

The Idea of Independence

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Among the first truths that we must never overlook, and must always keep before our minds, is that the violent crises that periodically afflict humanity always bring about a change in the set of values people have grown accustomed to. The meanings of certain ideas may change profoundly, even while the words used to express them remain the same. This naturally leads to confusion and disorder if we fail to notice this essential fact.

The idea of independence is one such concept whose value has been transformed by the great crises that have struck humanity since the beginning of this century. There is no doubt that the word “independence” today conveys a meaning very different from the one it held before the First World War.

At that time, “independence” signified complete freedom—or something very near to it—for any nation in determining its own affairs, both internal and external, across every branch of policy. Great Britain, for example, once enjoyed absolute freedom in managing all its concerns: those affecting its life within the British Isles, its relations with the parts of its empire, and its dealings with foreign nations—whether strong or weak.

But the First World War compelled Great Britain to cooperate with its allies and to align its foreign policy with theirs—and even to harmonize its domestic policies with the demands of the war effort. This necessarily limited its independence and curtailed its freedom to act as it pleased. Britain, in theory, could have pursued a foreign policy contrary to that of France, for instance. But to have done so would have endangered the alliance and jeopardized the victory sought by all. Likewise, it could have organized its economy in defiance of its allies’ economic systems, but this too would have weakened the war effort, ruined cooperation, and exposed all to defeat.

Thus Britain, like its allies, was obliged to coordinate its efforts, to direct its policies toward a single end: multiplying friends and employing every available means to win the war. And to speak of coordination and cooperation is to acknowledge a voluntary renunciation of a portion of independence—however small or great. But this renunciation was *chosen*, not imposed. Britain accepted it freely, to secure victory; it could have refused, even at the risk of defeat, or could have abstained from the war altogether. Having entered it by free will, it bore the consequences by free will as well. It surrendered part of its independence not to any other power, but to circumstance itself—to the universal necessities that bind all mankind.

When the war ended, the victorious nations regained much of the independence they had surrendered, but not all. They continued to sacrifice part of it in the interest of organizing peace, just as they had done to win the war. Cooperation remained essential—to draft peace treaties, for instance. Each victorious power had its own ideas about how to deal with the defeated nations, but they were forced to compromise, to give up certain views so that collective effort would not be wasted and so that one victor would not become the enemy of another.

They also yielded some economic independence, for no country can ever be entirely self-sufficient—least of all in the aftermath of a devastating war. And they ceded some

sovereignty again by establishing the League of Nations, whose covenant required commitments inconsistent with absolute sovereignty.

The life of Europe—and indeed of the whole world—after the First World War became a constant struggle between two impulses: the desire to recover full, untrammelled independence, and the recognition that the common good required a partial surrender of it. The United States, however, withdrew from this struggle. It rejected what its own President Wilson had proposed, reclaimed its complete freedom, and refused to join the League of Nations, though it had been its chief architect.

The other victorious states persisted in that tension—striving to restore their independence while using the League and its covenant as instruments toward that end. The inevitable clash between private and collective interests produced all the consequences we know: nations withdrawing from the League, and finally, the outbreak of the Second World War itself—born from the same violent conflict between selfishness, which drove nations to recover full independence, and altruism, which urged them to surrender part of it for the sake of peace and the greater good of humanity. Self-interest triumphed; peace collapsed, the League collapsed, and war returned. Once again, the great powers had to relinquish much of their independence to coordinate their efforts and win.

When the Second World War ended, the victors resumed the same old contest: between recovering full independence and retaining a measure of collective restraint to build peace on firm foundations.

Those who now gather in Moscow may appear to be discussing technical questions, but in truth they are circling around a single, central issue: independence. Shall each victor reclaim it in full, governing policy, power, and influence as it pleases? Or shall they renounce part of it to coordinate their efforts in peace, as they did in war?

This is the real question behind the meetings in Moscow, as it was behind the meetings in London, Casablanca, Cairo, Tehran, the Crimea, and Potsdam.

And how curious is the sight the world presents today—two scenes, both striking in their own way. One, a small but momentous meeting in Moscow, brutally pragmatic, stripped of ideals and moral aspiration, where nations discuss only their material interests: Will the Soviet Union be given free rein in Eastern and Southern Europe? Will Great Britain in the West? What is to be done with Iran and Turkey? How much freedom will the United States have in the Far East? How is power to be balanced in the Near and Middle East? What of atomic energy and its control? These are grim questions indeed, with little to satisfy the conscience or the human yearning for moral progress.

The other scene is the great gathering being prepared in London—the meeting of the United Nations. It is an *idealistic* assembly, where nothing is to be heard but talk of peace, justice, liberty, equality, truth, and fairness. Thus the world looks on: at Moscow, where interests meet in secret to settle their affairs unseen; and at London, where ideals convene openly to charm the hearts of humankind.

There is in this contrast some evidence of moral progress. Goodness has no need to hide—it seeks the light, as it did at San Francisco and now in London. Evil hides, seeking to conceal itself. It tried to appear openly in London, when the five foreign ministers met; the world

rejected it, recoiled from its sight, and it retreated again into the depths of the Kremlin, searching for some ornament with which to disguise itself.

I am not here employing metaphor or embellishment, but describing reality as it is. The United Nations assemblies—at San Francisco, in London—are open attempts, whether fruitful or not, to achieve peace and cooperation among nations. The secret conferences in Moscow are for dividing spoils, distributing influence, and shaping power behind the scenes—all of which will later determine how the victors behave in the public forum. And at the heart of it all lies the same question: independence. Shall the victors recover it in full, becoming rivals once again? Or shall they continue coordinating, cooperating, and surrendering a portion of it during peace, just as they did during war—so that they may consume the weaker nations quietly, without battle or struggle?

As for independence in relation to the weak nations—the vanquished or the powerless—it is an even sadder affair. I do not speak here of the “liberated” nations, whose story is a tragic one. These peoples sacrificed all their independence for victory, with the promise that it would be restored to them in full. Now it is being returned drop by drop, and only on condition that they submit to the authority of the victors and shape their freedom according to others’ wishes, not their own. If they refuse, they are threatened with hunger, cold, misery, and deprivation.

For the weaker nations, “independence” has become a kind of joke. Their representatives sit among the United Nations, where they may say what they please and appear the equals of the great powers. But in reality, they must obey one victor or another according to which sphere of influence they fall under; or all of them, when the victors agree. And when the victors disagree, they must align themselves with whichever power dominates their region.

Thus there now exist nations that are “independent” in a new sense—one unknown in modern times, though familiar in ancient Rome. It is the independence of the weak in alliance with the strong: the powerful holds the substance, the weak the appearance. In antiquity, there were Eastern states that appeared fully sovereign, yet were allies of Rome—where “alliance” meant what “protectorate” came to mean in our own era.

This old-new form of independence began to spread in the East after the First World War, and humanity seems to have grown fond of it, for it is now spreading in Europe as well. Greece, for example, is independent—but the British decide her internal affairs. When they could not, their cannons and tanks “persuaded” her last year; their money now sustains her economy—or destroys it, if she refuses to obey. Romania and Bulgaria are independent too, but only under the shadow of Russia; otherwise, their future is in peril.

The word “independence,” then, has become so flexible that it can be stretched to mean almost anything—or contracted to mean nothing at all. It may be extended to cover the so-called independence of the Near Eastern states, of the Balkans, of Iran, of Tunisia and Morocco, all of which display certain outward forms of freedom. But it may also be contracted until one could say that even Great Britain herself is not truly independent: she needs the United States for money, needs various regions of the world for food, and needs markets to sell her goods; she must win the consent of her allies before extending her influence anywhere.

The word *independence* has thus lost its old value. And so, for nations that wish to be free—free to manage their own affairs as they themselves wish, guided by their own interests rather than by others’—it is time to find another word, one less pliable than this. I do not yet know what that word might be. Perhaps the Arabic Language Academy of Fu’ād I will find it for us—whether new or old.

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