect or hope that it will come deliberately to be diminished. The political and economic organization and the cultures of different societies today foster the development of this capacity to very varying degrees. Skill at explaining, predicting and controlling nature is extremely useful; and it is therefore hard, other things being equal, not to see superior capacities for scientific learning as an
unequivocal human good and societies which possess these capacities as objectively preferable to those which manifestly lack them. But no culture can live by explaining, predicting and controlling nature alone. And because of the tangled history of the world which we inhabit, over the last four centuries, for the great majority of societies today the experience of acquiring a superior understanding of non-human nature is inextricably entangled with the experience of western domination and the deep political bemusements of the struggle to escape from this domination. Cultural modification within this era has been for most societies is the world a confusing mélange of cultural enhancement with cultural destruction, a process of subjugation as much as one of edification. It has left them today understandably unready to trust others to distinguish for them and resentfully diffident of their capacity to judge for themselves how much of their present identities, collectively and individually, to embrace as enhancement and how much to repudiate as destruction. But, by the same token, the post-Quinean stress on the gap between the pragmatic authority of natural scientific understanding and the epistemic precariousness and vacuousness of any understanding of distinctively human qualities and characteristics has made it far easier for us in the West to grasp the continuity between the cultural predicament of most non-western peoples and that of ourselves. For us, too, the culture of modern natural science and its elaborate and opaque linkages with the economic and political organization of the societies in which we live has been a product not merely of a real history of productive organization and class power but also of a complex cultural struggle. As long as it remained natural for us to represent this process as the self-unfolding of reason, the history of this cultural struggle could only appear to us as one of more or less linear cognitive progress and we could see ourselves only as the proud products of this progress. But once the progress itself, identified in its own most rigorous and parsimonious terms, has come to dictate an abandonment of any coherently realisable conception of human identity and any conception of how it can make sense to live a human life, the dialectics of cultural enhancement and destruction have come home to roost with a vengeance. It would be fair to say that thus far we have had little success in thinking through the implications of seeing ourselves as credal victims as well as beneficiaries.
of history. Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue*, Richard Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* and the less invigorating but more extensive and systematic corpus of Habermas's writings have been far more successful in conveying the scale of the imaginative transformation which we are facing than they have in bringing the questions at issue under disciplined intellectual control. What they offer is more the prelude to a shift in sensibility than a deep understanding of what exactly history has done to our conceptions of nature and of our place within it.

But the broad drift of pragmatism, at least, is plain enough. It enjoins us brusquely to see the relation between human understanding and nature as external and objective and its consequences as the development of real powers. And by contrast it encourages us, though perhaps in a less peremptory fashion, to see the relation between human understanding and human lives and human societies as internal and equivocal and its consequences as little more than the persisting availability of idioms of self-deception. To resist this broad drift it is necessary either to deny the metaphysical autonomy of purely epistemic considerations or (perhaps more promisingly) to see the crude disjunction between fact and value as a product not of purely epistemic considerations but rather of a naively conceived evaluative choice, the choice to privilege considerations of practical control of the non-human over those of human self-understanding and self-development. If either or both of these lines of thinking can be carried through to good effect, they will not merely enable us to get a better human grip on what history has made of us. They will also, plainly, alter the theoretical terms of trade in the reproduction of modern cultures between their powers of cognitive incorporation and their capacity to maintain existentially viable human identities. By the same token they will force us to conceive cultures in relation to each other not simply as complexes of abstract propositions, the truth status of which can be compared, one by one or *en gros*, but rather as complexes of theoretically related belief and sentiment, in which many beliefs are not open to a purely individual reconsideration precisely because of the human significance attached to them. None of this, of course, implies that cultural change might come to an end or the cultural component of human history be rendered somehow existentially painless. But it certainly does imply that the structures of historical percep-
tion and belief set out in categories like modernization or western- 
ization are due for very profound reconsideration and that they 
cannot simply be replaced, with the political signs reversed, by 
those of imperialism, dependence, hegemony and ethno-
ressentiment. (Ambivalence and ambiguity just are central to 
human history.)

As the simple reversal of the political signs suggests, the 
readiest mode of reconsideration involves no more than a shift in 
explicit political allegiance. To invoke the tones of Thomas Hob-
bes, dependency is little more than westernization or moderniza-
tion misliked. There is a certain cosmopolitanism of perspective 
induced by the very practical integration of the world economy, 
the organizational procedures of multinational corporations, the 
diplomatic routines of interstate relations and the communica-
tion patterns of IATA, the telex and the United Nations. Indeed 
it may by now be correct to see this perspective as a real culture, a 
genuinely inhabited geocultural perspective with its representa-
tives in almost every land, though of course in a higher density in 
some lands than in others. But the very direct and explicit links 
between the bearers of this culture and the practical modalities of 
overwhelmingly unequal control over nature and other human 
beings preclude our seeing it simply as a complex of beliefs, a 
mode of understanding the world, which has traded the father-
lands of its individual possessors for a common allegiance to the 
interests of the world as a whole. There certainly are, from the 
collective point of view of the human race, interests of the world 
as a whole and it might even be true that these interests are more 
clearly and fully discerned within the ranks of the bearers of this 
cosmopolitan culture (though I see little evidence thus far that 
this is so—and it is worse than trusting to presume that it must be 
so). But what in any case we definitely should not do is to equate 
participation in the culture itself with either accurate understand-
ing or deep commitment to the collective interests of the species 
now or in the future.

In its pristine versions the theory of modernization had a cer-
tain splendid effrontery to it. Just as, if you'll forgive me, John 
Locke observed that in the beginning all the world was America, it 
presumed blandly that in the end all the world must become so or 
if, less optimistically, it seemed unlikely to contrive to do so, that 
what this failure implied was its regrettable deviation from the
highest historical standards. Today we are on the whole more cautious. We may have few reservations about natural science as the abstract and teleological project of understanding nature—and only moral and political reservations about it as the decidedly more concrete project of enhancing men's capacity to control nature. But we recognize a measure of precariousness in any equation of the cultural preconditions for the flourishing of the former with the advance of western culture and the corresponding retreat of non-western cultures. And we are for the most part considerably less sanguine than we used to be about the connections between the epistemic and practical prowess, for better or worse, of modern science, modern industry and modern weaponry, and the more cherished aspects of our political and social arrangements. Thinkers as different as Popper and Habermas, of course, have attempted to show a necessary link between the pursuit of science and effective social freedoms. But the connections which plainly do exist are too weak and too intricate (too fiddly) to enforce the recommended disciplines upon political authority. Natural science, in the form in which they fully recognize a need to acquire it, is readily available to even the most tyrannical of modern rulers, as Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union have ascertained to themselves. If such regimes can only produce more effectively, or learn more imaginatively, at the price of surrendering many tyrannical powers, they can usually afford in practice to continue to produce less effectively and learn less imaginatively; and even if, on rare occasions, they prove in practice to be unable to afford to do so, they are virtually certain to misjudge this danger until it is too late to avert it. The only liberal triumphs, from this point of view, in modern history have been the reconstruction of West Germany and Japan in the aftermath of the Second World War—and, dramatically important though each of these episodes has certainly proved, it is apparent enough that the political capacity to render them possible did not at the time lie within the resources of these societies themselves.

Modernization and westernization, seen from other quarters of the globe, were modalities of western dominance, with the politics discreetly edited out. What they reflected was the assurance of the West that, whatever happens, we have got not merely the Maxim gun but also western science and rationality—and they have not—though now, to be sure, they certainly could acquire
these—and indeed would do so soon enough if only they would take our advice, adopt our models and generally smarten up. Modernization was quintessentially a mission civilisatrice and the civilization into which the barbarians were to be inducted was, of course, our own.

Some balance can be brought (and has by now been brought) to all this, simply by restoring the politics to the text. Western economic aid and western educational assistance are merely masks—and often pretty indiscreet masks—for the economic and political hegemony of the West. The westernized elites of the Third World are carefully cultivated quislings. And so on. But restoring the politics by itself fails to resolve the ambiguities of cultural confrontation. For the vagaries of the tradition of capitalist modernization are fully matched in the tradition of socialist modernization. The canonical texts of the latter also confidently presume that the more advanced societies (themselves) simply display to the less the image of their own future. And although the tradition of socialist modernization has become by now (like its capitalist counterpart) a rather plural tradition, both its Russian and its Chinese variants have proved at least as rigid as the United States or Great Britain in their sense of the institutional forms which it is appropriate for societies today to employ. This has been as apparent in Tibet as it has in Poland or Central Asia and it has caused immense damage and resentment in a wide variety of settings. Traditions of political legitimacy are perhaps in general peculiarly rigid and maladapted to cultural transplantation. Certainly, their equation with unequivocal cultural enhancement tends to involve fairly massive bad faith on the part of both cultural donors and cultural recipients. Seen from Prague or Warsaw or Kabul, let alone from Gdansk or Lhasa or the Hindu Kush, the extension of scientific socialism has proved both culturally and politically at least as ambiguous an experience as the combined ministrations of the IMF, the World Bank and the CIA. Since, in this audience, I am no doubt on this text preaching largely to the converted, I will not labour the point further. Instead, I will simply underline in conclusion the grotesque absurdity of equating the major triumphs of a civilization's theoretical understanding with the full panoply of its practical social, political and economic institutions. What has science in the end to do with the Russian or American states and the power
which each of them disposes? There is nothing manifestly very scientific about Mr. Brezhnev. But the same goes in spades for Mr. Reagan.

All this, to be sure, is fairly limpely negative. To be incorporated into the civilizational ambit of any of the major world powers is no more necessarily to be done a favour than to be incorporated into their economic, political or military hegemonies. But what exactly does this imply, apart from a certain weary (and wary) scepticism? Should we interpret it, for example, as dictating a comprehensive credal relativism in relation to all cultures, a conception considerably more elusive than it may initially sound? Is the truth of cultural interchange for the denizens of every culture all of (and only) how that interchange appears to each of them: so that the credal modification of cultures by each other in mutual interaction is to be seen validly only as subjectively credally benign (because all beliefs are taken as true in and for themselves), while externally and objectively it must be regarded in purely causal terms as a relation of force in which the issue of intrinsic validity cannot in principle arise? Any attempt to think consistently in these terms rapidly degenerates into paradox; and the intellectual devices required to sustain it seem arbitrary, tendentious and insincere. But any other terms, because they presume the possibility and conceptual legitimacy of cultural critique, demand at least an implicit conception of a normative culture within which the criterion of epistemic validity can be established without arbitrariness, and by the standards of which other cultures can validly be judged and found wanting. Vindicating the very possibility of such a culture is, as some men have been more or less dimly aware ever since Plato, philosophically a very tall order. On the other hand, the belief which Richard Rorty, if I understand him correctly, has now espoused—that the very conception of such a culture is incoherent—seems, to me at least, a decidedly taller order, indeed a veritable philosophical Tower of Babel which stands no chance whatever of proving stable. Rorty’s fetching mockery of the view that philosophy and science are aptly seen as more or less visually perfect mirrors of nature or that, since philosophy and science in fact consist of propositions, they seek to describe nature in the terms which it itself intrinsically demands, is extremely seductive. But his conception of the interchange between cultures as just the intersection of discrete human prac-
tics is altogether too trusting of the theoretical coherence of most human practice. There is more to cultural interchange—more risk, more promise and more glory—than the mutual edification which Rorty commends (which I take to mean simply an extension of the habit of patiently hearing one another out).

But although I am thus myself more or less helplessly committed to the presumption that at least the conception of such a culture makes sense, and although I am old-fashioned enough to regard the role of philosophy as precisely the attempt to delineate its contours (with whatever degree of indeterminacy proves epistemically mandatory), I am not either vain or imprudent enough to try to offer you a hasty sketch of it myself. Instead I shall turn shortly to consider a more tractable theme, the politics of Ghana.

But before I do so I want to underline one obvious but important implication of my argument so far for the relation between geocultural perspective and identity. The point is this. Whether we take the radically relativist view which I have repudiated or the suspiciously Platonic view which I am somewhat surreptitiously embracing, whether we locate it within the political ambience of the more or less liberal West or in that of the less or more socialist East, the very conception of a genuinely cosmopolitan perspective on the world today stands in an internal relation to the cultural history of the West and in severely external relations to the cultural history of most of the rest of the world. Of course the internal relation, as the range of possible allegiances I have already invoked makes clear, may have involved a good many dialectical twists and turns. But it does remain—and in a question of identity this is the vital consideration—an internal relation. The most that can be hoped in this instance is that it may prove possible through time to blur a little the severity of this contrast, partly by highlighting more generously and imaginatively the drastically and painfully dialectical character of western cultural history and partly by rendering the process of incorporation into categories (which at least originate with the West) more seductive and less abrasive than it has so far proved. Even to hope for this is to hope for far more than we are likely to be given.

I want now to consider the implications of these painful questions on a far narrower stage, the former British colonial territory of the Gold Coast, now the state of Ghana. Today, sadly, the importance of Ghana for such questions is confined to the purely
exemplary. But only a quarter of a century ago, when Ghana became an independent state, matters were very different. 

Under the dazzling political leadership of Kwame Nkrumah, the Gold Coast set the fashion for British decolonization in the African continent as a whole and the populist nationalism of the party which Nkrumah founded, the Convention People's Party or CPP, presented its colonial rulers with a challenge which they were quite unready to meet. Ghana was the first African country to have its capacity for a stable and effective modern political order vetted at length by an American political scientist, an assessment as it proved of a broadly optimistic character, already made public two years before the date of formal independence. For a time Nkrumah's formidable personal charm united colonial officials, Soviet diplomats, American political scientists and the political leadership of other African countries in admiration of his achievements. It was a time of euphoria. Outside the country, also, he contrived to use the great prestige earned by his historical priority in the nationalist struggle to help crucially in forming the main African diplomatic grouping, the Organization of African Unity. Under Nkrumah, briefly, Ghana, a little West African state of no particular importance, became a political cynosure for the world as a whole. It was a formidable feat of political illusionism. But it was, of course, also far too good to last. By the time in February 1966 that Nkrumah was removed from office by a small scale military coup, the glamour of independence had faded miserably. His dramatic historical role had turned Nkrumah's head. (Characteristically, the occasion of his fall found him on the other side of the globe in Peking on a self-initiated mission to end the Vietnam war). Even within the African continent his position had become hopelessly compromised by vanity and by the sponsorship of subversion amongst his neighbours, leaving a continental policy shrunk to the dimensions of Panafricanism in one country. Domestically, he left a drastically weakened economy and a people resentful of the food shortages, corruption and bullying which marked the closing stages of his rule. More importantly perhaps, he left a population which was profoundly bemused by its political experiences, but which retained a fair degree of optimism about its prospects for the future.

Today no one in Ghana has much optimism about the future. Virtually all Ghanaians who can readily do so have voted with
their feet and left the country to employ their marketable skills and qualifications elsewhere. Inflation soars. Foreign trade has virtually collapsed and the food supplies to major centres of population are erratic and grossly insufficient. The country’s main export production, cocoa farming, has been devastated by decades of gross over-taxation. The government is in the hands of a poorly organized and politically and economically ignorant group of junior officers and NCOs, the fifth or sixth distinct military regime since January 1966. Any economic policy which might conceivably arrest the steady disintegration of the economy would be politically prohibitive, since it would necessarily involve the further depletion in the short term of standards of consumption which are already dismally low, particularly in the cities and towns, where the government are politically most vulnerable. The last government which had the nerve to attempt anything of the sort, the Progress Party government of Dr. Busia, was summarily removed from office by the soldiery roughly ten years ago. At one level, no doubt, matters could be (and very probably will be) considerably worse. The levels of anomic violence from the armed forces are thus far much less alarming than those of Uganda today, let alone under General Amin. There have thus far been no instances of inter-tribal massacre involving the armed forces and the country has yet to vindicate the suspicion that it may be a structural property of postcolonial states in Africa that they occasionally shoot a tribe pour encourager les autres. In Ghana so far the rivers have not run red with blood and the polity has not regressed to the nightmare world of Equatorial Guinea a few years ago or even to that of Sekou Touré’s regime before he relented and allowed it to be bailed out by the multinational mining corporations. But the absence of such gross abominations in a way simply underlines the scale of the catastrophe which has taken place.

Twenty five years ago Ghana was the pride of Africa. Fifteen years ago, a little chastened but far from bowed, it was an enormously warm and happy society, full of absurd inequalities and irrationalities like all actual societies, but still pretty prosperous by African standards, and still very much resided in by people most of whom knew how to make many aspects of their lives entertaining and agreeable. Today everyday life for almost everyone is an unrelenting misery. A whole way of life, settlement, transport,
occupational structure, founded on international exchange, has been rendered unworkable. Of course some things do still operate after a fashion. Letters are sometimes delivered and the soldiers still have bullets. But hospitals, in a country ravaged by malaria, dysentery, river blindness, bilharzia and sleeping sickness, have neither drugs nor syringes, even in the capital. Lorries have no petrol. Food and cocoa rot in the forest. The soldiers have no coherent idea of how to rule—just the diffuse anger and bitterness of their civilian compatriots. And no one any longer knows how to stop them from ruling whenever they feel like trying their hand at it. Within less than a decade and a half a happy and prosperous people have been reduced to misery simply by the way in which they have been misgoverned—and today they have no realistic prospect of major improvements in their position within an imaginable future. It is an awesome demonstration of the destructive power of politics. But what exactly does it mean?

I emphasize the scale of the ruin which has befallen the people of Ghana to discourage the imaginative response that perhaps it may not mean anything in particular or may mean only whatever anyone at present chooses to regard it as meaning. Ghanaians, of course, like any other assemblage of millions of people subjected to overwhelming disaster, vary considerably in their understanding of what it does mean. Since they have had to live through it, none of their sincerely experienced understandings can simply be discounted as irrelevant. But thus far at any rate it is clear that even when laid together side by side the collective understandings of the Ghanaian people can as yet make very little sense out of the disaster which has befallen them. Perhaps in some parts of the country, in 1954 and 1956, and rather more widely in 1969, there could be said to have been a distinctively Ghanaian understanding of the content of Ghanaian politics, a tribalist understanding if you will, centering on the political recrudescence of the Ashanti nation, or, later, of the Akan peoples as a whole. And everywhere in Ghana, as in other societies, there are distinct localist perspectives on the exercise of power by the central state. Certainly also, every contested national election since 1954 has been fought predominantly between two national political parties, one of which conceives itself as the legitimate heir of Nkrumah's Convention People's Party and the other of which sees itself as the
lineal descendant of its inveterate foe, the United Party or Progress Party of Dr. Busia. These traditions of political conflict are often extraordinarily intricate at a local level and they have seldom been uncomplicated even in the alignment of national political forces. But even today they still represent for many a certain sense of national political allegiance through time. What they do not offer, however, is any coherent diagnosis of the nature and causation of the catastrophe which has struck Ghana. For such a diagnosis, thus far at least, an external perspective on the political vicissitudes of the country does appear to be a prerequisite. And any such external viewpoint is necessarily subject not merely to the presumption of a certain degree of ignorance but also—and more crucially—to the suspicion of a measure of parti pris associated with more or less self-conscious local commitments of its own elsewhere. What has taken place in Ghana over the last three decades is not some ghastly and determinate act of gratuitous criminality, like the Holocaust or the monstrous Khmer Rouge obliteration of old Cambodia. But it is unmistakably for those involved a tragedy; and just because it has not been a determinate and virtually self-interpreting intentional performance, it can only be understood validly by grasping an intricate and opaque causality. In this sense the idea of a cosmopolitan standpoint on the history of modern Ghana is not an assault on Ghanaian identity or a self-regarding celebration of the incomparable advantages, cognitive as well as existential, of living in what at present are still happier lands. All it represents is the presumption of the availability in principle of a form of understanding which the people of Ghana direly need, which they have so far proved unable to muster out of their own resources and which it is open to others today at least to attempt to fashion because of just those aspects of the economic and practical integration of the world today which first enabled Ghana to become a contented and prosperous independent state as a single unit and then enabled it to plunge to its ruin.

One desideratum of a genuinely cosmopolitan understanding is that it should not gratuitously flatter the historical roles of any political actors, Ghanaian or foreign, within this disastrous political trajectory. There has certainly been in abundance over these years, in Ghanaian domestic politics and in the interventions of foreign powers, obtuseness, greed, cowardice and malice, as there
is in the politics of every land. No foreign power (Britain, Russia, America) which has played a major role in shaping the country's future at any point in the last four decades has much on which to congratulate itself. But by the same token no political force within Ghanaian society itself since the early 1950s has much to be proud of either. The records of public theft, economic incompetence and private squalor of each Ghanaian regime in this period has been dismal in every instance in its arrogance and irresponsibility. Some, to be sure, have done far more damage than others; most importantly, perhaps, General Acheampong, the leader of the coup which overthrew the Progress Party government in 1972, who was duly shot under the brief first government of Flight Lieutenant Rawlings. But none has shown any sign of taking the measure of the political and economic problems which confront the country and of establishing much practical control over these. This has not been a question of ideological proclivity which has varied all the way from the dedicated ideologues of scientific socialism on the left of Nkrumah's administration to firm exponents, within the Progress Party, of the view that the Ghanaian state precisely ought to be the executive committee of the Ghanaian bourgeoisie and that the only real criticism which it richly merited was that of failing abjectly to exert its powers effectively on behalf of what should long have been an indigenous ruling class. What Ghana has not been offered politically at any point since 1951 is the combination of a clear understanding of the country's political economy and a feeling for the internal political dynamics of mustering and sustaining popular support for economic policies which might, in the light of this political economy, actually work in practice. Of course one could say the same of other countries. (The United Kingdom comes to mind.) But, in the case of Ghana at least, the crucial factor which has been absent and which has prevented any such outcome has not been the will or the political flexibility but the crude understanding of the economic and political factors involved. There can be no rational doubt that Ghana has over the last three decades been grotesquely misgoverned. And it follows from this characterization, presuming it to be valid, that the present devastation of the economy and, hence, of the life chances of its population is not something attributable to the structural malignity of the world economy but is rather the responsibility of a particular set of
human beings—the political leaders of the country over this period of time.

One can sharpen this point by a relatively simple comparison between the debacle of the Ghanaian economy over the last twenty years and the fairly massive gains in material welfare made in the, in most respects, structurally and ecologically analogous territory of the Ivory Coast next door. The Ivory Coast from most points of view is still administered economically very much as it would have been if it had remained a French colony. French companies dominate its economy's international exchanges and the modern sector of its domestic production. French civil servants and technical experts retain overwhelming influence over its economic strategy and French soldiers furnish a modest but thus far sufficient praetorian guard for its now aging President, Houphouet Boigny, a ministerial veteran of the French Fourth Republic. (The crucial importance of this last consideration is underlined by the massive and erratic contribution of the Ghanaian armed forces to their country's present plight). There are, of course, many grounds for criticizing the development of the Ivorien economy, quite apart from the consideration that its development has been achieved by a tacit perpetuation of many aspects of colonial rule. But what it definitely does show is that the destruction of the Ghanaian economy is predominantly a domestic political achievement, not a geographical or historical fatality. This human failure, sadly, has not been narrowly distributed within the society. All major political forces with any definition and capacity for agency in the society have by now played their part. Both major political parties have been tried and found grossly wanting, Nkrumah's party by now on two separate occasions. The armed services likewise have been tried at least twice already, doing wholly gratuitous and inexcusable damage by their last protracted venture, and the blood runs cold at the thought of the harm which they may be now about to perpetrate. As in the case of the United Kingdom over the last two decades, such singular consistency in political failure cannot be explained simply by the fecklessness of political leaders. Since they have the moral nerve to offer their services as rulers professional politicians and the makers of military coups certainly bear responsibility for the consequences of their political performance. But consistently disastrous outcomes of the exercise of governmental
power are most unlikely to be caused by nothing more complicated than the monumental bad luck over the political judgment of the governors.

What is it about Ghanaian society and polity which has elicited such a dismal display of vice and ineptitude from those who have ruled over it since the mid-1950s? This is, plainly, a very complex historical question. But it can be answered in bold outline with considerable confidence. What made Ghana at its independence in 1957 the most prosperous and probably the most equitably prosperous country in Sub-Saharan Africa, north of the indubitably less equitable Union of South Africa was certainly not the entrepreneurial vigour of British capital, still less that of its colonial rulers. Instead it was the energy and inventiveness with which the Akan, Krobo, and Ewe farmers of the southern Gold Coast developed its rain forest into the premier cocoa-growing zone in the world, making the Gold Coast at Independence the producer of up to half the entire world stock of cocoa. By the same token, what has ruined Ghana since has been the diversion, through a government monopsony, of a staggeringly high proportion of the wealth created by Ghana's cocoa farmers into a range of almost universally disastrous public sector entrepreneurial ventures and the maintenance of a huge, relatively highly paid and predominantly parasitic bureaucracy.

Now in diverting these resources in this way it was certainly not the intention of Ghana's rulers to liquidate the cocoa-producing sector of the economy or to fritter away hard won wealth on costly factories which failed to produce for markets which didn't exist. What they hoped, naturally enough, and for a time in consonance with bien pensant western economists, was to diversify and strengthen the productive base of the economy through a programme of import-substitutive industrialization. This was an over-optimistic but far from absurd strategy in itself. What has made it lethal for Ghana was the array of forces which caused the Ghanaian state to implement it so fecklessly. Here the key contrast was with the colonial regime. What made the colonial state a more benign administrative agency for the Ghanaian economy than Nkrumah and most if not all of his successors, was not, of course, a greater dedication to the real interests of Ghanaians, a possibility too ludicrous to merit serious discussion. Rather, it was the very effective constraint placed upon all British colonial ad-
ministrations throughout far the greater part of their existence to restrict their expenditure to their own fiscal capabilities and to limit their fiscal extraction in turn to a rate which did not impair the future productivity (and thus the future fiscal yield) of the economy which they administered. Oddly the British colonial state was effectively disciplined, as the more credulously functionalist Marxist fancy presumes all states to be, to reproduce the social relations of production and hence to sustain the productivity of the economy. But the post-colonial state of Ghana was under no such discipline. Unlike the colonial administration which was firmly answerable to the metropolis, the independent state of Ghana was effectively answerable to no one at all, either inside or outside the country. Its constructive powers were pretty limited but its capacity to destroy was impressive. And so far from discharging its theoretically allotted role of reproducing the mode of production, it has come by now extremely close to obliterating this. It has done so, of course, because it furnished real opportunities to real men and women and because some of these opportunities were taken with enthusiasm—making first civilian politics and then career soldiering into the grandest entrepreneurial horizons within the society. It was able to do so because of the devastating efficacy as a taxing device of a colonial institution, the Cocoa Marketing Board, the sort of instrument of which absolutist monarchs dreamed. But it chose to do so because, unlike the colonial administrators, it was not externally inhibited from doing so, because it simply did not understand the disciplines of production and because initially it won friends and influenced people by spending the proceeds and because by the time that it could no longer hope to do this, it was wholly beyond its power to repair the damage. Après moi le déluge is one of the most oecumenically accessible of political mottoes.

And today the flood has come with a vengeance.

If the Ghanaians are to stand any chance of recovering from its impact they will need to grasp first what it is that has befallen them. But to do this they will have to learn to see the politics of their country in terms which are as yet very far from being their own. I want therefore to turn back briefly from the fate of Ghana to reconsider in more chastened terms the issue of the legitimacy of a critique of culture.

What is the moral which I seek to draw from all this? What is a
cosmopolitan perspective on the sorry recent history of Ghana and how does it relate to the troubling categories of modernity, identity and the claim to a superior understanding? It is a perspective, above all, I think, which registers the ineradicable significance for every human individual and society of their own sense of their own existence. It is also one which acknowledges the inescapable and always potentially tragic conflicts which follow from this significance, between distinct values for each particular individual or society and the equally tragic conflicts between the entire scheme of values of one individual and that of another and the potentially more overwhelming and finally tragic conflicts between the scheme of values of one society or set of societies and another. (Consider the Falkland Islands.) But equally, I think, it must recognize not only the rational commitment of highly contingent human beings to the values which they simply happen to value, but also the overwhelming causal importance in the shaping of individual and social life not just of momentary imprudence, folly, greed and resentment, but also of profound failures to grasp what is actually occurring to human beings and what this will mean for the values they hold dear. Men make their own history, under conditions notoriously not of their own choosing. But they understand very poorly what it is that they are doing in making it as they choose. It is this profound incomprehension and the dreadful consequences which sometimes follow from it that a cosmopolitan perspective must try to alleviate. It is not a view from somewhere in particular but a view of something in particular. In this sense certainly it has no option but to claim to know better than the parochial visions with which it contrasts itself. But what it claims to know better is not what other human beings in a particular place should choose to value and to become, but rather of how they have good reason to act to protect more effectively and realize more fully the values which truly are theirs. What it seeks to do is not to supplant the values of real people and localities with those esteemed by Professor Habermas, but to aid their bearers to perceive more clearly the dangers which face their values and the opportunities which they enjoy to secure these values against such dangers.

What particular human beings actually value, however little their values may appeal to us, is not adequately seen as a set of evaluative propositions or a collection of affective states, the ap-
appropriate materials for a World Handbook of Cultural and Psychic Indicators. What human values are, rather, are the categories which in part determine and are in part engendered by the repressions and efforts, the hopes and terrors of a lifetime. If we recognize their force for others, as we cannot but recognize their force for ourselves and if, accordingly, we will the end of enabling others to defend their own values, we must also, other things being equal, will the means. In the case of politics this certainly raises gross questions of economic redistribution. But in the particular context which I have been considering, what it principally and unequivocally implies is the commitment to will a change in the false causal beliefs which have made the Ghanaian people, within their political forms of the last three decades, their own most mortal enemies and the agents of destruction of their own most deeply felt concerns.

The key point, with which I wish to close, is simply this. To respect the values of another human being or an alien society does not entail a respect for the causal beliefs of that person or society. Indeed, as I have tried to show, it precisely precludes respect for causal beliefs of real practical importance which one has good reason to believe false. The ‘cosmopolitan’ claim to know better, where it is legitimately advanced, is not a claim to know better what others should be. It is the claim to a better understanding of some of the practical preconditions for realizing and protecting what others in fact are and choose to remain. In a world practically interrelated in economic, political and cultural ways like the world in which we all live today, we are all, after our capacities, credal fellow citizens of a common territory, the present human habitat. It is a status which for some of us certainly has its charms and its privileges. But like any civic status it also has its duties.

So for this common territory and all those who perforce share it I offer another, I trust equally oecumenical and somewhat more edifying political motto: Salus populi suprema lex.*

University of Cambridge

*For the analysis of recent Ghanaian history which lies behind the judgments of the lecture see Introduction and Conclusion to John Dunn (ed), West African States: Failure and Promise, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1978, J. Dunn & A. F. Robertson, Dependence and Opportunity: Political Change in Ahafo,