

How the West can help in world's 'danger zones'

Prominent liberal veers toward traditional outlook

Book Review by Mark Wegierski

The decisive restraint on inhuman practices on the battlefield lies within the warrior himself, in his conception of what is honorable and dishonorable for a man to do with weapons.

This subtle and intricate series of essays constitutes a halfway-house between internationalist, liberal optimism, and the pronounced realism or pessimism of the conservative view of human nature and problems.

Michael Ignatieff is a renowned young scholar and writer. His earlier book, *Blood and Belonging* (reviewed in *The Social Contract*, vol. IV, no. 3, Spring 1994, pp. 223-225) looked at similar topics. Ignatieff tries to arrive at a useful framework for strategies of intervention by the West into the non-Western world, particularly those inflamed "zones of danger" (endemic warfare, famine, etc.). He makes many useful observations: that an intact authoritarian state is generally preferable to the complete breakdown of social order; that the traditional code of the warrior is perhaps the best hope of reining in indiscriminate terror; and that humanitarian interventions into the non-West must be well-thought-out to have any real impact. He also avers that some situations are virtually intractable, and low-level aid is perhaps then the only type which can meaningfully be offered.

Ignatieff also shares the conservative sense of foreboding as to where the current-day world is headed.

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He expresses trepidation about the unbelievable disassociation between, on the one hand, the "twenty-four-hour global trading economy" centered on a few large, viable cities, and much of the rest of the planet, which seems to be sliding into a twilight zone of irregular conflict and ecological catastrophe.

However, Ignatieff's embrace of human rights thinking, and of an abstract liberal individualism (which he is at least honest enough to admit is a very recent innovation) is made in a kind of vacuum as to what is actually going on in the West today. He seems to argue that the idea of equality in the court of law can be seen as the basis for current policies of hyper-equalitarian leveling and redistribution. This idea of equality before and under the law is, today, the conservative position. The fact is that a wide swath of legal and social thinking currently

argues precisely that those individuals and groups perceived to be "historically-disadvantaged" are indeed to be treated preferentially to others, in virtually all spheres of law and social relations. As Western civilization seems to be devolving into one vast affirmative-action project for such designated groups, the rights of the majority are trampled on, and classical liberal definitions of liberal democracy no longer adequately describe the Western state.

For all its subtlety, one of the main points of the book appears to be a critique of virtually all forms of nationalism. Ignatieff does not seem to see that, with all its focus on legalism, economics and technology, the West itself has become a denationalized, meaningless, and identity-less milieu for most European peoples.

One would be searching for a healing rootedness which would not be dogmatically left-liberal and equalitarian, and which, indeed, might have many aspects

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and the Modern
Conscience**

by Michael Ignatieff
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which would, in today's unusual context, be considered "exclusivist" and "authoritarian." It seems unlikely that the so-called "erotic" sense of community can exist without some forms of subordination, exclusion, and closure of options. Yet today, we in the West are practically morally terrorized to regard the needs of strangers above those of our own kith and kin.

The proposed "civic nation" of Ignatieff is a cold chimera lacking meaning — as Western civic institutions will almost invariably wither as an ever-larger number of highly dissimilar immigrants enter the Western host-countries. In such a case, zones of safety might surprisingly quickly become zones of danger — as a look at America's inner-cities clearly shows.

The irony is that Canada has virtually replicated, in less than three decades, all the acrimony, frictions, and problems associated with multi-ethnic societies, which in the U.S. could be seen as partially the result of the anguished legacy of centuries of slavery.

Insofar as the West can offer its own model of healing rootedness, a middle way between hatred of others and self-hatred, to the non-West, this kind of phenomenon could potentially be a salve for the non-Western traditional societies, who would be typically approaching it from the direction of lessening their own

particularist extremisms. Both West and non-West alike also have to learn how to cope with the all-pervasiveness of the U.S./big city-derived global pop-culture, i.e. how to constructively maintain (or restore) one's authentic identities before this flood of alluring junk.

As far as Ignatieff's hope for "useful forgetting" it may be remembered that a nation or people with no living, inspiring past has no future, something which, of course, the designated minorities are well aware of (as the push for Afrocentric and similar curricula shows), but which the European majorities of Western countries appear to have largely forgotten.

Despite these criticisms, Ignatieff's thought has clearly evolved much beyond conventional liberal internationalism — one of the defining themes of the new Canadian state which arose in the wake of the Pearson-Trudeau years (1963-1984). One sometimes gets the impression that Ignatieff need only have pressed his arguments a little further to arrive at a profoundly traditionalist view of human nature and its problems.

Another irony is that, with the dumbing down through pop-culture and dismal education today, fewer and fewer people will even be able to appreciate the subtleties of this highly thoughtful book. **TSC**