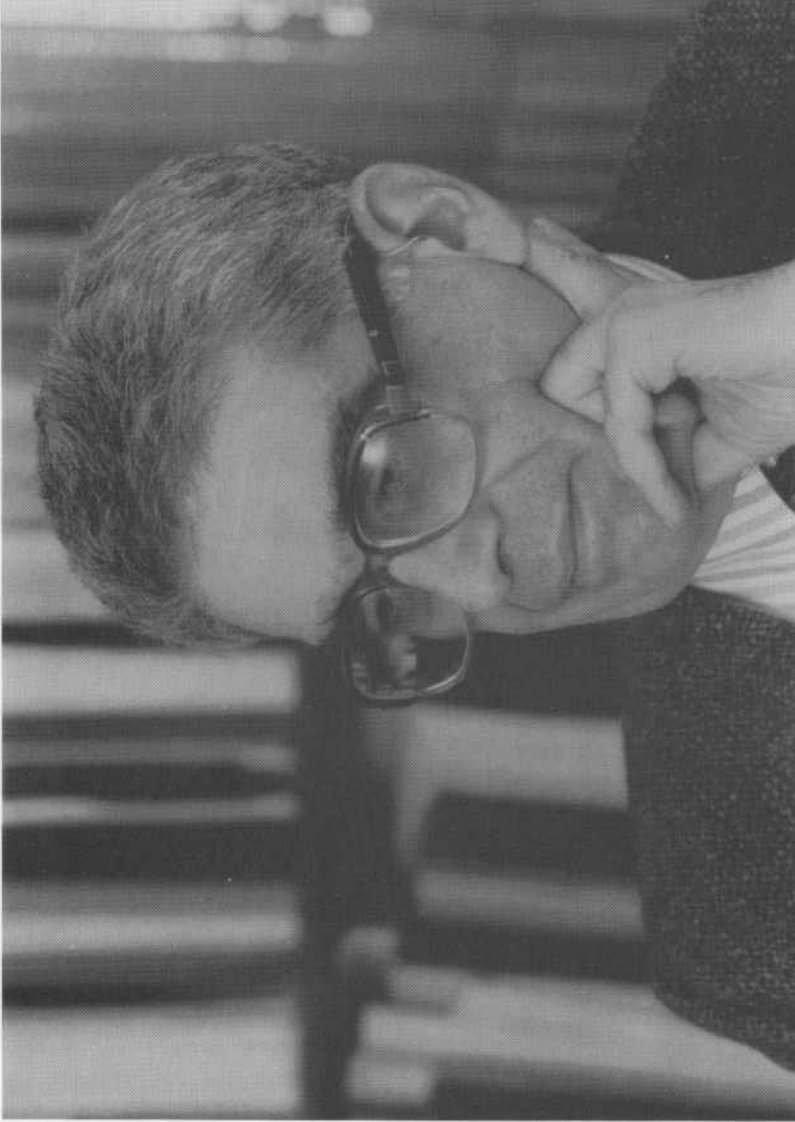


Note: I wish to thank Professor Jack Garstman, and Peter Berglund and Scott Harrison (children of Hugo Berglund), for allowing me to see their collections of letters from Theodor E. Levi; acknowledge gratefully the facilities afforded me by the members of Theoria, already mentioned, by Professor Charles P. Nathan-Adams, Wayne University, and Professor J. C. G. de Winter, University of Groningen.

**ELIE KEDOURIE***Hanoch Guthmann*

Elie Kedourie 1926–1992

I

THE CORPUS OF ELIE KEDOURIE'S WRITINGS is not only large, but remarkably varied. It encompasses detailed historical accounts of events in the modern Middle East, the nature of international relations since the French Revolution, the impact of economic change on poor societies in Asia and Africa, the logic of historical and philosophical enquiry, the relationship between ideas and action, the uses of philology, the ideology of nationalism, the character of British conservatism, and the place of religion in the modern world. This range, each aspect informed by a mastery of literature in many languages, would be sufficient to establish Kedourie as a scholar of rare quality. Kedourie, however, was not merely immensely learned, nor merely a polymath. The corpus has consistency and coherence. No close reading of his works could fail to reveal either the affinities between the individual contributions, or the extent to which, revisited, his first publication intimated almost all of the apparently disparate themes which he was to pursue for the rest of his life.

His first book, *England and the Middle East: The Destruction of the Ottoman Empire, 1914–21*, published in 1956, appears, at first encounter, to be simply an historian's close scrutiny of British policy towards the Ottoman empire during one particular period, and its apparently narrow compass appropriate to the doctoral thesis which it was intended to be. In the light of what was to follow, it is revealed as very much

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more than a conventional doctoral offering, and the stature and complexity of Kedourie's thought exposed him (then and later) to misunderstandings of what he was about. Ignorance of with what (and with whom) they were dealing may explain (but not condone) the decision of his Oxford examiners to reject the thesis; the folklore of LSE includes the story of one his undergraduate examiners (Kingsley Smellie) responding to a serious disagreement about the quality of one of his Finals papers with: 'you think that you have examined him. But *he* has examined *you*, and you have failed'.

The combination of coherence and variety in Kedourie's writings, and the nature of the academic community's response to him (particularly in his early academic years), cannot satisfactorily be understood without reference to the character of the British undergraduate education to which he was exposed. He went to the London School of Economics as an undergraduate, and most of the rest of his life was spent at the School. He graduated in the Special Subject of Government, but this Subject occupied, then, only the final year of three years of study for the B.Sc.Econ. For the first two years, all B.Sc.Econ. students were required to read History, Government and Economics. This stipulation was based on a clear view about the fundamentals of an education in the social sciences, and its catholicity was reinforced by the character of the Government Department's teaching within the School's overall arrangements.

Politics at LSE, when Kedourie first encountered it, was seen as a subject rather than a discipline. The subject was the constitutions of states, and it was examined through the disciplines of History and Philosophy. Most teachers in the Government Department taught both 'institutions' and 'theory', and students were required to take examinations in both disciplines. The teaching of Political Institutions had a considerable historical emphasis, and shared with Political Theory an emphasis on the importance of constitutional structure and legal forms. These Departmental characteristics had generated serious contributions to both history and political theory: both Harold Laski and Kingsley Smellie (the latter particularly impressed by Kedourie's undergraduate career) had published a great deal in both areas of political studies. It was thus assumed, in this sort of education, that specialisation by discipline was inappropriate.

There were, however, disciplines that were either ignored, or only indirectly introduced, or approached in a particular way in the LSE at that time. Sociology was a major Department of the School, available as

an option within Kedourie's B.Sc.Econ., but rendered marginal by the constitutional and legal emphases of Government Department teachers, and by the death, in 1951, of Laski, whose ambiguous Marxist leanings had formed the Department's main connection with sociology. The idea of *Social Science* was, in the School in general, increasingly identified, for Kedourie's generation, with Economics.

The Economics to which Kedourie was exposed was of a particular kind. It was taught by people (Paish, Plant and Robbins, for example) whose view of their subject was based on its practical contributions rather than its intellectual possibilities as a branch of mathematics, and whose commitment to the advantages of market-based economies was very strong. Robbins's philosophy emphasised the limitations of economics, and, in particular, the extent to which it rested on foundations quite different from those of the natural sciences.

In this milieu, Kedourie's range of disciplinary interests, his conception of politics as concerned with the rule of law and constitutionalism, and his appreciation of the logic and effects of the workings of the market, were developed and encouraged. There were, however, two other aspects of this undergraduate environment which are relevant to his future intellectual development. The first was that the states whose experience interested the Government Department were those of Europe, North America, and the British Commonwealth. There was little interest in the Middle East (or in British policy towards that area), his birthplace and one of his central historical concerns. The second was that the Government Department, then, was mainly composed of people with current or past practical political concerns. Nearly all of his teachers in the Government Department were practising or lapsed Fabians and/or socialists, most of them appointed by Harold Laski. They were imbued with 'liberal' views on nationalism, the adverse effects of market forces, and the viability of egalitarian democracy as a universal panacea.

Michael Oakeshott, who succeeded Laski in 1951 after Kedourie had graduated and left for Oxford, introduced new and radically different ideas into the Department. Oakeshott was sceptical about the possibilities of political action, scornful of the explanatory claims and practical effects of political ideology, dismissive of the idea of a 'science' of politics, concerned to explore the notions of constitutionalism and the rule of law (rather than democracy), and rejected the idea that it was any part of the business of the university to provide advice and guidance to political practitioners. His philosophy of History

distinguished sharply between ‘the practical past’ (a source of ‘lessons’ for the present) and the ‘dead’ past (studied for its own sake), the latter alone being the proper concern of academic History. Kedourie had already embraced and (especially through *Britain and the Middle East*) extended these positions; Oakeshott became, successively, mentor, colleague, and friend. The academic appointments which Oakeshott made (including that of Kedourie himself in 1953), reflected his views about the nature of political studies: his preference was for people either initially educated as historians and/or philosophers, or who came to share (and practise) his views about the distinction between different modes of explanation.

On graduation, Kedourie’s intellectual interests took him to Oxford and to St Antony’s. The fruits of his doctoral studies—*England and the Middle East*—were published with Oakeshott’s assistance. This book contains, we can see in retrospect, all of the themes to which he devoted the rest of his scholarly life.

England and the Middle East is the story of how before, during, and after the First World War, the Ottoman empire was dismembered, to be replaced by a *galère* of unstable, arbitrarily despotic states, whose authority was (unsuccessfully) based on nationalist principles. It dealt with the Great Power interests of Britain and France as they responded to the ‘sick man of Europe’, with the calculations and perceptions of the individual actors (soldiers, statesmen and dreamers) involved in making decisions, and with the Imperial political structures on whom these interests and calculations were visited. *England and the Middle East* was ‘High Political’ history in the sense that it was a narrative study of the provocations and responses of central individual actors, whose actions and reactions were offered as an important part of the process by which the Ottoman empire collapsed.

The narrative of these actions and decisions referred to the complicated relation between Great Power interests and concern for the welfare of the communities affected; the invention of ‘Arab unity’ as an aim; the appeal of nationalism as a guiding idea; the character and dispositions of the actors themselves; and the place of these individual actors within the context of their native constitutional structures of authority. But the central aim of Kedourie’s historical account was to explain decisions and actions from the standpoint of the knowledge and calculations of the actors themselves: the thesis eschewed any reference

to 'the inevitability of national self-determination' or to 'public opinion' in France and Britain as explanations for their decisions. Men do not act on 'what is the case'; they can only act on what they believe to be the case. The 'realities' of the situation help to explain outcomes and to identify mistakes; but these realities are transparent, by hindsight, only to the historian. They cannot therefore explain the decisions taken, and the decisions themselves become part (to an extent impossible to predict) of the realities. It was this sort of eschewal of 'the obvious' which led to the thesis being referred. Kedourie's position was that, whatever the force of these wider explanations (for which he could find no evidence), they were unnecessary to explain the outcome. He believed that he had sufficiently explained the outcome without recourse to these alleged 'forces'.¹ There was, in the *viva*, no criticism of his use (or translations) of sources; the criticism was based, instead, on his failure to acknowledge the 'inevitable' and 'forces' working for the triumph of nationalism. The thesis could not itself contain an extended account of his views on 'inevitability' and 'forces' (this came later); he merely asked that his examiners explain how the invocation of these factors was necessary to his conclusions, what evidence they had for the influence of these factors on the central political actors with whom his thesis was concerned, and why a thesis on *History* should concern itself with these matters.

He withdrew the thesis. But this experience is important to an understanding of Kedourie's later place in, and reactions to, the academic world. He considered, then as later, and with good reason, that he was being judged according to criteria different from those he himself approved.

Despite these distasteful *viva* experiences, Oakeshott offered him an appointment in the LSE Government Department, and helped to arrange (through Bowes and Bowes) the publication of his thesis.

In 1955, Oakeshott asked him to lecture on Nationalism, beginning that extension of *England and the Middle East* into a lifetime's refinement and exploration of its evidence and presuppositions. The lectures were eventually published as *Nationalism* in 1960, a work which virtually created modern British scholarly interest in nationalism. Most of those

¹ *England and the Middle East* (London, 1987 edn), pp. 1–7.

who later took up Kedourie's themes (and who disagreed with his conclusions) were colleagues at the School.²

Nationalism was an essay in the complicated relationship between ideas and political practice. It took nationalism to be an instance of ideological politics:

Such a politics is concerned to establish a state of affairs in society and state such that everyone, as they say in old-fashioned novels, will live happily ever after. To do so, the ideologist will, to borrow Plato's analogy in the *Republic*, look upon state and society as a canvas which has to be wiped clean, so that his vision of justice, virtue and happiness can be painted on this *tabula rasa*.³

Nationalism was, in origin, a European idea, later exported to the subjects of Middle Eastern, Asian and African empires. The central claim made by *Nationalism*, and reaffirmed in the later *Nationalism in Asia and Africa* (1970), was that nationalism deserved serious consideration as an ideology: it was not merely an instance of 'false consciousness',⁴ or of the insincere employment of a manifestly mistaken theory in the service of ordinary political ambition. To the surprise of many, the origins of nationalist doctrine were traced back to Kant. Kant's emphasis on freedom as the manifestation of the autonomy and authenticity of the individual will became transmuted into a doctrine under which all current political arrangements were to be judged by this sovereign and omniscient individual will, without reference to established traditions. Membership of a nation, and the transformation of this nation into an independent State, became the only true form of freedom. Nationalism was, thus, a doctrine which called into question almost all existing state boundaries and established patterns of political authority.

Taking nationalism seriously as an idea involved Kedourie in making another claim. This was that 'economism' could not explain the spread of nationalist practices. 'Economism' embraced such ideas as that nationalism appealed to poor subject peoples exploited by colonialism, or that nationalism was 'functionally' necessary to economic development. Kedourie's objection to these explanations was

² They include Ernest Gellner, Anthony Smith, James Mayall and Brendan O'Leary.

³ *Nationalism*, pp. xiii–xiv. All references to this work are to the fourth edition (1993), unless otherwise indicated.

⁴ The central characterisation of nationalism in Ernest Gellner's *Nations and Nationalism*.

partly empirical. He held that imperial rule was not merely a form of economic exploitation; it involved (*inter alia*, and to varying degrees) great power strategic rivalry, and political and bureaucratic issues of governance. If exploitation was identified with the market economy, then its defenders (such as Adam Smith) had seen the mercantilism of empires as an obstacle to, rather than a condition of, its successful working. The social upheavals which the spread of market forces and industrialisation created were not confined to (or even at their greatest in) empires; Britain itself was the obvious example here, and Britain was notoriously devoid of nationalist sentiment. In particular, there was no correlation between the success of nationalist doctrine and the level of economic well-being: nationalism had flourished in both pre-industrial and relatively rich societies ('Auschwitz did not occur because Germans were poor'). None of the nationalist texts which Kedourie selected exhibited a perceived link between nationalism and economic development, a link which, in any case, he thought to be empirically unfounded.

In addition to these empirical objections to 'economistic' explanations, Kedourie also raised philosophical considerations: ideas were not merely 'superstructural' effects of objective economic conditions. His account of Kant's place in the rise of nationalist ideology is an exemplar of his view of the relationship between theory and practice, but it was widely misunderstood. Kant was not a nationalist, and nationalism is not entailed by Kant's philosophy of freedom; Kedourie explicitly accepted both these arguments. Moreover, he recognised that many of those who invoked nationalist arguments were either ignorant of Kant's existence, and/or unable to furnish a serious philosophical basis for nationalist doctrine. His point was, rather, that a Kantian conception of freedom was a *necessary* condition of the rise of nationalist doctrine: without such metaphysical underpinnings, the doctrine could not have emerged, or been rendered intellectually respectable. Ideas are not 'determined' by economic realities, and ideas are diffused from the level of philosophy to the level of practice by a complicated process the charting of which requires both a knowledge of history (a chronology) and a philosophical appreciation of the logic of ideas. There was, here, none of the elisions he had condemned in Popper and Talmon.

Kedourie's objections to economistic explanations of nationalism have often been mistaken for an indifference to the 'sociological' circumstances of its emergence. This is surprising, given the attention

in his writings to the intricate symbiosis of theory and practice.⁵ In his account, the seed of nationalist doctrine fell, cumulatively, onto social soil whose condition had been partly (but not entirely) shaped by nationalist doctrine itself. The French Revolution (itself a complex mixture of ideas and contingencies), the rise of market society and industrialisation, the spread of literacy, the fragility and eventual collapse of the international balance of power, and war, all feature as solvents of traditional family, tribal, social and political affiliations. These radical disruptions of settled ways of life are an essential part of the story of the attractions of nationalism; but they are not a sufficient explanation: why was it nationalism, in particular, that took doctrinal root?

The circumstances in which nationalist doctrines became dominant varied from time to time and from place to place; the point is not that social circumstances are irrelevant to the success of nationalism, but rather that these circumstances are so varied as to defy any but the most simple generalisations.

The variety of conditions under which the idea of nationalism triumphed are also important in explaining its eventual development as a political regime. Not the least of Kedourie's concerns as an historian was to spell out the differences between the experience of various subject peoples: between, for example, the governance of the Ottoman and British empires.⁶

This historian's sensitivity to the particularity of circumstance, combined with a philosopher's appreciation of the role of ideas, generated one of Kedourie's major (and most frequently overlooked) contributions to the study of nationalism. Kedourie asked a simple, but previously largely ignored, question: what benefits did nationalism bring, in contrast to its subjects' previous (usually imperial) experience? This comparative perspective tended to be ignored by students of nationalism, because they took for granted some or all of a number of things which Kedourie either denied or questioned. These assumptions included: that the triumph of nationalism was inevitable (so that there was no point in judging its merits); that nationalism (as a doctrine) was

⁵ See, also, *Essays on the Economic History of the Middle East*, edited by Kedourie and Sylvia G. Haim (London, 1988).

⁶ *Democracy and Arab Political Culture* (London, 1993).

so trivial or so manifestly false that its undoubted appeal had to be explained on grounds other than its intellectual content; that the situation of imperial subjects was so bad that any change (even to a nationalist regime) must be for the better; that constitutional democracy could (and would) be introduced anywhere (so that even the worst nationalist regimes were potentially corrigible); and that the economic development which only nationalism could bring was a price worth paying for the (admittedly inevitable) loss of peace and liberty involved.

To question these assumptions (at least during Kedourie's scholarly lifetime) was to be self-defined as a 'reactionary'.

II

Kedourie's questioning of current assumptions about the emergences and consequences of nationalism was too subtle to avoid misinterpretation. He 'defended' neither Enlightened Despotism nor imperial rule. As an historian, he was concerned to investigate the actual experience of imperial subjects, and to compare it with their fate under nationalist rule. He did not believe that European constitutionalism could or should be a universal criterion for judging all governments; on the contrary, he argued that the historical experience of most post-imperial nationalist states made such a criterion entirely inappropriate. The Ottoman empire (for example) was an 'Oriental Despotism' and, lacking any form of civil society, was incorrigible from the standpoint of constitutionalist reform. However, the very lack of the necessary conditions for constitutionalism in the Ottoman empire rendered utopian for its nationalist successor states the hope that they would turn out to be non-despotic.

The practice of imperial rule, moreover, could and did provoke resentments which made nationalist doctrine seductive; British rule in India, for example, although the least despotic form of empire, could display racist dispositions entirely at odds with the rule of law principles which were its central justification.

The account in *England and the Middle East* of the situation of the Ottoman empire before the First World War is detailed and subtle. This empire was the pawn of European great power interests; these powers saw the weakness of the Ottoman empire as remediable only by either partition between them, or by strengthening the empire through English and French methods of centralisation and efficient administration.

Partition would generate a potentially fatal conflict between the Great Powers; centralised efficiency would destroy the fragile and reluctantly-conceded authority of the Ottoman rulers. This is not a hymn to the virtues of empire; it is a patient and detailed analysis of a tragic dilemma.

Kedourie's treatment of the question of the 'inevitability' of imperial decline was equally subtle. Of the view that the collapse of the Ottoman empire was 'inevitable', he held that this might be true, but only in the sense that a series of previous contingencies and decisions had produced a situation in which the collapse of the empire was entirely explicable. What he wanted to resist was the idea that this outcome was ordained by 'iron laws' of history, or that it was a result arrived at independently of a collection of past individual human decisions, or that the force of contingent circumstances were such that they could never have permitted the participant actors to have averted the eventual outcome. Kedourie's history found room for the possibility (indeed, the likelihood) of surprise.

Kedourie's (then) surprising nomination of Kant as the begetter of nationalist doctrine created other misunderstandings. We have seen that Kedourie explicitly excused Kant from personal subscription to nationalist doctrine, and did not subscribe to the view that the Kantian philosophy of freedom entailed nationalist conclusions. But further misunderstandings are generated by Kedourie's citations of examples of what later became known as benign or liberal nationalism. He quotes Mill:

It is, in general, a necessary condition of free institutions that the boundaries of government should coincide in the main with those of nationality . . . This is merely saying that the question of government ought to be decided by the governed. One hardly knows what any division of the human race should be free to do, if not to determine with which of the various collective bodies of human beings they choose to associate themselves.⁷

The purpose of this quotation is to contrast Mill's (relatively) harmless defence of nationalism with the very different justifications which Kedourie cites elsewhere. Kedourie's point is that such 'liberal' views of nationalism (he includes Woodrow Wilson in the list of the benignly

⁷ John Stuart Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government*, cited in Kedourie, *Nationalism* (4th edn., p. 127).

misled) exemplify the constitutionalist's misunderstandings of actual nationalist thought and practice. The latter do not invoke individual welfare or freedom, 'economic growth', equality etc, as their justifications: 'existing' nationalism is anti-individualist, despotic, racist, and violent.

The mistake here is to take Kedourie's use of Mill as accepting the possibility of a harmless version of nationalism. Kedourie's point is that *no* post-imperial nationalisms are based on Mill's arguments. He wants to argue (textually, and therefore empirically) that nationalism in the post-imperial regimes in Asia, the Middle East and Africa employs rhetoric and justifications wholly different from those put forward by Mill.

The novelty of Kant-founded nationalist doctrines is, indeed, Kedourie's main concern: for him, there are no 'nations before nationalism', because such a conception (whatever the anthropological evidence about 'ethnically-united communities') lacks the essential nationalist ingredient of linking collective (nationalist) identity with the idea of transforming this identity into its adherents having their own independent state, thus acquiring a licence to slaughter 'foreign' elements within and without their borders.

Kedourie's invocation of Mill has to be read in conjunction with his earlier use of Kant. Mill on nationalism is invoked to demonstrate the absence of any such constitutional/democratic defence in the actually existing nationalisms with which Kedourie is concerned. But Kant's philosophy of freedom (as interpreted by Kedourie) has egalitarian, individualistic, anti-traditional, and (therefore) disruptive consequences for *any* state—not just for those founded on nationalist doctrine. Kedourie's views on the impact of the French Revolution (and of all Kant-based ideas) on English politics reflect precisely the same approach to rationalistic individualism as he displayed in his treatment of nationalism: Kantian autonomy (Mill's unconditional freedom of all to choose their own political community) would be disruptive of constitutional states as well as empires.

The point is important, because Kedourie's treatment of Nationalism became attractive (or at least acceptable) to some anti-nationalist liberals who failed to see that his attack on Kant-inspired individualism and egalitarianism (and on the disruption these ideas caused to established orders) applied equally to their cherished assumptions about

democracy and progress. Kedourie himself made no secret of this connection: he wrote frequently on the baleful impact of individualistic egalitarianism on constitutional regimes (especially Britain). Kant filtered down to nationalism in post-imperial societies; in constitutional polities (like Britain) he filtered down to democracy. Kedourie's historical learning kept a sense of proportion between the differential effects of this diffusion on different societies and on different times; but both his critics and admirers often failed to see the consistency with which he pursued the ideas first adumbrated in *England and the Middle East* and *Nationalism*. Kant's legacy was nationalism in post-imperial societies, and democracy in what had previously been constitutional states. Contingently established circumstances shaped the forms of the outcome; but the guiding ideas were also essential.

Kedourie's attention to the detailed context misled many of his later critics. His invocation of Mill as an exemplar of 'liberal nationalism' was designed to reveal the difference between Mill's test of political reform (the welfare of individuals) and the very different justifications actually deployed by modern nationalism (the sacrifice of individual welfare (including life itself) to the demands of an ideology). This contrast was in no way a defence of liberal ideas; while Mill's ideas could not have licensed the horrors of modern nationalist rule, he represented the fatal illusion of Anglo-American liberals that ideas and practices commonplace in their own societies had any relevance to societies with totally different historical experiences. Whether a doctrine of 'liberal nationalism' has merits is not, for Kedourie, in this context, the point. The point is that such a doctrine does not and could not feature in the justification of any actual modern nationalist regime. In the British context, Mill's ideas worked to undermine the tradition of constitutionalism and to replace it with an unstable system of egalitarian democracy. Kedourie's treatment of Mill is thus contextual and relative: Mill's ideas on nationalism (though deluded) are harmless compared to those of (say) Franz Fanon, but the liberalism on which they are based is harmful and mistaken when deployed in its domestic (British) context.

The ease with which Kedourie's treatment of particular ideas and individuals could be mistaken for approval or disapproval (or even inconsistency of judgement) arises, perhaps, from the form which his writings took. The philosopher William von Leyden said: 'he does not

move, step by step, from the beginning to the end, in accordance with an axiomatic plan. He's like a bee: once he's chosen his garden, he moves from flower to flower, extracting all he can from each of them'. Von Leyden said this of Michael Oakeshott; but it is even more appropriate to Kedourie's writings. The same ideas and individuals often appear in different essays, and each essay is concerned with a particular context. Kedourie was, indeed, essentially an essayist: even his book-length writings (notably *England and the Middle East*, *Nationalism*, and the introduction to *Nationalism in Asia and Africa*) are written as a series of episodes which can be separated out into autochthonous sections. This reflects two aspects of Kedourie's conception of history and philosophy.

The first is that History, for him, was a chronological narrative of the responses and initiatives of central individuals in particular circumstances.⁸ Chronology itself provides the structure: only 'analytical history' (of the sort aspired to by the *Annales* School, for which he had great contempt⁹) cannot be written as a series of discrete chronological episodes. For Kedourie, History is not about structures or forces or laws; it is about (and only about) events, and events are particularistic and time-bound.

His writings involve, also, detailed consideration of the circumstances, character and thoughts of particular individuals. This is not 'biography' (in the sense of an attempt to reduce thoughts to upbringing or social location), but rather a desire to specify the circumstances to which individuals were responding, the stock of ideas available to them, the use they made of the stock, and the role of chance (or 'fate') in shaping their positions and responses. These vignettes are thus both an exercise in revealing the relationship between thought and circumstance and a reaffirmation of the difficulty and danger in abstract generalisation.

The second consequence of Kedourie's manner of exposition follows from the first. It seems difficult to extract his general or 'real' views on the central issues which continually recur in his writings: the nature of politics, the role of the state, the relation between freedom and equality, and between the market economy and political rule, etc. etc. Since his reflections on these sorts of issues usually occur (as in the Mill example) in detailed and circumstantial accounts of particular episodes,

⁸ *Arabic Political Memoirs and Other Studies* (London, 1974).

⁹ 'New Histories for Old', in *The Crossman Confessions and Other Essays* (London, 1984), pp. 159–76.

his readers are often left regretting the fact that he did not collect these scattered reflections into a more systematic account—into something resembling a coherent and consistent ‘philosophy of politics’.

But such a general account is precisely what, given his presuppositions, he could not and would not provide. The political practitioners with whom he is mainly concerned do not deal in philosophical ideas. They operate on rules of thumb, interpretations of circumstances, on often half-baked and indirectly-encountered theories (such as Kant’s), or take for granted, unreflectingly, most of the practices and ideas established in their own (or other people’s) communities. The most interesting of them (Lord Salisbury) can be described as intellectuals, but not as philosophers. For philosophy one goes (as Kedourie always did) to Hegel, for example; but Hegel operates at a philosophical level which, Kedourie believed, has no legitimate implications for political practice. Such philosophy can, of course, be used and distorted to further practical political ambitions, but then it ceases to be philosophy. Without Kantian philosophy, nationalism would have been impossible; but that philosophy does not entail nationalism, and nationalists are not philosophers. Kedourie’s ‘theory of the state’ is, largely, Hegel’s; but such theories are (in their original form) irrelevant to explaining the practical events with which, as an historian, he was concerned. This question of the relation between theory and practice is, of course, a genuinely philosophical issue; but Kedourie explored it through his teaching of Hegel, not through his historical writings.

There are, however, general dispositions about politics to be found in Kedourie’s work. One is that political activity is necessarily limited in what it can achieve. Utopian ideologies (such as nationalism) are false and dangerous because they ignore the simplest facts about human conduct. Men are not omniscient; their conflicting interests and ideas are not resolvable by appeals to ‘science’ or ‘fact’ (and are therefore simply a part of the human condition); no men (however young) can live their lives entirely free from the unexamined effects of tradition and prejudice; most men seek peace and security rather than glory; and it is simply a category mistake to believe that ideological politics on earth can deliver the salvation involved in religious belief.

He continued to be surprised by the view that the famous criteria expressed at the end of *Nationalism* could be seen as wildly inadequate to the expectations of the modern world:

The only criterion capable of public defence is whether the new rulers are less corrupt and grasping, or more just and merciful, or whether there is no change at all, but the corruption, the greed, and the tyranny merely find victims other than those of the departed rulers.¹⁰

The dispositions reflected in these criteria seemed to him both minimal and more or less obvious, but exploring their philosophical basis was not his objective. He wished, rather, to display them at work in particular contexts and through individual political actors. This is illustrated best in his accounts of British Conservatism.

He had a great admiration for the intellect of Lord Salisbury. Salisbury was (before he became Conservative leader) a defender of the balanced constitution against the claims of democracy. The balanced constitution accommodated the political differences between prescriptively-established interests with a view to arriving at generally acceptable (rather than ideal or true) outcomes. Democracy, by contrast, counted heads and took each head to be of equal worth and weight. Democracy thus ignored both obvious differences in ability and experience, substituted majoritarian demands and wants for a parliamentary process of discussion and accommodation, and turned politics into a perpetual governmental invasion of previously private social spheres. Democracy engendered unreal expectations about possible levels of social welfare, or facilitated redistributions of wealth (in the name of equality) without regard to either overall economic well-being or the predictability previously conferred by a rule of law based on respect for property rights.

Kedourie believed (as Salisbury himself came to believe) that Britain had avoided the worst of these potential consequences only because, there, democracy had been grafted onto existing and surviving constitutionalist practices, and because the Conservative party succeeded in playing the democratic game so successfully as to enable it to prevent democracy wholly from overturning the balanced constitution, although he became concerned about the extent to which the Conservative party (especially after 1945) seemed to have forgotten what (in Salisbury's terms) Conservatism was *for*.

Of particular attraction to Kedourie was Salisbury's conception of

¹⁰ *Nationalism*, p. 135. Ernest Gellner's criticism of the criteria as hopelessly anachronistic appears in his *Nations and Nationalism*.

the nature and responsibilities of political decision. The burden of decision, Salisbury held,

depends on the materials for decision that are available and not in the least upon the magnitude of the results which may follow With the results I have nothing to do.¹¹

If the consequences of decisions are largely unpredictable, and if political actors are constrained by a past of which they cannot be wholly aware, what is the scope of political judgement? Kedourie's answer to this informs all his historical writings. It is that responsible actors have to do the best they can with whatever they can make of their situation. To assume, in advance, that some decisions (however unpalatable) are 'inevitable' is both false and an abdication of responsibility; and not to consider seriously 'the materials available for decision' is simply childish. This conception of political judgement lies behind his rejection of politicians like Richard Crossman, who described part of the momentous process of British withdrawal from Aden and the Gulf in terms which suggested that it was the loss rather than the acquisition of the British empire which took place 'in a fit of absence of mind':

When I challenged Roy (Jenkins) the other night he said that £40 million saved in prescription charges is worth £140 anywhere else because of the impression it makes on the bankers Well, I've been thinking a lot about this slaughter of the sacred cows and I've come to the conclusion that if we are going to hold the Party together it is essential that we must have some major cuts in defence, i.e. some slaughter of right-wing sacred cows. When I gave Roy dinner at Lockets before Christmas the idea of balance which I sold him was withdrawal from East of Suez and the cancellation of the purchase of F-111 in exchange for two domestic cows.¹²

Another aspect of Salisbury highly congenial to Kedourie was his conception of the relation between religion and politics. For Salisbury, as for Kedourie, religion was a matter of faith and revelation embedded in established rituals: 'God is all-powerful and all-loving—and the world is what it is! How are you going to explain *that*?'¹³

¹¹ Lord Salisbury, quoted in 'Lord Salisbury and Politics', *The Crossman Confessions and Other Essays*, p. 52.

¹² R. H. S. Crossman, *Diaries of a Cabinet Minister*: Vol. 2, *Lord President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons*, 1966–8. Entry for 27 December 1967, quoted in *The Crossman Confessions and Other Essays*, p. 21.

¹³ Lord Salisbury, quoted in 'Lord Salisbury and Politics', *op. cit.*, p. 51. See also the reflections on religion in *The Crossman Confessions and Other Essays*.

The place of religion, thus conceived, is in the soul and in civil society, not in the political arena. Respecting the separateness of politics and religious faith is both logically imperative and politically necessary; not the least of the harmful effects of nationalist ideology in the Middle East, for Kedourie, was that it had transformed Islam from a religion either indifferent to or contemptuous of politics, into a 'fundamentalist' theocratic totalitarianism which violated both theological tradition and the requirements of political peace.¹⁴

These views about constitutionalism, political judgement and religion are encountered throughout Kedourie's writings; but they are founded on a complicated and ambiguous mixture of assumptions. In some contexts, the adumbration of conservative/constitutionalist ideas and of the circumstances of nationalist ideology is clearly being offered as a non-judgemental historical account:

For an academic to offer his advice on this matter is, literally, impertinent: academics are not diviners, and it is only at dusk, as Hegel said, that the owl of Minerva spreads its wings.¹⁵

In this mode, constitutionalism and the rule of law are not universal principles against which to judge (and reject) polities based on alternative ideas. These concepts are intelligible only in the historical context in which they happen to have emerged; they are the deposits of unrepeatable experiences (such as feudalism), and it thus makes no sense either to regret their absence or to recommend their adoption in societies whose experiences are of tribalism (i.e. the virtual absence of government) or despotism.¹⁶ English politics is merely what the English have inherited, and the (relative) wisdom of English politicians consists only in recognising and working with the grain of the situation. The conclusion is stark: it is simply impossible to establish constitutionalism (and therefore democracy) in communities which have no previous experience of it.

On the other hand, Kedourie's writings often betray a different, more censorial, tone. T. E. Lawrence's judgements (as discussed in

¹⁴ See, *inter alia*, Afghani and 'Abduh: *an Essay on Religious Unbelief and Political Activism in Modern Islam* (London, 1966); *Islam in the Modern World and Other Studies* (London, 1980).

¹⁵ *Nationalism* (London, 1961 edn.), Preface.

¹⁶ *Democracy and Arab Political Culture* (London, 1993).

England and the Middle East, and by extension in *The Chatham House Version and other Middle Eastern Studies* (1970)) are said to be ignorant, unfounded and dangerous; and the contempt for the work and influence of some political actors (nationalists as a whole, English politicians such as Crossman and Halifax) is undisguised.

While the contextual and detailed nature of each of Kedourie's essays is often enough to remind the careful reader that no moral judgements or universal-scientific regularities are being employed, the overall impact is somewhat different. Kedourie implies a distinction between sound political judgement as an objective category (the mere recognition of the realities of the human situation), and moral appraisal. But his tone sometimes conceals this distinction, and the distinction itself is based on a perception of the nature of 'political realities' which is neither tradition-specific nor uncontested. In Kedourie (as in Oakeshott), the view that political traditions can be judged only in their own terms ('from the inside'), turns out to be both an insufficient protection against the temptation to indulge in 'external' moral appraisal and itself founded on (universal) philosophical presuppositions.

On the other hand, the emphasis on cultural specificity (whatever its ultimate philosophical difficulties) was, for Kedourie, a healthy working rule for historians. It directs them towards detail and context, avoids anachronism, and protects them against ill-digested social science and philosophy. In his case, it also constituted a powerful empirical weapon against many of his successors in the field of nationalist studies. None of the latter have successfully challenged the historical scholarship underlying his account of the imperial conditions in which nationalism emerged,¹⁷ or responded to his invitation to produce evidence of the existence of an alternative canon of nationalist rhetoric in which the requirements of economic development or justification by a recognisable 'liberalism' played any significant part. Whatever general weaknesses arise from Kedourie's dismissal of 'social science' or from the nature of his philosophical presuppositions, his history has so far been sufficient to confound his critics.

¹⁷ For his diligence in establishing the robustness of the conclusions of *England and the Middle East*, see *In the Anglo-Arab Labyrinth: the McMahon-Husayn Correspondence and its Interpretations, 1914-39* (Cambridge, 1976).

III

With the exception of his postgraduate years at St Antony's, Kedourie spent his academic life in the Government Department of the London School of Economics, from his arrival as an undergraduate in 1947 to his (wholly unexpected) death in June 1992. His intellectual affinities with Michael Oakeshott were the strongest, and Oakeshott's presence was obviously a major attraction of the Department to a scholar who would, as he quickly became established, have been welcome in any major university in the world.

Kedourie's relationship with the Government Department was always amicable but was also, in many ways, distant. He regarded them with an affectionate, quizzical eye; some of them did not know quite what to make of him. He had obvious affinities with most of Oakeshott's own intellectual circle and appointees, and great respect for some of those who had been his teachers and later became his colleagues (notably Kingsley Smellie and Reginald Bassett). In many respects, however, the Department's appreciation of Kedourie's qualities and interests was not based on any close acquaintance with his writings or identification with his historical concerns: after all, his doctoral thesis was submitted at Oxford, and not at the School. Many of his colleagues took his hostility to nationalism in their stride, having themselves been disappointed by the results of the decolonisation which they had earlier enthusiastically supported. But they knew (and cared) little about the Middle East, or even about Asia and Africa. The *Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, which Kedourie and his wife Sylvia G. Haim created in 1964 and edited jointly thereafter, acquired an international prestige which went unrecognised by many of his colleagues. It seemed remote from their philosophical or Eurocentric concerns, and represented a commitment to serious historical scholarship which some of them neither possessed nor valued. Kedourie's publications (with the important exception of *Nationalism*) consisted largely of detailed historical essays on the experience of non-European polities or on British policy towards them; his philosophical teachings were for the most part transmitted to students and a small number of colleagues through lectures and seminars rather than through publications. Ironically, it was his philosophical colleagues who were most likely to appreciate his academic qualities (and who were most likely to read what he wrote); of the rest, some came to regard him with something

approaching the awe reserved for manifestly great men who are, however, engaged in esoteric pursuits. His more Eurocentric colleagues employed their own parochial categories to identify him as conservative, or reactionary, or 'right-wing'. They did not discern the extent to which his analysis of nationalism was based on views which led also to a radical lack of sympathy with almost all the assumptions of modern European liberal thought. The few (such as William Robson) who realised what he meant, and that he meant what he said, were profoundly shocked.

Kedourie's personal disposition added to these perceptions of him as a great but somehow eccentric presence. He was, for most of his time at the School, the only member of the Department who was by origin neither British, nor American, nor antipodean, and he volunteered little about his earlier circumstances and less about his religious commitments or, indeed, about any part of his private life. Those who knew about his Baghdadi origins sometimes assumed that his (and his family's) experiences at the hands of the Iraqi regime 'explained' his views on nationalism; others (along with the anonymous reviewers of *The Times Literary Supplement*) veered between thinking of him as an Arab apologist or (when an element of reality intruded) a 'Zionist' (despite his frequent inclusion of Zionism in the nationalist canon). That he was a traditional Jew was obvious to all save the utterly inattentive, but this too distinguished him from and to the not insignificant number of colleagues (some of them Jews) for whom jocular, carelessly anti-semitic remarks passed for light conversation (although never when he was present).

He was alarmingly learned, formidably well-informed about topics remote from his specialist concerns, and fluent (from sources which he smilingly always refused to divulge) in even the remoter reaches of idiomatic English.¹⁸ Those who took it upon themselves to impress him with their knowledge of (say) opera, poetry or painting were often disconcerted to discover later (though never from him) that he knew much more than they did.

Kedourie was not an easy colleague for those who liked small talk or superficial clubbability. He knew little and cared less about the private lives of most of his colleagues; he was impatient of gossip about them; he judged them primarily as scholars, and could round with surprising

¹⁸ Some sentences in the next few paragraphs have previously appeared in Alan Beattie, 'Elie Kedourie', in *The Jewish Journal of Sociology*, 34, Autumn 1992.

(for him) vehemence on those who allowed social snobbery or racial prejudice to affect their assessment of academic merit. The judgement could appear forbidding, even in informal circumstances. A visiting academic, staying with him, recounted producing at Sunday breakfast a copy of the 'quality' Sunday newspaper which he took. Kedourie read aloud, without comment, the headlines and subheadings in the paper. 'He made them sound', his visitor recalls, 'either utterly trivial or absurd, and made me feel foolish for concerning myself with them'.

The cryptic comments in which Kedourie, on informal occasions, would encapsulate his views could be startling and appear designed to end rather than to invite debate: 'He was a Whig' (a dismissal of Burke); 'It is a slave plantation' (Nasser's Egypt); 'He is the intellectual counterpart of Madam Blavatsky' (Marx); 'politicians cannot take decisions with a view to their consequences' (on political judgement). Such remarks were usually accompanied by a seismic shrug, or by the characteristic chuckle which emphasised the degree of his contempt. But even his most provocative epigrams usually turned out to be but the tip of a carefully constructed and massive intellectual iceberg.¹⁹ One sometimes came to appreciate this only years after they were first encountered. An undergraduate who presented him with a banal 'Whiggish' essay on the British Constitution complained that Kedourie had merely remarked: 'Go to the Foreign Office. Look at the buttons on the uniform of the messengers. You will see the Crown on them'. Much later, he came to appreciate the point: that British constitutional practices and ideas reflect a considerable number of non-democratic assumptions, and this fact is not evidence of 'a democracy which is a noble lie'. Rather, it is evidence of the serious limits of democracy as a concept adequate to describe British political culture.

Kedourie was generous with his advice and help to those who asked for it; and those of us who came to feel a great personal affection for him did so in part because of his capacity to be companionable without feeling (or making us feel) the need to chatter.

The felicity of his own family life and his quiet but firm views about proper conduct must have made the sometimes tangled personal lives of others puzzling and distasteful to him; but those he liked and respected were offered quiet and effective support when they needed it. He was an academic who exemplified the Aristotelian virtues: admirable in

¹⁹ See, for example, *Modern Egypt: Studies in Politics and Society* edited by Kedourie and Sylvia G. Haim (London, 1980), and *Politics in the Middle East* (Oxford, 1992).

character, quietly companionable, a friend in need, always the teacher yet blissfully unaware of the onus he imposed when he treated the pupil as simultaneously his intellectual peer.

Kedourie's own conception of the teacher was expressed in his tribute to Martin Wight:

... a teacher whose greatest and most seminal influence was in large measure expressed in lectures, tutorials, seminars and discussion groups. Exercised that is by means of the spoken, the living, word transmitted directly person to person, mind to mind.²⁰

To most of his students, he himself would not have appeared as a great teacher. He lectured from a script, written as if for publication, rather than in the easy, impromptu, style adopted by many of his colleagues. He spoke in a low, calm, monotone, with no dramatic gestures, head down to the lectern to read his script, often straining the hearing of his audience. His lectures in the introductory History of Political Thought course (originally taught by Oakeshott) were generally regarded as tedious, except to those with sufficient interest and imagination to discount the manner and to interpret them as a teacher reading from a sophisticated and illuminating text.

The content of his lectures on nationalism were particularly impressive. They were lucid, well-organised, and logically sequential. Some of us discovered Kant through them, others were introduced to nationalist writings for the first time, doubtless sometimes (in Kedourie's view) with adverse consequences. These lectures were not compulsory, but word spread about their quality: note-takers, philosophers, and triflers alike attended. It is unlikely that, when he gave up the lectures on the publication of *Nationalism*, as many students read the book as had learned from the lectures.

In his early years as a teacher in the Department, he appeared shy and diffident. Later, as his reputation and self-confidence grew sufficiently to overcome the earlier blows to his self-esteem, he could adopt an arrogant and dismissive tone in classes and seminars. He did not suffer fools gladly (although his harshest comments were reserved for academic colleagues rather than students) and his conception of teaching in a university was individual, if not unique. He was uncomfortable

²⁰ 'Religion and Politics: Arnold Toynbee and Martin Wight', in *The Crossman Confessions and Other Essays*, p. 207.

with the idea of lectures as substitutes for reading or as imparting (on the model of economics and the natural sciences) a 'basic toolkit' which could be examined by (for example) multiple-choice tests. This was why he ceased to lecture on nationalism on the publication of his book. He was scornful of the deployment of personal computers (and even typewriters)—'gadgets'—preferring to write the final version in a longhand needing little revision ('I don't start writing until I'm entirely clear as to what I'm going to say'). Nor was he entirely at ease in informal seminars where discussion became alternately adversarial, unfocused, or undirected. He was happiest when elucidating texts to a group of colleagues or students (occasions known affectionately as 'Elie's bible classes'), or assisting graduate students and colleagues with particular problems in the interpretation of sources. He had an unrivalled ability to tease out information from a single document, and to piece together original and coherent accounts or suggestions from a collection of disparate and apparently unrelated sources. He was an unfailingly fecund supervisor, even for graduate students working in fields remote from his own.

As his reputation grew, he regularly took up visiting appointments at universities in North America, France, Israel and Australia. These absences were sometimes resented by some of his younger colleagues. But he was, for most of his academic life, one of the few members of the Department whose scholarly reputation attracted such invitations; he did not conceive of teaching mainly as a matter of fulfilling timetabled lecturing obligations; his scholarly affinities were as much with colleagues outside as inside the School; and developments at the School (as in British universities generally) had made it less congenial to him.

For Kedourie, a university was a library surrounded by scholars who were skilled in the explication of texts and documentary evidence. It was (or should be) concerned only with instilling an appreciation of intellectual enquiry. He was distressed by the extent to which this conception was being replaced by an emphasis on 'relevance' and vocational training, and subject to increasing and detailed governmental regulation. Political studies at the School were increasingly divorced (through specialisation) from other disciplines (notably economics and history), and teaching and examining were becoming bureaucratically formalised (from both within and without): universities were ceasing to be a community of self-regulating scholars. Oakeshott had been, for Kedourie, a guarantor of resistance to these developments and of the

preservation of an 'Oxbridge' view of academic community; after Oakeshott's retirement, he feared that 'the game is up' (a revealing reference to a favourite anecdote of Oakeshott's about one sort of reaction to the 1870 Education Act).

Kedourie did not find it easy to deal with these developments. He disliked internal academic politics as a distraction from his scholarly pursuits, was dismayed by the lack of success he encountered on the few occasions when he was moved to lobby the School authorities, and confined himself to writing (with no great hope of success) elegant appeals to politicians and the academic community.²¹ After Oakeshott's retirement, he was subject once again to the spectacle of university colleagues failing to uphold what he saw as the basic conditions of their own institution. As an undergraduate, his merits had not been sufficiently recognised; the submission of his Oxford D.Phil. thesis had been criticised on grounds which he found shockingly irrelevant to historical scholarship. Towards the end of his time at the School, he found himself once again governed by those who did not share his own austere academic standards.

His early death cut short what would have been a continuation of his prolific scholarly activity. There were two projects, in particular, towards which he had long been reflecting and (as he put it) 'jotting'. The first was an account of British Conservatism. The consolation here is that his published essays leave one in no doubt about his general conception of the course of Conservative history, and about what he thought of some of its exemplars (such as Salisbury) and some of its less satisfactory mutations (Halifax). What we will never have is an extension of these beautifully painted and discriminating portraits of individual character, disposition and circumstance, so effective in linking the general argument with the particular instance.

The second project—his interpretation of the philosophy of Hegel—was nearer to fruition, and has now been published.²² This is some recompense for the most obvious lacuna in the legacy of his

²¹ *Diamonds into Glass: the Government and the Universities* (London, 1988); *Perestroika in the Universities* (London, 1989).

²² *Elie Kedourie: Introductory Lectures on the Philosophy of Hegel and Marx*, edited by Sylvia G. Haim and Helen Kedourie (London, 1995).

published works: an independent and extensive account of his own conception of philosophy.

ALAN BEATTIE

London School of Economics and Political Science