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*Reconsidering Churchill's Europeanism and Its Implications for the Present Crisis*

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### **The Ethical Foundation of European Integration**

In the aftermath of the Second World War, European integration offered the promise of peace and prosperity to a continent devastated by an unprecedented onslaught of mechanized destruction and murder. By 1945, tens of millions of Europeans had been killed, with the lives of countless others shattered by the loss of homes and homelands, family members and dear friends. Europe's future was unknowable. Perhaps this was only a brief moment of respite and the Allied victory over Germany would again prove short-lived. Many feared they were still living through the unfolding of a grand European tragedy whose last act had yet to come.

The crisis that confronted the continent was not just material in nature. Europe, the self-proclaimed engine of moral progress, torchbearer of liberty and virtue, had over the previous three decades become the West's heart of darkness, barbarism incarnate. Western European elites, once smug in their conviction that they ruled over the nexus of the civilized world, had lost their swagger. Whereas in the nineteenth century the word "civilization" had widely been understood as synonymous with Western European culture and ethics, the much-vaunted qualities of "civilized Europe" now appeared to be no more than a distant memory.<sup>1</sup>

Into the void entered socialism as the new spirit of history. In Britain, the Labour Party decisively bested the Tories in the July 1945 general election. Three months later, across the Channel, communists and democratic socialists won a majority of seats in the new French constituent assembly. Not until 1951 would conservatives win parliamentary majorities in either country. Meanwhile the countries of Eastern Europe had begun their slide into de facto one-party rule, with communists facing little effective resistance from their intimidated and outmaneuvered partners in postwar coalition governments. Even in the West, constitutional niceties were done away with, as they had been during the war. From London and Paris to Budapest and Warsaw, governments invoked states of exception to prolong and extend their control of vast sectors of the economy, as well as to carry out expulsions and purges of those accused of collaboration with the Axis powers.<sup>2</sup>

A diverse array of conservatives at once found themselves scrambling for a common moral vocabulary capable of shoring up confidence in the traditional sociopolitical order. They feared that left-wing majorities might extinguish basic freedoms in the name of anti-fascism and social justice. Perceived to be most at risk were the liberties of business owners, church schools, landholders, conservative opposition newspapers, and right-wing political prisoners, all of whom conservatives claimed to have been subjected to discriminatory treatment with no regard for the rule of law. Though anti-communism would eventually prove to be their trump card in postwar elections, what conservatives lacked in the mid-1940s was a fresh, positive political vision capable of generating widespread consensus around their programs, many elements of which had suffered discredit as a result of the terrible conflicts and crises that had beset Europe in recent decades.

Amid this wreckage and uncertainty arose a number of movements promoting new supranational mechanisms to unite and revive the region's remaining noncommunist states.<sup>3</sup> Yet no groundswell of support was immediately forthcoming in the first years following the war. By the conclusion of the Second World War, left-wing nationalism had emerged triumphant over its right-wing counterpart in most of Europe. In addition to democratic socialists, its representatives included the Soviet Union and communist partisans. Increasingly, it stirred in the colonies as well. For conservatives in the postwar European unity movements, the construction of a united Europe was a means of containing nationalist forces on both the Left and Right. This required transposing the motifs of liberal and romantic nationalism to a European key.

Conservatives in favor of Western European unification spoke of the recreation of a "European family" whose ties preceded those of the nation and whose political expression was a European union or federation. They imagined Europeans as sharing a long history of cultural unity that stretched back to the united Christian Europe of the High Middle Ages and Renaissance. The European community of peoples, they claimed, was knit together by a shared commitment to individual freedom and the rule of law. These principles were not posed as recent liberal innovations but rather as part of Europe's Christian and humanist heritage. The formation of a European union thereby would mark at once an end to the cataclysmic age of total war and a nostalgic return to the lost unity of a bygone era. Supra-nationalism had now obtained both liberal and romantic dimensions, like nationalism before it.

### **Making Sense of Churchill's Europeanism**

This book displaces the French technocrat Jean Monnet as the central figure in the origins of European integration, welcoming, instead, Winston Churchill (1874-1965) to center stage. I argue that Winston Churchill's European project was an attempt to revivify the values of the Victorian world of his youth as viewed through the prism of his Christian romantic imagination.

Churchill's Europeanism has long mystified his many biographers. There has been much debate about whether or not Churchill intended the United Kingdom to be part of a future Europe union but less attention paid to how he envisioned that such an organization of states would work in the first place. Little has been written about the free-market and romantic components of his internationalism, the key to deciphering his understanding of what European integration entailed, and which states would take part in its various aspects. Without fail, Churchill scholars have either passed over his role in the creation of the European human rights system or mentioned it only in passing.<sup>4</sup>

Churchill was tenaciously attached to the free-market individualist ethos of Victorian liberalism. In the context of the immediate postwar period, when the Left was identified with democratic socialism and the Center with social democracy, he cast the Conservative Party as the true inheritor of the classical liberal tradition in that it alone among the parties defended the freedom of the individual from state tyranny. So, too, could Churchill with some justification present himself as faithful to Gladstonian liberal internationalism at a time when Labour was turning away from its interwar internationalist orientation. From the Bolshevik Revolution onward, his domestic politics was conditioned above all by his antipathy toward socialism. The rise of communism, like that of Nazism, pushed Churchill ever more toward a

counterrevolutionary and libertarian outlook, intensifying his anxieties regarding untrammelled state power and majority rule.

Such considerations made European integration attractive to free-market conservatives, for it held the promise of insulating democratic states from the contagion of statism, whether it took the form of a communist revolution, a fascist coup, or the more gradual erosion of liberty under socialist governments. For Churchill, the shadow of totalitarianism stalked not only continental democracies, but also Britain under Labour rule. Though his overriding strategic objective was the reconciliation of former foes and stabilization of the continent, his anxieties over the spread of socialist statism in Britain do much to explain why by 1949 he was open to ceding a degree of British sovereignty to a European union.

Before Churchill's entry onto the field, the establishment of European institutions with meaningful powers of supranational control stood little if any chance of realization. During the Axis occupation of the continent, Europeanism had been most closely associated with collaborationist propaganda. Though some figures in the anti-Axis coalition, most notably Churchill, had endorsed the unification of Europe, on the whole the fight against the Axis powers had been framed as a nationalist struggle. After so much blood had been spilled to restore the sovereignty of occupied nations, there was little ready support for allowing foreigners to dictate policy. Europeans were no more sympathetic to granting such powers to an international organization than they were to interference in their affairs on the part of the superpowers. We know this not from opinion surveys—there appear to be none conducted on the subject before Churchill's involvement in the movements for European unity was well underway—but rather from the accounts of diplomats, journalists, and other observers of the European scene.

Churchill changed this dynamic by giving the cause of European unification the public credibility due Hitler's most inveterate foe. He brought to the European unity movements a unique combination of attributes: the star power to hold the attention of the media, the rhetorical skills to generate public enthusiasm, and the diplomatic skills to build consensus, not to mention his considerable charisma and charm. The European project was in need of a new master narrative, and Churchill was a master storyteller. Perhaps most important of all was Churchill's facility in presenting change in terms of continuity and vice versa, an aptitude common to the finest conservative rhetoricians. A skeptical public needed to be reassured that European unification was neither a leap into the unknown nor a reformulation of right-wing fantasies. For this purpose, Churchill was, if not a perfect messenger, certainly the best on hand.

By no means could Churchill have achieved results on his own. Even so, it is hard to imagine that, without the catalyzing effect his leadership provided, European integration would have attracted sufficient numbers of figures with the political muscle necessary to sway enough government officials and parliamentarians to the cause. Churchill's involvement in the postwar European project began well before that of many of individuals later baptized the "founding fathers" of the European Communities—among them Jean Monnet and Robert Schuman. The latter's attention during the latter half of the 1940s, like those of the vast majority of Europeans, was turned to national reconstruction efforts. Churchill had the luxury of not having governmental responsibilities for over five years following his exit from 10 Downing Street after the July 1945 general election. This gave him not only the time to devote to the activities of the European unity movements, but also an electoral incentive.

This was an issue that could attract cross-party support, particularly that of the Liberal Party, and restore his status as a unifying figure above petty partisan politics.

The mystery of Churchill's Europeanism is one that will never be entirely solved. There is simply too much ambiguity in his utterances to paint a finely detailed portrait. Churchill, the elder statesman of the postwar era, made equivocation into an art form. Though not adverse to telling hard truths when he felt it necessary to shock his audience out of complacency, he was adept at issuing lofty pronouncements that left his audience guessing as to how they translated into deeds. Moreover, after 1945, Churchill was not particularly interested in hashing out the details of policy, whether domestic or foreign. He saw himself as setting the outlines of a grand strategy and letting others fill in the blanks.

This reflected, in part, his conservative political philosophy, above all his subscription to an organic theory of society. Organicism held that societies functioned best when they evolved through gradual adaptation to changes in objective conditions, as a natural organism adapted to changes in its habitat, rather than an elaborate, fixed blueprint. Though often attributed to Edmund Burke, organicism was popularized in Britain by the romantic writers Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth.<sup>5</sup> In the realm of ethics, it bore similarities to Burke's historicist sensibility, which Churchill shared. For Burke, liberty rested on the bedrock of tradition, not natural law. Common-sense appraisals of the lessons of history were a surer moral guide than rational reflection on the basis of first principles. Though Burkean historicism held that the freedoms of one people were not necessarily those of another, it was not the same as moral relativism. Burke believed that there existed a transcendent divine moral law, one whose expression was contextual and could be ascertained piece by piece through empirical observation.<sup>6</sup> Here was the link to British idealism, the anti-

materialist doctrine that traveled to Britain from Germany, which in its Hegelian variant allowed for the universal spirit or God to manifest itself in human institutions and practices differently according to time and place.

Churchill's vagueness could also be interpreted as a matter of political convenience, as it permitted him to sidestep contentious debates at home and abroad over how precisely his grand strategy should be implemented, if he so chose. In past ministerial duties, he had proven himself as fearsome a micromanager as they came. After his exhausting tenure as wartime prime minister, which had severely taxed his health, Churchill was in many respects a different man. He immersed himself in creative endeavors such as painting and writing, including the publication of a six-volume history of the Second World War. As leader of the opposition, he enjoyed his visits to the continent, where, away from parliamentary skirmishes at home, he could play the part of visionary for several days at a meeting on European unity before taking a vacation with his family at some lakeside villa. This did not mean that his pugnacious side would not reappear when faced with resistance from old enemies on the Left. His success in outmaneuvering and overpowering Labour delegates to the Council of Europe's Consultative Assembly was critical to ensuring that body's endorsement of a European human rights treaty. Yet, when not confronting Labour ministers or communist hecklers, he showed a high-minded, one even might say sacerdotal, side.

The political dimensions of conservative Europeanism were intimately linked with its cultural dimensions. Churchill came of age in the era of the Hague peace conferences, whose vision of international law was premised on the common cultural and ethical attributes of the "society of civilized states." So, too, did the visual language of romantic internationalism on display in the aesthetics of the Hague Peace



Palace find an echo in the imagery and metaphors in Churchill's internationalist rhetoric.

### **[PEACE PALACE SLIDES]**

#### **Implications for the European project**

Today EU officials, in response to the rise of centrifugal economic and political forces, increasingly resort to describing Europe as a “community of values,” but they seldom provide a vivid portrait of Europe's qualities. The forward march of European economic integration over the past several decades has resulted in what the German sociologist Max Weber described as the ascendancy of “bureaucratic authority” over “charismatic authority,” a “disenchantment of the world” that is today reflected in popular disenchantment with European institutions.<sup>7</sup> Europeanists sometimes speak of the need for a charismatic leader to counter the growing tide of “anti-Europe” sentiment. Charisma, however, is a quality that emerges only if there exists an empathic bond between leaders and the people they aim to inspire and mobilize. This in turn depends on identification between the two on the basis of not only common material interests but also a shared cultural and ethical sensibility.

With Euroskepticism on the march, Europe still searches for its qualities. The stakes are high. Brussels and Strasbourg appear powerless to win back those who feel profoundly disconnected from European institutions. They may very well succumb to what Churchill as a young Liberal MP hailed as “the sledgehammer of democracy.” Even so, there may be hope yet for Europeans to forge a new consensus on the rights and obligations that they owe one another. As a more seasoned Churchill observed in the wake of two world wars: “To rebuild Europe from its ruins and make its light shine forth again upon the world, we must first of all conquer ourselves. It is in this

way only that the sublime with its marvelous transmutations of material things can be brought into our daily life.”

### **Conservative domestic politics and its implications for the European human rights system**

Today the politics of the European Convention on Human Rights cannot be easily disentangled from those of the European Union. This is particularly the case in Britain, where those inveighing against the “Eurocrats” in Brussels and Strasbourg rely on similar lines of argumentation, contending that neither has any business overriding British parliamentary majorities and infringing on British national sovereignty. To submit to supranational mechanisms of control is, in the view of these Euroskeptics, tantamount to eviscerating British democracy and independence, which an earlier generation of Britons sacrificed so much to preserve. The British, they assert, do not need foreign judges to tell them how to conform to human rights standards, and their country would be better off substituting for the European Convention a new national bill of rights of its own devising. Recently, calls for the United Kingdom to withdraw from the European Convention have multiplied. Right-wing news outlets and politicians have been at the forefront of those denouncing the Strasbourg court for its interference in the workings of the British legal system, lobbying the British government to refuse compliance with its rulings.

Much of this criticism rests on the presumption that the Strasbourg court has of late exercised powers contrary to the original intent of the framers of the European Convention. Under this interpretation, the European Court of Human Rights outlived its usefulness as soon as the menace of communism and fascism receded from Europe. Such critiques are bolstered by conventional understandings of the origins of

the European Convention, which posit that its progenitors only had on their minds the defense of democracies on the continent. Hence, critics argue, there is little reason to allow such an anachronism to interfere with the workings of the United Kingdom's venerable legal systems or the actions of democratically elected representatives of the British people.

Those coming to the defense of the Strasbourg court counter that the European Convention is a “living instrument” that must be interpreted dynamically—that is, according to present-day conditions rather than the postwar context in which it was conceived. The reigning assumption among the Strasbourg court's detractors and supporters is that the European Convention was conceived in order to shield its signatories against the threats of communism and fascism alone. On both sides, it is presumed that little thought was given after the Second World War to the need for supranational safeguards on British liberties. Arguments today in favor of the legitimacy of the Strasbourg court's prerogatives are therefore rarely grounded in original intent.<sup>8</sup>

In fact, communism and fascism were not the only targets that the founders of the European human rights system had in their sights. If we examine closely the European Convention's origins before the negotiations between states that immediately preceded its adoption, others come to light. The European human rights system was conceived by transnational organizations that operated independently of governments. For conservatives in their ranks, new supranational mechanisms were indeed required to protect the West against communism and fascism. At the same time, they saw in the construction of a European judiciary a means of overcoming opposition at home to a number of hotly contested conservative policies.

Conservative Europeanists, whether British or French, invoked international human rights norms for different purposes. Nevertheless, they were united in their belief that a democracy in which tyranny of the majority held sway was little better than a dictatorship. The rights of the minority, like the autonomy of the individual and groups in civil society, were not to be sacrificed at the altar of the unitary nation-state. Pluralism, not popular sovereignty, was their watchword. While their socialist opponents called them anti-democratic, conservatives saw their aim as protecting democracy from itself.<sup>9</sup> Totalitarianism, they believed, was a contagion whose carriers were not limited to communists and fascists, for it could metastasize within democratic movements and persist even after the fall of authoritarian regimes. Socialism was alleged to be its breeding ground, especially that of the Marxist variety, but so, too, were certain aspects of liberalism and republicanism to blame. With domestic courts having proven themselves unable or unwilling to uphold the rule of law against overweening executives, in their eyes, a new international solution was needed.

Although some of the rulings of the Strasbourg court have been unwelcome to conservatives, the underlying principles on which it operates today are more in line with the original intent of its conservative progenitors than commonly assumed. Certainly, the Tory founders of the European human rights system would have been comfortable with its doctrine of dynamic interpretation, though not all of its applications. The romantic sensibility that Churchill shared with many other protagonists of the conservative human rights revolution was likewise compatible with the spirit of the doctrine of the margin of appreciation, which in practice allows the Strasbourg court to take into consideration differences of culture and history between Council of Europe member states. The margin of appreciation is also

comparable in many respects to the principle of subsidiarity to which the French Catholic communitarians involved in the conservative human rights revolution subscribed in the name of greater pluralism.

As a defense against excessive state interference, the European Convention remains as conservative a document as it was in the context of the postwar era. The supranational prerogatives of the Strasbourg court ensure that individuals and private entities continue to enjoy a large degree of autonomy from the central state apparatus regardless of which political parties enjoy a parliamentary majority. The conservative anti-statist origins of the Strasbourg court point to the shortsightedness of free-market and social conservatives who currently favor exiting the European Convention. Not only does the European Convention reflect conservative values<sup>10, 11</sup> It reflects their interests as well. If any state party to the European Convention were to withdraw from the jurisdiction of the European Court of Human Rights, it would deprive today's conservatives of a potential shield against future parliamentary majorities that might one day enact measures that postwar conservatives designed the European Convention to curtail: the confiscation of property, extension of emergency powers into peacetime economic affairs, and imposition of a state monopoly on education.

A weakening of the European human rights system would render countless individuals, families, civil society groups, local communities, minorities, and political oppositions across Europe more susceptible to discrimination and abuse by the state. The day such an eventuality transpired would be a sad one for those who believe in the principles that Churchill and his fellow conservatives fought so mightily to enthrone in international law.

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- <sup>1</sup>. On the delineation of European civilizational frontiers, see Brett Bowden, *The Empire of Civilization: The Evolution of an Imperial Idea* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); Bruce Mazlish, *Civilization and Its Contents* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004); Bo Stråth, ed., *Europe and the Other and Europe as the Other* (Brussels: Peter Lang, 2010); Michael Wintle, ed., *Imagining Europe: Europe and European Civilisation as Seen from Its Margins and by the Rest of the World, in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Brussels: Peter Lang, 2008); Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994).
  - <sup>2</sup>. The most comprehensive coverage of European political history in the years immediately following the Second World War is found in Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945* (New York: Penguin Press, 2005). On Britain and France, in particular, see Peter Hennessy, *Never Again: Britain, 1945–1951* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993); Jean-Pierre Rioux, *The Fourth Republic, 1944–1958* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1987).
  - <sup>3</sup>. On the history of the postwar European unity movements, see Walter Lipgens and Wilfried Loth, eds., *Documents on the History of European Integration*, Vol. 3: *The Struggle for European Union by Political Parties and Pressure Groups in Western European Countries, 1945–1950* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1988); Lipgens and Loth, eds., *Documents on the History of European Integration*, Vol. 4: *Transnational Organizations of Political Parties and Pressure Groups in the Struggle for European Union, 1945–1950* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1991); Lipgens, *A History of European Integration*, Vol. 1: *1945–1947: The Formation of the European Unity Movements* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1982); Peter M. R. Stirk and David Willis, eds., *Shaping Postwar Europe: European Unity and Disunity, 1945–1957* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991).
  - <sup>4</sup>. On the place of Churchill's Europeanism in the broader history of British involvement in the European project, see Hugo Young, *This Blessed Plot: Britain and Europe from Churchill to Blair* (London: Palgrave, 1998). On postwar British attitudes toward European economic integration, see N. J. Crowson, *The Conservative Party and European Integration Since 1945* (London: Routledge, 2007); Oliver Daddow, *Britain and Europe Since 1945: Historiographical Perspectives on Integration* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2004); Wolfram Kaiser, *Using Europe, Abusing the Europeans: Britain and European Integration, 1945–63* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave, 1999).
  - <sup>5</sup>. Charles Armstrong, *Romantic Organicism: From Idealist Origins to Ambivalent Afterlife* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003).
  - <sup>6</sup>. Rodney W. Kilcup, *Journal of Modern History* 49, no. 3 (September 1977): 395–99.
  - <sup>7</sup> Max Weber, "Science as a Vocation," in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 155.
  - <sup>8</sup>. An exception is Ed Bates, *The Evolution of the European Convention on Human Rights: From Its Inception to the Creation of a Permanent Court of Human Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). On present-day controversies surrounding the implementation of European Convention law in Britain and other Council of Europe member states, see Spyridon Flogaitis, Tom Zwart, and Julie Fraser, *The European Court of Human Rights and Its Discontents:*

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*Turning Criticism into Strength* (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 2013). On the recent political history of the European Court of Human Rights, more generally, see James A. Sweeney, *The European Court of Human Rights in the Post-Cold War Era: Universality in Transition* (London: Routledge, 2013); Antoine Buyse and Michael Hamilton, eds., *Transitional Jurisprudence and the European Convention on Human Rights* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Jonas Christoffersen and Madsen, eds., *The European Court of Human Rights Between Law and Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>9</sup> On the multivalence of democracy in twentieth-century Europe, see Udi Greenberg, *The Weimar Century: German Émigrés and the Ideological Foundations of the Cold War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014); Jan-Werner Müller, *Contesting Democracy: Political Ideas in Twentieth-Century Europe* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011).

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<sup>11</sup> Norman and Osborne, *Churchill's Legacy*.