

*How Acton's view on "the realization of liberty"
apply to his time and ours.*

Lord Acton: The Historian as Thinker

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REPORTING A CONVERSATION he once had with Lord Acton, James Bryce gave the following description: "He spoke...as if from some mountain summit high in air, he saw beneath him the far winding path of human progress from dim Cimmerian shores of prehistoric shadow into the fuller yet broken and fitful light of modern time." The eloquence was great; the penetration even greater. "It was as if the whole landscape of history had been suddenly lit up by a burst of sunlight." That now, after the lapse of nearly a century, Acton does not appear any less Olympian is testimony to his stature as historian and thinker.

To the work which was to make him famous Acton brought the gift of an extraordinarily cosmopolitan background. He was descended on the one side from an old Catholic family of English country squires. On the other he came from the ancient German family of Dahlbergs, whose members had been knights of the Holy Roman Empire. A branch of the English family had settled in France and later in Italy. His grandfather, John Francis Acton, so raised himself in the esteem of the Queen of Naples that he became

prime minister of that kingdom, and it was in Naples that Acton was born, in 1834. His antecedents and the course of his later life combined to make him, it has been said, an expression "of German learning, of French thought, and of British and American experience."

After an early period of schooling in France, he was sent to England, to the Catholic school at Oscott, so that he might prepare for Cambridge. But Acton was not destined to become a part of Cambridge until more than forty years later, when he was made professor of modern history at that university. Legally he could have been admitted, but anti-Catholic feeling was still high, and he was denied entrance by three of its colleges.

This failure now looks providential, since it led to a favorable turning point in his life. He decided to continue his education in Germany, and by 1850 he was in Munich, settled in the household of Dr. Johann Ignaz von Dollinger, a priest and a famous theologian and church historian of the University of Munich. Dollinger proved the person to excite his idealism and his intellectual passion. What fired the imagination of Acton, who had come

from an environment slack in comparison with this, was the enormous industry and learning of his new teacher, and the abstemious habits of life which seemed to mark these as a kind of dedication. But crowning even this was the fact that Döllinger was a leader in the Catholic Renaissance in Germany, which naturally made an immediate appeal to him because of his heritage, his own experiences, and a love of the church which never deserted him through many trials and disillusionments. Here in Munich he began the immense reading which was to make him, in the opinion of many, the most learned man of his time. One fact may convey an idea of his voracious appetite for print. During his first few weeks in Munich, he later told some one (and we may note that at this time he was sixteen years of age), he read through the fifty-five volumes of the *Biographie Universelle*.

The thing of greatest value and consequence which he learned from Döllinger was a concept of history and of what it means to be historically minded. Döllinger, along with other German scholars of his group, had become convinced that the meaning of Catholic Christianity was not to be found merely in the study of dogma and doctrine but also in the study of historical change and development. Acton was in close association with this master for the next eight years, although time was taken out for travels, which included one journey to the United States and another to Russia. Then in 1858 he returned to England, filled with determination to stir up English Catholicism.

The means he chose toward this end was magazine journalism. He was connected, either as editor or regular contributor, with four journals in succession, *The Rambler*, *The Home and Foreign Review*, *The Chronicle*, and *The North British Review*. In the course of his work for these he

wrote articles on a wide variety of historical, political, and ecclesiastical subjects, which displayed in a man still in his twenties an extraordinary sense of historical fact and a feeling for the inner impulse of movements which other historians could but treat from a distance.

Among the things which made him distinctive as an historical writer and which continue to mark him as a prophet in his own time none was more compelling than the idea of freedom. "When Acton speaks of liberty, there is always a ring in his voice," G.P. Gooch was later to write. This was the dominant focus of his thinking, an intellectual and a moral preoccupation which never ceased to influence his way of looking at events. In his view the achievement of liberty was the thread of progress to be discerned in human history. That progress was not steady; it was not without dark nights of absolutism and oppression; yet it was there, and it justified the sacrifices that compose so much of the human story. Fairly early in his career Acton projected the writing of a "History of Freedom," a work for which he above all men seemed equipped by training and by temperament to attempt. But for one reason and another—partly because of the immensity of the task and partly because of his own conscientiousness about the method of execution—the book was never produced. Even so, we can be grateful that two essays, "The History of Freedom in Antiquity" and "The History of Freedom in Christianity," were completed, for these allow us to see how he was conceiving a problem at once so universal and so intricate as the realization of liberty.

Acton's concept of liberty grew originally out of his reflections upon religion and the state. It seems characteristic that the essay on "The History of Freedom in Antiquity" should begin with this sentence: "Liberty, next to religion, has been

the motive of good deeds and the common pretext for crime, from the sowing of the seed at Athens two thousand four hundred and sixty years ago until the splendid harvest was gathered by men of our own age." Then he continued by way of further prologue: "It is the delicate fruit of a mature civilization. . . . In every age its progress has been beset by natural enemies, by ignorance and superstition, by the lust of conquest and the love of ease, by the strong man's craving for power, and the poor man's craving for food. At all times sincere friends of freedom have been rare, and its triumphs have been due to minorities that have prevailed by associating themselves with auxiliaries whose objects often differed from their own. . . ." Then he went on to note that liberty is the essential condition and guardian of religion. The greatest source of danger to liberty is the state, which sometimes injures it by doing too little and at other times by doing too much.

The idea of liberty, Acton held, was born among the Israelites, whose government was a federation founded upon voluntary consent. The Hebrew prophets constantly testified that the laws, which were divine, were paramount over sinful rulers. In doing this they set up the distinction between the nation and the higher law which has been the seedbed of freedom down to our own time.

In Greece the idea of liberty was born with the reforms of Solon. Solon gave the poorer classes a voice in the election of magistrates. This change, slight though it may seem to us, contained a principle that transformed the basis of the Greek state. "It introduced the idea that a man ought to have a voice in selecting those to whose rectitude and wisdom he is compelled to trust his fortune, his family, and his life." The revolution thus inaugurated by Solon was completed by Pericles, whose reforms,

though right in essence, required a higher type of leadership than appeared after his decease.

The Romans in securing their freedom faced the same problems and went through the same experiences as the Greeks. There the struggle was between the aristocrats, who had wrested power from the kings and were determined to keep it, and the plebs, who demanded a share in it. But whereas the Greeks were able to reach their solution in a short while, the Romans required two centuries. The achievement itself, however, was much longer lasting. But in Acton's view the ancient free states had one radical defect: they were both state and church in one. Religion, morality, and politics were lumped together. The state did much for the citizen but little or nothing for the man. "What the slave was in the hands of his master," he wrote, "the citizen was in the hands of the community." It was inevitable that, lacking one vital element, the ancient governments should have collapsed into despotism. That vital element was introduced by Christianity. This was belief in the sacredness of the person and thus in a center of power distinct from the state. What the pagan philosophers in all their brilliance had not been able to do, that is, set effective barriers to the power of the state, was done in response to that injunction: "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and unto God the thing that are God's." This instituted a basis of freedom upon which the world since that time has been able to build. It was to the working out of this principle that Acton turned in his second essay, "The History of Freedom in Christianity."

When the Roman Empire was subverted by Teutonic barbarians, civilization lapsed for a period of five hundred years. Yet even this catastrophe brought with it certain seeds of freedom which were destined

to grow. The barbarian invaders had lived under a tradition of freedom. Kings they had had at intervals, but sometimes these were elected and sometimes they were deposed. Their chief office was to lead the people in war. The supremacy of the popular will was in general acknowledged. These primitive peoples were rather rapidly converted to Christianity, and eventually there grew up in Europe side by side a political hierarchy and an ecclesiastical hierarchy. Out of the long struggle between the two arose the modern concept of civil liberty. This was not the object of either, as we know—and here one may recur to Acton's observation that liberty is sometimes won by minorities working with auxiliaries which have other objects in view. The historical fact was that each side called the nation to its aid in the name of liberty. "If the Church had continued to buttress the thrones of the kings whom it had anointed, or if the struggle had terminated speedily in an undivided victory, all Europe would have sunk down under a Byzantine or a Muscovite despotism." The weight of the church, especially that of the papacy, was thrown into the struggle against the indefeasibility of the right of kings. The growth of national states especially at the time of the Reformation placed liberty in jeopardy again by greatly increasing the scope of what the state thought it should do. And the trend in this direction was not arrested, in terms of political theory, until the American Revolution.

Acton was formulating these thoughts at a time when nationalism was proving the dominant force in Europe. The Italian risorgimento and the wars of unification which occurred at short intervals apart in Switzerland, in Italy, and in Germany were to show the force of the trend. An historical movement so widespread and so full of promise and of danger could hardly

escape the attention of a philosophic historian—especially of Acton, always alert to detect those developments which bore favorably or unfavorably upon his cherished ideal of freedom. Here was a case in point, for nationalist movements usually arose under the banner of freedom and independence, but whether they actually resulted in the gaining of these or in their subversion was an arguable question. As early as 1862 Acton published in *The Home and Foreign Review* a sixty-page essay on the topic of nationality. Although this was a product of his early period, it represents the main stream of his political thinking, and it has been perhaps the most widely studied of all his writings. Of special interest is the fact that it brings together his philosophy of freedom and his view of the then rampant nationalisms of Europe.

The essay opens with some general observations on revolution and reform. Practical evils often give rise to theoretical systems which are designed to cure them. These systems frequently contain large errors because they do not conceive the problem in the right way or do not provide relief of the right kind or in the right measure. Nevertheless, they may contribute something, because they point out the direction in which reform needs to move. And hence, Acton declared, "false principles which correspond with the bad as well as with the just aspirations of mankind are a normal and necessary element in the life of nations." The modern period has witnessed the appearance of three of these in particular: equality, communism, and nationality.

The French Revolution constitutes a dividing line in history, before which the modern concept of nationality did not exist. "In the old European system, the rights of nationalities were neither recognized by governments nor asserted by the

people." Frontiers were determined by the interests of ruling families. Absolutists cared only for the state and liberals only for the individual. The idea of nationality in Europe was awakened by the partition of Poland.

This event left, for the first time, a nation desiring to be united as a state—a soul wandering in search of a body, as Acton put it. The absolutist governments which had divided up Poland—Russia, Prussia, and Austria—were to encounter two hostile forces, the English spirit of liberty and the doctrines of the French Revolution. These two forces supported the nascent idea of nationality, but they did so along different paths. When the absolutist government of France was overthrown, the people needed a new principle of unity. Without this, the theory of the popular will could have broken the country into as many republics as there were communes. At this point the theory of the sovereignty of the people was used to create an idea of nationality independent of the course of history. France became a Republic One and Indivisible. This signified that no part could speak for the whole. The central power simply obeyed the whole. There was a power supreme over the state, distinct from and independent of its members. Hence there developed a concept of nationality free from all influence of history.

This was in contradiction to another concept of nationality, which maintained that certain natural and historical forces ought to determine the character and the form of the state. When the new nation of France embarked on a program of conquest, it was opposed by this second concept. Napoleon, by attacking "natural" nationality in Russia, by engendering it in Italy, and by governing in spite of it in Germany and Spain, called into being forces which were to make nationalism po-

tent throughout the nineteenth century. Those ideas and institutions which had suffered most at his hands—religion, national independence, and political liberty—all contributed to movements directed against the French Revolution. The ensuing uprisings were essentially popular in nature because the people opposed French supremacy as hostile to their freedom.

But the spirit of nationality which had emerged received a hard blow at the Congress of Vienna. The liberals of the day were interested only in liberalism in the form of French institutions, and the powers which formed the Holy Alliance were interested only in restoring absolutism. "The governments of the Holy Alliance," he wrote, "devoted themselves to suppress with equal care the revolutionary spirit by which they had been threatened and the national spirit by which they had been restored."

The revolution of 1848, though unsuccessful, promoted the idea of nationality in two ways. Austrian power was restored in Italy in a more centralized and energetic form, and this produced a feeling among the people that there was no hope of relief except through national freedom. The second way was through the restoration of the democratic principle in France. This brought in again the notion of the sovereignty of the people, and to it the idea of unity and nationality seemed essential. A nation imbued with this notion cannot allow a part of itself to be owned by another state nor can it allow itself to be divided up. "The theory of nationality, therefore, proceeds from two principles which divide the political world—from legitimacy, which ignores its claims, and from the revolution, which assures them; and for the same reason it is the chief weapon of the last against the first."

At this point a distinction emerges explicitly which has been implicit from the

beginning. Acton is here differentiating between the *theory* of nationality and the *right* of nationality. The two views correspond to the French and the English systems. The first sees the state as resting upon a unity which is in reality fictitious and which "crushes all natural rights and established liberties for the purpose of vindicating itself." It is capable of subverting governments, of oppressing minorities, of exercising what amounts to a foreign domination over lesser national elements within the state. The idea of the right of nationality, which is the English conception, recognizes that national minorities are entitled to certain liberties because, as a matter of empirical fact, they are united by language or race or geography, or culture or any combinations of these. It obeys the laws and results of history and tends toward diversity. It sees the fact of nationality as an essential but not the supreme element in determining the form of the state. This view makes possible a union of nations, and "the presence of different nations under the same sovereignty is similar in its effect to the independence of church and state."

The theory of nationality, as contrasted with the right of nationality, Acton regarded as a backward step in history. In explaining this point, he reintroduced the thought with which he started. Nationality tends to arise in opposition to something which should not have existed in the first place. It must be seen therefore as a corrective; and it must contribute to that which the theory itself condemns—the liberty of separate nationalities under one sovereign community. It is thus one of these "false ideas" or "extremes" which are able to accomplish what nothing else could accomplish. But it becomes arbitrary and subversive because it surrenders the individual will to the collective will and then makes the collective will subject to

conditions which are independent of it. What can be said for nationality is that it had a mission in the world and that in its period it worked successfully against the two forces which are the worst enemies of civil freedom, absolute monarchy and the revolution.

In a period when the peoples of Asia and Africa, of various levels of culture, are placing naïve hope in the power of nationalism to redeem them, these sober words should be full of warning, both for those who are tasting the heady wine of national independence for the first time and for those of the West who are, with seemingly equal naïveté, urging them on.

It is of special interest that Acton brought these considerations to bear upon the American crisis of 1861. He had made one visit to the United States, and he possessed a detailed knowledge of, and—what was hardly characteristic of the Englishmen of his time—a great respect for, American history. His ecumenical point of view enabled him to take the story of American sectional conflict and place it in the wider frame of French revolutionary nationalism and the ensuing movements toward unification. For Acton therefore the great debate over the nature of the American union and the Civil War was not a unique event, but part of that political spasm, if the term be permitted, which was then affecting Europe and erupting in military struggles. (Although he does not mention it, the European struggle most closely analogous with the American one in the ideologies involved and in the nature of the two alignments was the Swiss Civil War of 1847.)

Acton addressed himself to the problem in a long essay on "The Political Causes of the American Revolution," which appeared in *The Rambler* in May 1861. Although this antedates by a year the essay on nationality, it is evident that both proceeded

from the same course of thinking. By "the American Revolution" Acton meant the American Civil War, then on the verge of breaking out. His essay was a causal exposition of the forces which had made this a crisis of nationalism.

To appreciate the force of his reasoning, one should know that he had an almost unbounded admiration for the founders of the American government. He regularly spoke of them in superlatives. In political science, he declared, "there are at least six Americans on a level with the foremost Europeans." He knew in intimate detail the literature of the Constitutional Convention, which he regarded as having produced the most perfect form of democracy seen in the world. But it was admirable in a special sense which he stressed: it was "armed and vigilant less against aristocracy and monarchy than against its own weakness and excess." It was this thought that underlay his admiration for American federalism. "Whilst England was admired for the safeguards with which, in the course of many centuries, it had fortified liberty against the power of the crown, America appeared still more worthy of admiration, for the safeguards which, in the course of a single memorable year, it had set up against the power of its own sovereign people." Acton was thus clearly a constitutionalist, and he regarded the long sectional struggle which preceded the Civil War as a contest to decide whether the federal principle was going to be preserved.

He begins this essay also with a series of generalizations. It is the innate tendency of monarchy to become more free, but democracy has a similar tendency to become more arbitrary. The latter is true because power is already in the hands of those who seek to subvert and abolish the law. The real test of democracy, therefore, is whether it can remain law-abiding; that is, "whether it can adhere to the constitu-

tional limitations laid down at the beginning." "The strict principle of the sovereignty of the people," he observed, "must . . . lead to the destruction of the state that adopts it, unless it sacrifices itself by concession."

"The greatest of all modern republics has given the most complete example of the truth of this law. The dispute between absolute and limited power, between centralization and self-government, has been, like that between privilege and prerogative in England, the substance of the constitutional history of the United States. This is the argument which confers on the whole period that intervenes between the Constitution of 1787 and the election of Mr. Davis an almost epic unity." Following this comes a long series of quotations from speeches made at the Constitutional Convention. Madison, Gerry, Wilson, Hamilton, Sherman, and others are cited to show the apprehension that was felt of an unbridled democracy.

He then proceeded to trace the history of the United States through Jefferson's embargo and the Hartford Convention, through the disputes over the tariff and nullification and other issues of sectional controversy. His deepest admiration was reserved for the ideas which Calhoun introduced into this debate. The arguments of Calhoun in defense of the nullifying ordinance he pronounced "the very perfection of political truth" because they took into account "the realities of modern democracy" and "the securities of medieval freedom." He reproduced a long quotation from Calhoun's *Disquisition on Government*, describing it as "so profound and so extremely applicable to the politics of the present day that we regret we can give only a feeble notion of the argument." "Webster," he declared, "may have been the truest interpreter of the law; Calhoun was the real defender of the Union." This

judgment, which will sound very odd to some, must be understood with reference to Acton's view of a viable democracy. His approval of Calhoun centers really on one point: Calhoun had seen that the real essence of a constitution lies in its negative aspect, not in its positive one. It is more important for a constitution in a democracy to prohibit than to provide. The will of the majority would always be reaching out for more power, and unless this could be checked by some organic law, the end of liberty would come when the federal authority became the institute of the popular will instead of its barrier.

It has seemed strange to some that Acton, the great apostle of freedom, should have been a defender of Calhoun and Southern secession. But for him slavery was an unfortunate circumstance which did not touch the heart of the issue. What was being hammered out in the American quarrel was the ancient question of unrestricted power to rule. The American government, as he saw it at this time, was being destroyed by the "spurious democracy of the French Revolution," which was endeavoring to elevate simple majority rule to the status of divine right.

Running through all of these observations—the reflections on freedom, the account of nationality in modern European history, and the commentary on the course of democracy in America—is one consistent principle. It is the idea of political pluralism. Acton believed that the preservation of liberty depended on the maintenance of different centers of power, authority, and influence.* Of power Acton had a mortal distrust, and monolithic power was absolutist, whether it tried to sanctify itself by the name of church, mon-

*This is the real meaning of his otherwise puzzling reference to "the securities of medieval freedom." The medieval world was organized into various corporate bodies with sharply defined and recognized areas of liberties.

archy, or democracy. The remark of Acton's which has been most widely quoted has to do with the evil effects of power. In an exchange of letters with Mandell Creighton, another English historian, he said: "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely." Accordingly the contest for liberty was one long struggle against concentration of power. That is the ground for his insistence upon a free church in a free state. It explains his defense of the Southern states in invoking the principle of secession. The United States had originally been based as a nation upon federalism, which was, in Acton's own phrase, "the supreme political principle." This principle had been eroded away in the battle of contending interests and sections until the result was the threat of a centralized democracy operating by simple majority rule—the tyrannical principle of the French Revolution. It explains his defense of those traditions, institutions, classes, corporations, and nationalities which are barriers to uniformity and centralization. "Diversity," he noted, "preserves liberty by supplying the means of organization." It explains why he was often suspicious of those movements which appeared under the claim of "rights" and were ostensibly seeking the redress of wrongs. Nationality, which had been born of a wrong done to Poland and which was the major force in ending the domination of Europe by Napoleon, became itself an irrational and domineering force, disinclined to respect rights which had a different but a real basis. Socialism and liberalism were pointed in the same direction. Setting out as programs to "liberate" people, they discovered that they were more interested in ruling them. Though Acton thought of himself as a liberal, some of his most severe strictures are directed against what he considered to be perversions of the liberal creed. "Foreign liberalism," he wrote, "demands

not freedom but participation in power." And further: "No despotism is more complete than that of the modern liberals. . . . The liberal doctrine subjects the desire of freedom to the desire of power, and the more it demands a share of power, the more averse it is to exemptions from it."

Everything in Acton's thinking, therefore, tends to polarize around this conviction: absolute power is not to be trusted to any individual, institution, or form of government. The rights of minorities as centers of protest must be guaranteed. "It is bad to be oppressed by a minority, but it is worse to be oppressed by a majority." "Government by a majority is more likely to be a government of force. Government of one or a minority is not a government of force, but in spite of force, by virtue of some idea. The support makes up for the inferiority of brute strength." The ultimate principle of history is ethical, and this cannot be worked out in the absence of freedom, of which a pluralistic political organization is the only effective safeguard.

Acton's special quality as an historian arises from the depth of his insight and from his courage in making judgments. One might add that it also depends upon his recognition of a strain of tragedy in history. He was not, by the usual outward tokens, a great figure among historians. He never published a single outstanding work to make his name memorable. He was not a great narrator. Until his last few years he held no influential teaching post. He has not won and seems destined never to win a wide audience of readers as did Gibbon or Macaulay. But he has impressed posterity as having something profound to say in his own right upon the materials of history. In reading him, one encounters a reflective mind constantly casting flashes of illumination upon these materials, never deserting them long enough to go on speculative voyages, but

on the other hand probing into their meanings, philosophical and moral. It seems fitting therefore to ask finally what Acton thought about the uses of history itself.

One might begin the answer by saying that for Acton history was a lesson in pessimism—or, if that is putting it a bit too strongly, history was a solid rebuke to sanguine presumptions about the nature and the future of man. Out of this vein of feeling, he could write: "No historian thinks well of human nature." And he recorded another somber observation: "Neither paganism nor Christianity ever produced a profound political historian whose mind was not turned to gloom by contemplation of the affairs of men." Moreover, he thought there were things in history which must remain unforgivable—that is, inexcusable by an appeal to the nature of the times or to temperament or to circumstance. What then was the purpose of studying the painful and often sanguinary story?

The purpose of the study of history, according to Acton, is to heighten conscience. Reflection upon what man has done makes sharper in us that faculty by which we distinguish between good and evil. Let me suggest in this connection that the word "conscience" signifies in its root meaning something very much like recollection. To have conscience is to remember what we are and what we have been; it is a presence of knowledge to the mind which tells us what we ought and ought not do—not in the form of simple precepts, of course, but through an accumulated awareness of the past reminding us that some kinds of actions have produced good and others harm. Nothing was more repugnant to Acton's thinking than the belief that historical events are self-justifying. Even Edmund Burke, whom Acton in his early period described as "the teacher of mankind" in politics, he later became uneasy

with. Burke appealed too much to expediency. "Burke," he said, "loved to evade the arbitration of principle. He was prolific of arguments which were admirable but not decisive." Ranke also fell under his condemnation. "Ranke's dogma is impartiality," he wrote. "Ranke speaks of transactions and occurrences when it would be safe to speak of turpitude and crime." Thus history should arm conscience. The historian is not only the interpreter of the past; he is also in a sense the guardian of morality. It is his duty to trace all the currents of thought "which jointly weave the web of human history," to discern what strengths and weaknesses they possessed and to pronounce accordingly. Unless he

does this, ". . . history ceases to be a science, an arbiter of controversy, a guide of the Wanderer, the upholder of that moral standard which the powers of earth and religion itself tend constantly to depress. It serves where it ought to reign; and it serves the worst cause better than the purest. . . ." For Acton, *nothing could take the place of the sovereignty of the developed conscience*. It was this which enabled the historian to contribute something to that advancement which he believed humanity had made and possessed the power to go on making. "If the past has been an obstacle and a burden, knowledge of the past is the safest and surest emancipation."