How the Anglosphere Eradicated Racism

In a definitive book, a distinguished historian demolishes the academic consensus.

By Bruce Bawer

Now 88 years old, John M. Ellis studied German at London University, has taught at a series of universities in Britain, Canada, and the United States, and has written several books that are critical of the corruption of the humanities by ideology. His newest book, *A Short History of Relations between Peoples: How the World Began to Move beyond Tribalism*, is a fascinating and utterly timely piece of work. Why timely? Because we are living in an era when millions of people in the Anglosphere have been taught that the history of their countries is something to be ashamed of, marred by centuries of racism and white supremacy, and that we therefore should not only look with disdain upon our forebears but should applaud when statues of men and women once considered to be heroes of our civilization are torn down.

It’s all a lie, and Ellis challenges it brilliantly. Rather than judge our most prominent and accomplished ancestors by the moral standards of our own day, he argues, we should recognize that they themselves contributed, generation by generation, to the development of those very standards. Ellis sums up those standards with the Latin term *gens una sumus,* meaning, as he puts it, “that we human beings are all of one family.” Today this assertion is considered self-evident. But five centuries ago it wasn’t. On the contrary, up until around the year 1500, people living in different parts of the world did not look upon foreigners with a sense of common humanity. Instead, they were possessed – every last one of them – of a strong sense of tribalism.

And how could it be otherwise? Virtually none of them had ever traveled beyond their own realms, or even, in most cases, their own local communities. In what Ellis refers to as the “known world” – Europe, Asia, and northern Africa – the fastest means of getting from one place to another was by horse; in the “unknown world” – the Americas, Australia, and so on – the fastest way was by foot. (Native Americans didn’t

encounter horses until the Europeans brought them.) Steamships didn't come along until the early 1800s, and motor vehicles in the late 1800s. Gutenberg invented the printing press in 1455, but for centuries after that books were far too expensive for most people to afford, and in any event the majority of people were illiterate. Unable to travel long distances, then, and lacking anything like newspapers, TV, and the Internet, the people of 1500 knew virtually nothing about other societies and cultures. In fact the only time when they had close encounters with foreigners was in times of war – which was an almost constant occurrence, and which meant conquest, destruction, rape, and even extermination – and so it was only natural to look upon those foreigners with both fear and hatred.

It was in around 1500 that all this began to change. There were three major factors. First, the Age of Discovery began. It would eventually lead to the formation of the British, French, Belgian, Dutch, Spanish, and Portuguese empires. Brits have now been told to apologize for their empire, as if it were some historical anomaly. In fact, as Ellis points out, there have been hundreds of empires over the course of history. Until a century or so ago, the most natural thing for a powerful country to do was to expand the reach of its power by forming an empire. To be sure, the British empire *was* anomalous: for one thing, unlike, say, the Russian or Aztec empires, which were created by expanding into neighboring regions, it established contact among far-flung people with very different values and worldviews – and at very disparate stages of development. Before the Europeans arrived, for example, the people of the Americas, Australia, and sub-Saharan Africa didn't even have the wheel. At first, to be sure, the tribalist mentality persisted. Colonized people distrusted their European colonizers, and the colonizers looked down on their new subjects. But over time attitudes modified on both sides. One factor was the influence of Christian missionaries, who recognized that even savage

cannibals were children of God who could learn to be more civilized and humane.

The second factor that helped transform universal tribalism into an expanding sense of *gens una sumus* was Gutenberg's aforementioned invention of the printing press. Within fifty years, the entire corpus of ancient Greek and Roman writings had made it into print. The Bible was translated into modern languages – a development made possible by the third factor, the Protestant Reformation, as a result of which Europe's cultural center shifted northward. In Britain, beginning in the mid 17th century, pamphlets, and later newspapers and magazines, began to be published, enabling a vibrant exchange of ideas – including ideas about the rights of man, such as freedom of the press, which was powerfully defended in Milton's extraordinarily influential 1644 *Areopagitica.* The portrait in Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1714), one of the earliest novels, of a friendship between a white and black castaway is now condemned in academia because of the subordination of the black man to the white man, but at the time of its publication the book put into the heads of readers a mind-blowing, unprecedented image of people from two vastly different cultures being able to look upon each other as brothers.

Which brings us to the topic of slavery, which had been a universal practice since the dawn of man. Not until the 18th century did the morality of this institution begin to be seriously questioned – and it was in Britain that this questioning first took place. At least in certain English-speaking areas, the rejection of slavery happened with remarkable rapidity: by 1804 slavery was outlawed in all of the northern United States, and in 1807 it was banned throughout the British Empire. "The British," writes Ellis, "didn't at long last stumble into correct values, as their modern detractors want us to believe: *they created them!* And, having done so, they eventually gave them to the rest of the

world, though not without considerable resistance from people beyond the Anglosphere." Indeed, when the British Navy effectively closed down the sale of slaves – by Africans, of course – on the west coast of that continent, the African slavers switched to the east coast, selling slaves instead to Arabs (many of whom, incidentally, continue to practice slavery to this day, a fact that Western academics prefer not to dwell upon).

As with slavery, no one had ever felt a need to justify empire – it was just a fact of life. But the invention of printing and the increase in literacy led to intensified debates on the topic. Britain owned a large portion of the planet. What gave it the right to do so? This is how the concept of "white man's burden" developed. Nowadays, of course, this concept is viewed with scorn in academia. But as Ellis maintains, "it changed the rationale for empires, and in a way that would soon mean an end to those empires." The British Empire is now painted as brutal and oppressive, but mountains of historical evidence suggest otherwise. Many of the Brits' colonial subjects had lived under other alien regimes, and found the Brits gentler and kinder. Privileged Indians sent their sons to English-language schools and British universities. Colonials readily fought for Britain in the world wars. And even after the Empire was dissolved, many newly independent countries chose to keep the British monarch as their head of state, and over fifty of those countries chose to retain their special ties to Britain by joining the Commonwealth.

Ellis cites Martin Seymour Lipset's observation that Third World countries that had been British colonies stood a better chance of developing real democracies. Yet whereas British rule had maintained the peace, independence led, in countries like Nigeria, Somalia, and Rwanda, to tribal wars. The point being that whereas European (and especially British) imperialism had gone a long way toward replacing tribalism with a sense of shared humanity, the withdrawal of the Brits

(and other Europeans) from some former colonies led them to revert to a tribalist mentality. In any event, the bottom line here is that "the most effective anti-imperialists in world history were the later British imperialists. They dismantled the imperialism that had been so prominent a part of human life for thousands of years." Of all the empires in world history, "[o]nly the British Empire dissolved itself, and bequeathed to the world the conviction that empires cannot be justified."

The British Empire, then, was a massive impetus in the spread of the idea of *gens una sumus* – at least in the sizable parts of the earth's surface that was, or had been, ruled from London. The expansion of the idea beyond these domains took place as a result of the technological revolution that began in Britain and America around 1800 and that over the next two centuries created "a universal civilization, a way of life whose main elements are now common to most people in the world," amounting to "the most complete transformation of human life" ever. Racism became anathema. And the notion that racism was anathema, note well, did not originate in Asia or Africa; it originated in the Anglosphere, and was diffused around the world by an Industrial Revolution that was not a single isolated event but "a cascading series of inventions, in which one innovation led to the next, and then the next again. In short, what had really happened was not some particular inventions, but the beginning of a habit of invention" that continues to this day.

Everything in Ellis's book makes total sense. And every bit of it utterly contradicts the academic consensus about such subjects as imperialism, white supremacy, and racism. Far from being victims of white supremacy, black people in sub-Saharan Africa owe to the West, particularly the Anglosphere, their access to modern technology, medicine, and other benefits that have given them longer and better lives. When Westerners wear, say, Asian-looking clothes or wear their hair like African

women, they're accused of "cultural appropriation" – but if *that's* cultural appropriation, what do you call it when non-Westerners use electrical lights, drive a car, or take an airplane? As for racism, even as the West was developing more modern racial attitudes, there were no anti-racist movements underway in Asia or Africa.

Americans are taught to feel guilt about the supposed robbery of Native American land by white settlers, but in fact that land had traded hands frequently over the previous centuries as one Native American tribe conquered, or even exterminated, another; the Europeans were simply one more tribe who'd brought along superior weapons. Also, thanks to the European colonizers, the descendants of those Native Americans "live infinitely better" than before. Edward Said, a hero of academics everywhere, condemned Europeans of earlier generations for looking down on Arabs and other Eastern cultures. But nobody ever asks: what did the members of those other cultures think of the Europeans? In those days, *every* culture looked down on other cultures. And it was Westerners – especially members of the Anglosphere – who began the process that put an end to all that. In this splendid book, John M. Ellis has provided an invaluable, desperately necessary, and absolutely definitive corrective to the poisonous academic ideology that tells us otherwise.

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