The Other George

Lichtheim on Imperialism

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George Lichtheim is missing. You may not have noticed, especially if you don’t peruse political journals from the 1950s, 1960s, and early 1970s (or didn’t read them back then). You may have noticed if the history of the left matters to you. If you don’t know his work and the future of the left is of concern to you, you should miss him too.

Lichtheim was an independent intellectual spirit—the real thing, not the self-announced sort. His histories of socialism and Marxism are among the most intelligent that we have. They are works of learning, insight, critical engagement. Even if you would dispute him on something or many things, you’ll feel smarter for the disagreement. He didn’t just gobble a few secondary sources and then blurt “expertise”; he didn’t seek to display theoretical acumen by spry style and self-congratulating irony.” Footnotes didn’t frighten him. His friend Walter Laqueur reports an idiosyncratic but appealing quality: Lichtheim would not quote a book he didn’t own. (I take details about Lichtheim’s life mostly from Laqueur’s accounts of it.)

Lichtheim’s prose did not glitter, or it did so rarely. It was always straightforward, but there were acerbic riffs, and sometimes he just ran out of patience. Consider an observation on Hannah Arendt. In his essay entitled “Two Revolutions,” Lichtheim wrote that in her book On Revolution she

shows an inclination to discuss political topics in philosophical terms, and vice versa, until the distinction between metaphysics and politics is lost or dimmed in a twilight zone where it no longer seems to matter whether we are dealing with actual events, contemporary beliefs about these events, or subsequent reflections upon them by thinkers motivated by convictions and interests quite foreign to the participants. At some stage a writer has to decide whether the discussion is to be about the political realm ordinarily so called, or about the most general principles regulating human behavior. It is no use asserting that this distinction was overcome once and for all by Aristotle and his successors. (Who are they? Do they include the medieval Aristotelians who no longer had a polis to reflect upon?)

One phrase here—“At some stage a writer has to decide . . .”—finds its way over and again into Lichtheim’s works, in one way or another. Writers need to decide just what they are addressing. Making reference to a current event (he writes in 1964), he explained that “the recent tentative rapprochement between the Vatican and the Kremlin cannot be sensibly discussed in terms of Thomist and Leninist philosophy, although it is a fact that both have a common source in Aristotle.” His point ought to elicit reflection by contemporary concocters of notions like “Islamo-Fascism.”

Lichtheim’s books and essays provide synthetic understanding rather than reaching originality. He was not known for intellectual modesty; nonetheless, he used first-person pronouns sparingly. The temperament is not that of the 1960s, and it is not postmodern: the point of writing is the subject matter not the writing subject (whole, fragmented, constructed, conjunctural, whatever). “I trust I have learned something from modern scholarship and from the literature of the past four decades,” he wrote not long before his suicide in 1973, “but my instinctive sympathies lie with the representative thinkers of the age that ended in 1914.” Was this autodidact telling readers to historicize his own writings? Or that he was out of synchrony with his own century, and especially its intellectuals?
Well, it wasn’t a very good century, the twentieth, and he certainly knew that. Lichtheim was born in Berlin in 1912. His father was a leading German Zionist whose politics were on the center-right, although he had Kantian sympathies. Young George was attracted to Hegel, Marx, Heine, and the quirky (then) left-wing thinker Franz Borkenau. He studied law at Heidelberg and militated toward independent radical groupings before fleeing Hitler. He went to Britain, where he had spent some time in the 1920s, and found himself working for Marks and Spencer—surely a good subject for a Tom Stoppard play.

Lichtheim left for Palestine, where he became a journalist and eventually foreign editor of the daily Palestine Post.

He frequented intellectual circles in Jerusalem, where he befriended Gershom Scholem (and translated his Main Currents in Jewish Mysticism) as well as Hans Jonas. But he didn’t find Zionism or Jewish philosophy compelling, and in 1946 went to London. From there he wrote for the Post (renamed the Jerusalem Post after Israel’s birth) and became an editor for Commentary (this was long before that magazine plunged into the neo-deeps—or, rather, shallows).

Lichtheim covered the Nuremberg Trials, and in the next two-and-a-half decades he wrote, sometimes under the pen name G.L. Arnold, on European and intellectual affairs for an array of journals ranging from Partisan Review, Dissent, the New Leader and Encounter to the Times Literary Supplement and the New York Review of Books. He began to publish wide-ranging works on intellectual history and the left, including Marxism (which made him well known in 1961), The Origins of Socialism, and A Short History of Socialism. Hegelianism marked his mindset; he was out of sympathy with the simplified, scientized Marx promoted by Engels and beloved by one too many Marxists and Leninists. In the 1960s he paid sympathetic and increasing attention to Jürgen Habermas’s writings.

Lichtheim’s studies of the left are not equally satisfying. For one example, he wrote a book on Georg Lukács that is so obsessed with the unattractive features of this Marxist’s career, which were plentiful enough, that the interesting aspects of Lukács’s thought go out of focus. But hard Marxists, especially Leninists, disliked Lichtheim for other reasons. He said things they did not want to hear. Marx, he thought, offered a brilliant theoretical response to the bourgeois phase of European industrialization, but Marxism did not incarnate unalterable laws of history, let alone nature. Marx and his ideas also had to be historicized, not reified. Then it becomes obvious that a critique of classical “bourgeois” society is inadequate once that society is gone—and it was. If the point is to change the world, then your thinking must be a function of the world. If your life is devoted to saving Marxism as a doctrine, as the explanation of everything, well, that is something else.

Attacks on Lichtheim for “anticommunism” were predictable and missed the point. Read his essay “Happy Birthday”—it was the Bolshevik Revolution’s fiftieth—and you’ll detect his appreciation of Julius Martov, the Menshevik leader who fought as a Marxist for a democratic Russia, first against an autocratic old regime headed by a czar, and then against a new one-party state headed by his onetime comrade Lenin. The Martovs like the Lichtheims—they are not alone—seem to have vanished from left-wing recall, and if the left is ever to renew itself intellectually, it will need to ask why.

These days, Louis Althusser, the French communist philosopher and proponent of “theoretical anti-humanism” is being reprinted. Read his much-cited essay on “Ideology and State Apparatuses” along with Lichtheim’s “The Concept of Ideology” and think about which one makes you smarter. Or read Jacques Derrida’s Specters of Marx together with Lichtheim’s Marxism and ask which text teaches you more about the left, its problems, and, indeed, Marx.

Not that the intellectual right can gain succor from Lichtheim—at least not candidly. Lichtheim would never have hit a delete button on those continental intellectual traditions that gave us the best in socialist thought. Yes, neoconservatives may want to claim him in some way as they have the other George (Orwell, that is). But they will be able to do so only with their usual intellectual means—not ham-handed, but ham-headed. A lesson of Lichtheim: dislike of Leninism or Stalinism was
ICHTHEIM WROTE his slim tract on *Imperialism* in 1970. Another book (on Europe) was also in preparation, but this was the appropriate conclusion to his writings about the left even if it is not his best work. It is worth rereading because “imperialism” and “empire” are again prominent in the left’s vocabulary, even though Marxism’s hold on intellectual precincts, so strong when he wrote, is now gone.

When Lichtheim wrote *Imperialism*, decolonization was pretty much complete, British and French empires mostly dismantled. The cold war still chilled, and the Vietnam War still raged. Armies massed on the Sino-Soviet border. Beijing, quaking from the Cultural Revolution, was denouncing Moscow’s “imperialism.” Left groupuscules whirled about within the Western left, and Lichtheim believed Marxism “too important to be left to the post-Leninist sects—tiny, ferocious creatures devouring each other in a drop of water.”

He wasn’t right entirely. Ferocious, yes, but from drops come ripples. They never came close to making up a majority within the Western left except in the obsessed minds of liberals about to become neoconservatives. Yet they did sometimes function a bit too much like the larger left’s superego—a little like the more extreme “anti-globalization” militants sometimes do today. Toward the end of his book, Lichtheim points out sadly, but with irritation, that the word “imperialism” had turned into a source of endless confusion.

As “imperialist” became a catchall epithet, a new Subject of History was distilled from some of those ripples. The third world would save Marxism from the obvious fact that the proletariat had obstinately not become history’s universal class. Reformist talk on the left—some of it quite smart—of market socialism and “feasible socialism” was swept aside. And postmodernism and/or excitement about “new social movements” displaced a lot of traditional socialist theory. The latter seemed to go nowhere beyond rapprochement with liberalism, a useful move, but limited.

In the meantime, the West seemed to rest increasingly on technocratic laurels and a sturdy-enough welfare state, able to withstand occasional tremors. Lichtheim, though not a devotee of social democrats, thought classical liberalism had been put to historical rest. He did not foresee the coming crisis of the welfare state (and of social democracy) or the resurgence of hard liberalism—that Milton Friedman—economic theology translated into political alchemy via Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan. Faced with this, social democratic thought (liberalism, in America’s context) stuttered. Conservatives fostered young pundits and funded think tanks and journals—and all this as the world was poised for a communications revolution. Nobody, left or right, imagined 1989.

Lichtheim protested that multiple meanings of imperialism were bandied about and blurred into each other. It could mean the dominance by pre-1914 empires (Austria-Hungary, Russia) of national minorities. Or it might mean the mix of colonialism and mercantilism exemplified by Britain’s early dominance of India. Then there was “liberal imperialism,” that is, the British and later American quest to secure markets for Western capital. And all these seemed to have become interchangeable with discriminatory trade structures that benefited richer lands at the expense of poorer ones. “By running these different meanings together one can achieve startling rhetorical effects,” observed Lichtheim, “without coming any closer to a genuine theory of imperialism.”

Lichtheim saw imperialism as “a relationship” between “a controlling power” and those “under its dominion,” whether in a formal way or not. Hegemony is the key, that is, power and its justification. There were really “imperialisms,” because imperialism varied in times and places. It was not reducible to capitalism. Moreover, earlier theorists of imperialism in the age of capitalism—Hobson and Schumpeter or Marxists like Hilferding, Luxembourg, and Lenin—made many distinctions that seemed to have dissolved in the heat of the late 1960s. Lichtheim surveyed all the theories with a use-
ful, critical eye, but intended his book to be “a contribution to an ongoing political discussion.” Some of his most striking contributions were plain but inopportune questions that upset some common assumption. They often make you say, “That should have been obvious.”

For instance, when he discusses the development of free trade as a chief tenet of post–1945 U.S. ideology—Americans picked up where the dismantling British Empire left off—he asks if it made “economic sense after 1949 for the U.S. Government to boycott mainland China instead of entering trade relations with it?” Likewise, consider his question about the Maoist-flavored contention, popular in some academic circuits, that third world “underdevelopment” is the Siamese twin of “dependence” on industrial superpowers (the United States and the Soviet Union). Lichtheim—recall it is 1970—simply asks: “What economic damage has the ‘loss’ of China done to American capitalism since 1950 or to Soviet State Socialism since 1960?” And he answers, “Plainly, none at all. It has rather freed the superpowers of the tiresome obligation to provide development funds for China, thus throwing an additional burden on the Chinese people.”

His targets were bad intellectual habits, and it is unfortunate that they are still with us. For instance, how often do we hear that oil was the sole issue in the Iraq War and that President George Bush was nothing but the handmaiden of Texas Oil? If we pose Lichtheim-like questions, this becomes comic book neo-Leninism. Was oil a crucial factor? Of course. Does Bush come from Texas oil country? Of course. Are his economic views and energy policies appalling? Of course (again). Could Saddam and the oil companies have reached a mutually profitable agreement in about, oh, twenty minutes? Obviously, yes. Would Bush have concurred? Obviously, not. This makes no argument for or against the war; it does argue against facile formulas in making sense of complicated and dangerous matters.

Lichtheim traces imperialism’s plural ideological and historical meanings from ancient Rome—“imperium” first meant Roman rule over Romans and then later over others—through Mao. Counsel against economic determinism speckles his pages: “if one is determined to make imperialism rhyme with capitalism, one will have to ignore all empires save those that were built overseas by the nation-states of Western Europe in the age of their maritime predominance.” Capitalist imperialism won’t help you understand the Roman Empire, the Holy Roman Empire, and certainly not Sino-Soviet clashes.

Europe’s transition to political modernity was marked, in Lichtheim’s view, not simply by capitalism remaking the world but by an emerging distinction in statecraft between economic aims and non-economic purposes (religion, for example). As holy warriors concluded their wars of religion—another of history’s ends of ideology—and as local lords were subordinated to central powers, sovereign states arose. They could accommodate religious diversity and enhanced themselves by mercantilist means and overseas quests. Alliances between Catholic and Protestant kings became conceivable for a state’s sake. This patriotism was driven by dynamics different from those of later capitalist expansion, that is, the imperialism and empires that came of industrial revolution and the ideology of free trade. But when the British-dominated system of free trade began to falter in the latter nineteenth century, this was because Britain’s competitors refused to play “the game” according to the old rules:

One must decide what one is talking about. There grew up in the nineteenth century a British empire in India, a Russian empire in central Asia, and a French empire in Africa. These empires were not obliged to clash, and in fact never did. The owners were satisfied with the status quo and only asked to be left in peace so that they might digest their conquests. The trouble was started by newcomers who did not possess an empire: Germany and Japan. Once this has been grasped, we can stop arguing over the meaning of “empire.” Imperialist powers are not by definition obliged to own large tracts of land inhabited by conquered peoples. It is quite enough . . . if they are animated by a political will to bring about a forcible rearrangement of the global system controlled by their rivals.

Nationalism, then, was essential to this new “mentality.” Lichtheim insisted that German
and Japanese calculations were not economic or utilitarian—or else, “they did their sums wrong.” And if we look at France and Britain, we find that “nationalism transformed itself into imperialism wherever the opportunity offered.” In other words, imperialism then was a popular ideology based significantly on nationalist sentiment. It was not “merely a conspiracy got up in secret to enrich a few monopolists,” and its popularity extended genuinely to the working classes. Lichtheim found little persuasive in Lenin’s attempt to demonstrate how imperialism born of finance capital accounted for World War I and the failure of Europe’s workers to fulfill Marx’s predictions. It is unsaid, but Lichtheim’s account of imperialism does something akin to Max Weber’s treatment of capitalism. Weber argued for the impossibility of explaining an economic system, capitalism, by economics alone, and so pointed to the Protestant ethic as its precondition. Lichtheim argues for the impossibility of understanding imperialism by economic dynamics alone, even in the capitalist era, and points to the influence of nationalism. (But Lichtheim’s book might have been better-served had he considered the historicity of such terms as nation, nationalism, and patriotism.)

Lichtheim didn’t write out of the least sympathy for imperialism, but because he was out of sympathy with the clichés (and the political implications of the clichés) espoused by Maoists or third-worldists, Trotskyists or neo-Marxists, neo-Leninists or neo-this-ists and neo-that-ists. I’ll call them all “neos” for shorthand (admitting, readily, it’s too short). Influential neos such as Paul Baron, Paul Sweezy, Harry Sweezy, and those in comparable orbits insisted on a necessary link—chain might be the better term—between capitalist exploitation of the third world and the third world’s inability to “develop.” For Lichtheim, this is one formula substituting for another: “bourgeois versus proletariat” becomes “imperialist versus anti-imperialist.” (Nowadays, it’s “Empire versus Multitude.”)

“The ideological frenzy of the 1950s—reinforced by Stalinist psychopathology on the one hand and Dullesian drivel on the other—is taken literally by these writers,” says Lichtheim. In other words, they didn’t distinguish ideology from reality. Instead, they inverted the world depicted by “standard U.S. cold war literature” and simplified “to the point of absurdity.” That done, third worldism and anti-imperialism together became for neos the alternative to the superpowers. Their minds still worked through apocalyptic bifurcations. Here’s another way of putting it: cold warriors, both intellectuals and power-holders, ought not to have been taken at their words, let alone their shouts. What nearsighted intellectuals perceived as world-ideological struggles of “capitalist democracy versus communist totalitarianism” or alternatively, “imperialism versus liberation,” might really have been neosuperstructures of older kinds of geopolitical conflict. Perhaps while intellectuals argued ideology, power-holders acted on entirely different bases. Those who thought in the 1990s that history had just ended because the liberal idea vanquished the totalitarian idea might want to glance at pre-1917 relations between Russia and Georgia before discussing current commotions in light of 1989. They might even want to re-contextualize a good deal of cold war politics within the complicated history of Russia’s great power ambitions and its relations with its neighbors before and after communism.

Now consider Lichtheim’s approach to Maoism and third worldism. For him, recent anti-imperialist “neo-Marxist” theory presented new world-historical protagonists, national liberators, by means (again) of bad rhymes. He writes,

This nationalism is identified with socialism, the peasantry with the proletariat, anti-imperialism with anti-capitalism, until all the distinctions painfully elaborated in Marxist literature for a century are cast overboard in favor of a simple dichotomy between Western imperialism versus the starving masses of the Third World. People equipped with this kind of perspective no longer need a theory: practice grows out of populist sloganeering, as power is supposed to grow from a gun barrel.

I would add this: studying Chinese history may tell you much more about Maoism than a theory of totalitarianism that imposes neat cat-
egories on multi-textured and many-hued history and on varied political culture. Lichtheim pointed out that Maoism asserted the unity of “the people” in an overwhelmingly agrarian land, but gave “the people” a mostly urban leadership championing national interests. The result was unrecognizable as “authentic socialism,” at least of any Marxist variety. It was, however, “fully integrated with Chinese nationalism and ethnocentrism.” Thus, Mao’s revolutionary nationalism was truly popular.

Although Lichtheim doesn’t say it, his point is reinforced by a small fact: Mao did not announce in 1949 that the world proletariat had cast off its chains. He proclaimed, “The Chinese People has stood up.” Lichtheim does, however, point out that Maoism identified China as a “proletarian nation.” (This notion, he notes, has a heritage in fascist explanations of Italy’s “backwardness” and its need to stand up.) There may be a time, Lichtheim conjectured, “when China feels able to get along without Maoism.” But its industrialization would be unlike that of the West and would be one part of a transformation of Asia that would alter, inevitably, the world’s balance of power. We read at the end of Imperialism that “changes of this magnitude are rarely accomplished peacefully.”

China did leave Maoism behind. Certainly, there are new balances of power in today’s world. As to peace . . . it’s safer to predict the past, as the old cliché has it. We are now three-and-a-half decades beyond Lichtheim’s world. The Chinese Communist Party still rules, but it fosters market economics. The combination seems more like Augusto Pinochet’s dictatorship than pursuit of a classless society.

In the meantime, there is an academic industry addressing “postcolonialism.” A reader of Lichtheim’s Imperialism who wants some updating would do well to look at Stephen Howe’s Empire (Oxford, 2002). This judicious, very brief text doesn’t harbor the same ambitions as Lichtheim’s essay, but it also distinguishes among ideology, intellectual posturing, junk scholarship, and thoughtful treatments of its subject.

Its author discerns a problem like one lamented by Lichtheim. “A minor oddity of modern academic—and political—language,” Howe writes, “is that the word ‘imperialism’ has undergone a sharp decline in popularity, while ‘colonialism’ has zoomed up the citation charts.” However, “colonialism is being used just as variously and contentiously as imperialism ever was. Its younger relative ‘postcolonialism’ seems ever more elastic. To some people it’s an all-purpose label for the entire state of the contemporary world. To others it’s just a tag for a few professors of English Literature, their books and courses . . . [A] recent book of literary studies is rather mind-bendingly entitled The Postcolonial Middle Ages.”

My mind bent a bit recently when I read some literature devoted to “postcolonial theory.” I found in it virtually no discussion of history, of the impact of struggles for independence on postcolonial political systems, of political culture, of changes in social authority patterns following independence, of the transformation of postcolonial economies or their relation to the “developed” world. I found nothing about what political scientists or sociologists or historians or economists in, say, India, can teach us about imperialism or the world after colonialism. Instead, I found political claims made chiefly through literary criticism—by addressing fiction and nothing but fiction. Actually, I sympathized with many of the political points; and I think literature can be useful in exploring politics. But I also recalled a sentence in George Lichtheim’s Imperialism: “Propagandists use words like flags.” Perhaps it is time to lower the flags (or their substitutes) when we think of these things—of empire or imperialism or colonialism or post-colonialism—in our unsteady twenty-first century.

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