[Comment] Westphalia


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‘The first modern intellectual, the first international cultural celebrity’

Hugo Estenssoro on Petrarch at 700
Two glasses of champagne

Sir, — A few years ago, when I wrote the entry on the pioneering sexual tourist Felicity Cumming for the forthcoming Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, I came across the story of her stepfather Leo Rabeneck’s attendance at Chekhov’s deathbed — told in such touching detail in the TLS of July 2. I wondered then if Dr Schworer’s gesture of giving Chekhov a full glass of champagne moments before he died carried a significance of which Rabeneck was unaware. The great neurologist Peter Nathan, who knew Chekhov’s work intimately, told me once that he believed that it was old Russian (or German?) medical etiquette for a physician to call for two glasses of champagne and to drink them silently with his patient when that patient was a medical man who had just passed any hope of recovery. The meaning of the champagne was understood: the need of awkward words obviated. If the glass of champagne Dr Schworer handed to Chekhov was indeed a sentence of death, how brave the playwright’s reaction seems: the dismissive, smiling remark (“It’s a long time since I drank champagne”), and the decisive act of draining his glass at one gulp.

RICHARD DAVENPORT-HINES
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Westphalia

Sir, — Theodore Rabb’s review of my book, The Myth of 1648 (May 21), presents a combination of misrepresentations, denial and polemics. His main charge — that I am “operating within a literature of circumscribed range and purpose” that has little to offer the historian of early modern Europe — overlooks the book’s extensive engagement and agreement with the by now dominant revisionist school of absolutism (William Beik, David Parker, Roger Mettam, Ernst Hinrichs, to name but a few). These historians not only de-emphasize the absoluteness of royal power in Continental Old Regime states, especially in pre-1789 France, while stressing the limits of their modernizing and state-rationalizing efforts. They also agree in noting the specificity and uniqueness, if not modernity, of the post-1688 English state. No one has theorized this Anglo-French long-term divergence more compellingly than the economic historian Robert Brenner, whose work serves as a central reference point in my book. Yet, Rabb not only conceals the role of this body of literature in my argument, he seems to be unaware that leading German historians — and not International Relations (IR) specialists — are busy debunking the orthodox interpretation of the 1648 Peace Treaties of Westphalia as the foundation of the modern system of states. This rereading of the Westphalian settlement began well before its 350th anniversary in 1998 and has since gathered momentum. As long as there is some credibility in Max Weber’s standard definition of the modern state, it is hard to see how seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Continental political communities — whether we look at Old Regime France, the Dutch Republic, or the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation — could possibly qualify as modern states, or how they could have generated modern principles of international politics. Theodore Rabb may be forgiven for being ignorant of the IR discourse and maybe even of current Marxist debates in historiography, but less so for obscuring intellectual developments in his own discipline and in his own area of expertise. De te fabula narratur!

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Israelites

Sir, — In his review of several operas performed at this year’s Göttingen Handel Opera Festival (July 2), Andrew Porter remarks that the original texts of the dramatic oratorios Deborah (1733) and Judas Maccabaeus (1746) both “celebrate Israeli military victories”. Should that not have read “Israelite”? Patriotic the Hanoverians certainly were, and keen to project British patriotism onto the books of the Old Testament. But profligate Zionists? I think not.

ROBERT FRASER
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Jewish cowboys

Sir, — Well, I did get a good laugh from David Schiff’s satirical review of Andrea Most’s book, Making Americans: Jews and the Broadway musical (July 2). Oklahoma about Galitzianers and Litvaks? Curly a nice Jewish cowboy? Jud as Hitler? Funny, when I saw Oklahoma in 1943 with my father, whose native language was Yiddish, he thought it was about cowboys and farmers out west (in New York, out west meant beyond the Hudson, and when they went they filmed it in Arizona, my father told me — he was the bully, he knew him from Boy’s High). Curly, when I played him in summer school never occurred to me that we shared a heritage. And sexually inadequate! Curly, he arrives on a horse, and he gets a girl! Finally, what on earth does it mean that “Oh, What a Beautiful Mornin’” is to be the price the audience must pay to see Jud’s pornography collection? Is that wonderful song, which became a favourite, was surely not a price, and the audience — we are speaking of 1943, when in wood movies married couples slept in beds — did not get to see any pornography the plain backs of postcards Jud sells were perhaps as he showed them to Curly. Home was and is a great American musical, which, like many great American musicals from Show Boat to West Side Story, was written by Jews.

GEORGE GOLDBERG
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Brasilia

Sir, — In Freelance (June 25) Michael Toner describes Brasilia, the capital of Brazil, as “in the exact geographical centre country”. He cannot have looked at a map.

DAVID HAWKINS
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T. E. Lawrence’s libris

Sir, — Never mind old hookahs. John T. in his alternative explanations of the aromatic特性 of T. E. Lawrence’s copy of The Letters (July 9) are more like old hookahs. Sure, the highly trained curator of the Ransom Humanities Center is fully capable of distinguishing between printer’s ink and tobacco. Moreover, if the cause were prurience, how come the other thirty-six copies have the same book in the same collection, without the smell? As for Mr. Tranner’s fine gesture that Lawrence smoked some kind of psychedelic herb while in Arabia, one can’t help but wonder if there is no evidence he ever did such things, that it would have been a character, and that in any case at the ti