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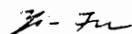
Dear Colleague:

After listening to Don Meinig's lecture on "Counterfactual American historical geography," I was led to think of an essay by Hugh Trevor-Roper in which he first dismissed Cleopatra's nose and then offered one of his own. He posed the question: Would the world we live in now be radically different if one monosyllable rather than another had been uttered on 23 October, 1940 at Hendaye? Hitler wanted Franco to agree to an assault on Gibraltar. At that time, Franco had every reason to say "yes." After all, Hitler was triumphant and Mussolini had easily yielded to the rising star's requests; moreover, getting rid of the British had inherent appeal to all patriotic Spaniards. But Franco's monosyllable was "no," and history (says Trevor-Roper) has not been the same since. (See History and Imagination, p. 360).

One of the greatest "What if" questions of our time is, Suppose the West, throughout the nineteenth century, had left Africa completely alone? Of course, you say this "counterfactual" is absurd. I agree. Nevertheless, I find anti-imperialist historians of both the First and Third Worlds posing it, implicitly if not explicitly. Among the tragedies of the imperial venture--so the presumption goes--was the derailment of the march of native African civilizations. If the West had not intruded, Africans would have grown their own Darwins, established their own Royal Societies, and developed their own sciences every bit as splendid as those of the West. Splendid, but different. And herein lies, I think, the source of deep frustration. Even if we accept the wonders of Western science and their material benefits, well, there they are; we soon get used to them and, increasingly, we find them easier to criticize than to praise. We are all a bit oppressed by the lack of a viable alternative to Western science. What we yearn for, romantically, is the possibility of a totally different path of human progress.

But progress itself is by now inconceivable other than in Western terms.* Hence progress itself--even as an idea--is condemned among intellectuals.

Best wishes,



* Take-home exam. Try to envisage progress, whether of society or of knowledge, in non-Western terms. It is easy to envisage utopia in non-Western terms, but progress is another matter.