

World Politics

PROGRESS AND ITS LIMITS



JAMES MAYALL

World Politics

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World Politics

Progress and its Limits

JAMES MAYALL

Polity

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For my grandchildren

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Abbreviations

CMAG	Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group
ECOMOG	ECOWAS Monitoring Group
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
EPLF	Eritrean Peoples' Liberation Front
GATT	General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade
IRA	Irish Republican Army
KLA	Kosovo Liberation Army
MFN	Most Favoured Nation
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
OAU	Organization of African Unity
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
RPF	Rwandan Patriotic Front
SALT	Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNITAF	United Nations International Task Force
UNO	United Nations Organization
UNOSOM	United Nations Operation in Somalia
USA	United States of America
USSR	Union of Socialist Soviet Republics
WTO	World Trade Organization

Prologue

It is fashionable to be sceptical about the significance of the new Millennium. The computer technicians, who now rule so many aspects of our lives, did their work with exemplary efficiency. Those who holed themselves up against the apocalypse need not have bothered. When the debris was cleared away after the celebrations – 20 tons of empty champagne bottles from the streets of London alone – the world looked much the same as it had the night before. Both the problems facing humanity, and its prospects, remained unchanged.

Yet the Millennium is as good a point as any from which to try to take stock of the state of world affairs. We could not give any intelligible account of either human problems or prospects, without reference to a calendar. In most cultures, people punctuate the year with celebrations at set times. In most cultures also, those who can manipulate the calendar, with the aid of the stars or a theory of numbers, command a huge following, presumably because we all secretly yearn for an insight into our destiny. Rulers, from Julius Caesar to Indira Gandhi and Ronald Reagan, have been as prone as the rest of us to employ soothsayers. But we also need the calendar for mundane reasons. We could no more organize our social and personal lives without it than we could do without roads to move about

on or houses to live in. There is no need to apologize, therefore, for using the onset of the Millennium as a vantage point from which to look at the development of international society and its present aspirations and discontents.

Still, let us admit it, there is a problem with this vantage point. The idea of the Millennium is a profoundly ambiguous emblem for the modern world. On the one hand – in Western thought – it is associated with the politics of enthusiasm, the paradisaical longings of people for a world born again, remade on principles of justice that have somehow got lost or been betrayed. On the other hand, the millennium is a trade mark of Western universalism, or hubris, depending on how one tells the story. It is true that, with the possible exception of Buddhism, all the major world religions have given rise to millenarian-like movements, that are inspired by the expectation of an ideal society. The same goes for Marxism, which until its demise many saw as a secular equivalent to a world religion. But the world itself is part of the Christian story. For all practical purposes the world is now organized – bound into a single world community even – by the Christian calendar.

The problem that the Millennium poses for the student of international relations is thus roughly as follows. If these relations are viewed from the perspective of comparative sociology, it is possible to discern patterns of behaviour that cut across social and religious divisions. An analysis of these patterns will no doubt throw light on our common predicament, but at the price of draining life of its passion and drama. For that, there is no substitute for narrative. However, if our concern is with the story framed by the past two thousand years, then we must recognize that it is not of deep spiritual relevance to many of the world's peoples, and its longevity therefore cannot be

expected to resonate everywhere. Indeed, one aspect of the story – the fact that it can be told so as to demonstrate the superiority of Western civilization and values – seems likely to fuel anti-Western millenarian-type movements. One does not have to accept Professor Huntingdon's thesis, that the Cold War will be followed by a clash of civilizations, to predict that the energies of these movements are likely to be directed at challenging the structures and institutions of international society that were developed during the era of Western expansion.¹ Indeed, they are already doing so.

The politics of enthusiasm have their intellectual as well as their grass-roots variants. The Millennium will also, no doubt, be treated as a suitable case for deconstruction within the academic community. The discovery that the West and the world are not synonymous has already had widespread intellectual as well as political consequences. When the world was being integrated into a single economic and political system between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, those who were responsible – the philosophers, scientists and empire builders – were seldom worried about the problems of cultural or any other kind of relativism. At the start, they operated with an uncomplicated Mercantilist view of the world, in which there were always winners and losers. On this view, the difference between trade and warfare was one of degree only. Later, they advanced the view of a common human rationality. In economics the rationalists sought to demonstrate that vice could be transformed into virtue through the combination of the profit motive and open competition. In politics, they discovered that there were certain human rights, which all persons possessed by virtue of their humanity, and that these could be sharply differentiated from mere privileges.

These discoveries involved the substitution of a ration-

alist positive-sum world view, in place of the realist zero-sum form of universalism that had preceded it. Where it had once been accepted that one person's, or state's, gain was another's loss, according to the new doctrines, it was not necessary for both parties to gain equally for both to be better off. This view of the world offered an explanation of co-operation and laid the foundations for a secular ideology of social progress. It also created a conundrum. In a world made up of sovereign and equal human beings, endowed with the same fundamental rights, including the rights of individual and collective self-determination, how could one explain, let alone justify, the fact that a few powerful states had effectively enclosed the world and partitioned it amongst themselves. The fact that the two countries – Britain and France – whose competition sparked off the final act of enclosure, were the birthplaces of the industrial revolution and the Enlightenment respectively, and hence the progenitors of rationalist universalism rendered the conundrum even more complex.

It has never been resolved. Eventually, the recognition that the conundrum was insoluble played a part in the withdrawal of European imperial power after the two world wars. But, during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, evolutionary theory came to the aid of those who wished to defend Western dominion in terms of a doctrine of progress. In their view, European imperialism was the avatar of a future world civilization. Social Darwinism could not survive the obscene atrocities of the Second World War, at least as a respectable defence of cultural domination. But the almost immediate onset of the Cold War pushed the issue of alternative value systems, and the cultural relativism that their existence seemed to imply, to the margins of international political debate. It is only since 1989 that the lack of confidence in