The Cosmopolitan-Communitarian Clash over Syria in Conservative Politics

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DANIEL MILLAR, APR 22 2019

On 18th August 2015, the retired archaeologist Khaled al-Assad was publicly beheaded by the terrorist group known as Islamic State (IS). Al-Assad had been the head of antiquities at the ancient city of Palmyra, an "urban palimpsest" shaped by generations of Roman, Greek, Persian and Arab residents.[1] Its architecture, which includes "sublime" sculptures, tombs, and temples, and the diversity and complex cultural history they represent, [2] were perceived as a threat to IS's disruptive historical narrative and radical interpretation of Islam. [3] Al-Assad's brutal murder was a consequence of his refusal to reveal the location of some of Palmyra's museum's most valuable artefacts, which had been hidden shortly before the city fell to IS. The city as a whole had been recognised as a cultural world heritage site by UNESCO – the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization – since 1980. Its destruction was widely condemned, branded a "new war crime and an immense loss for the Syrian people and for humanity" by UNESCO's Director General.[4]

The destruction of Palmyra occurred within the context of the Syrian Civil War. Ongoing since 2011, the War has been fought between Syrian Armed Forces loyal to the incumbent President Bashar al-Assad, numerous rebel groups, and several terrorist organisations. It has wrought devastation. Government forces are alleged to have repeatedly used chemical weapons – illegal under international law – and have employed a tactic of besieging rebel enclaves.[5] This strategy has been demonstrated in Aleppo, Raqqa, and, in February 2018, in Eastern Ghouta – a campaign described by the United Nations (UN) High Commissioner for Human Rights as "legally and morally unsustainable".[6] In total, the War has led to an estimated 500,000 casualties, of which 100,000 have been civilian.[7] The conflict has also forced more than 5.6 million to leave Syria as refugees, displacing many more internally.[8] The international response has been mixed. While condemning President Assad's suspected war crimes, some Western states have been accused of failing to provide sufficient support to those fleeing the conflict.

These two linked issues fall within a wider debate on cosmopolitan and communitarian attitudes within International Relations. To abhor the destruction of Palmyra is to acknowledge a wider sense of 'international community', suggesting that human cultural achievements within Syria are universally valuable. This resonates strongly with the cosmopolitan understanding of shared morality. It is inconsistent with some Western states' refusal to accept any significant number of refugees, a policy which lies closer to the communitarian emphasis of individuals' value within fixed national communities. With a focus on responses to the destruction of Palmyra and the Syrian refugee crisis, this essay will argue that these two attitudes are contradictory. It will concentrate on the parliamentary British Conservative Party, which has held Government since 2010, and within which both cosmopolitan and communitarian perspectives – in favour of and against the notion of international community respectively – are displayed.

Palmyra was by no means the first cultural monument torn apart by the Civil War. Five of Syria's six UNESCO World Heritage Sites have been damaged in the conflict, and more than 290 cultural sites have been affected in total.[9] Palmyra however, perhaps due to its uniquely well preserved classical monuments, drew far more international press coverage, including in Britain. The Conservative MP Tobias Ellwood, then Foreign Office Minister, described IS's involvement in Palmyra as "a tragedy for all Syrians," stating that "[Palmyra's] destruction would be a terrible act of vandalism."[10] The fate of the city was also the subject of an Opinion Editorial written by Conservative Mayor of London (later Foreign Secretary) Boris Johnson, which described the attack as part of a broader "struggle between

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civilisation and nihilism."[11] Both Tories placed value on Palmyra as a treasure of the 'transnational community'– a representation of the "very idea of our Western civilisation and what we stand for."[12]

Both Johnson and Ellwood also praised the role of the United Nations, particularly through its UNESCO agency, in the protection and preservation of Palmyra. Since its foundation in 1946, UNESCO has sought to "contribute to peace and security by promoting collaboration among the nations through education, science and culture."[13] It pursues a wide range of programmes, including supporting improvements in education in the 'Global South', promoting free journalism, and managing, preserving and maintaining global cultural sites such as Palmyra.[14] The UK was a founding member of UNESCO, and has remained generally committed to its ideals.[15] As of January 2018, Britain was among the six largest contributors to UNESCO's World Heritage Fund,[16] its commitment to the UN project reaffirmed by a 2016 speech by Conservative Prime Minister Theresa May.[17]

Johnson and Ellwood's responses comply well with cosmopolitan discourse, which stresses shared humanitarian values and a universal morality that spans the 'international community'. Cosmopolitanism's proponents date back to the stoics of classical Greece,[18] and include the Enlightenment thinker Immanuel Kant,[19] and the contemporary philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah.[20] It has become most significant, however, as technological advances and the rise of 'globalization' have brought an increase in global migration and rapid communication. While there is diversity within this school of thought, Cosmopolitan thinkers generally espouse "a [global] political and moral community characterised by laws which are universal."[21] They suggest that each individual owes an "allegiance" to the whole of humanity, not any specific state or organisation.[22] The UN, especially through UNESCO, which Johnson, Ellwood and May supported in their statements, is a fundamentally cosmopolitan institution. Its establishes a basic set of international laws through its Charter, and presents a universal opposition to crimes against humanity, regardless of their perpetrators or locations.[23]

Conservative politicians' dismay at the destruction of Palmyra is inconsistent with their attitude to another product of the War in Syria: the exodus of refugees. Since the beginning of the conflict, the majority of those fleeing Syria have been forced into neighbouring states. Iraq, which itself has faced an IS-led insurgency, has taken in 246,000 refugees; Jordan, 655,000; and Lebanon, more than one million, according to the UN Refugee Agency.[24] Turkey, as part of a deal with the European Union (EU), has taken in more than three million.[25] Despite condemnations of the Syrian regimes' war crimes, including its suspected February 2018 use of chemical weapons in Eastern Ghouta, the successive Conservative Governments in place since the start of the conflict have taken remarkably little action on the refugee crisis.[26] The United Kingdom has taken in just 11,000 Syrian refugees since 2011.[27] Despite the government's provision of aid to support refugees still in the region, this number is remarkably small. It is a fifth, for instance, of the number taken in by Austria, which has a population an eighth the size of that of the UK.[28]

Although Britain's policy is supposedly based on the use of both "her head and her heart," as claimed by then Prime Minister David Cameron in September 2015,[29] it has been accused by some commentators as being overly "modest".[30] It seems particularly meagre in comparison with Germany and Sweden's more open responses to the influx of refugees into Europe. Since 2011 Germany has received more than 525 thousand asylum applications from Syrian refugees, Sweden a further 115 thousand.[31] This disparity is emblematic of the deep-rooted anti-immigration stance in the Conservative Party, as demonstrated by the Conservatives' target to reduce net migration to Britain to the tens of thousands, which was first introduced in the 2010 manifesto,[32] and reiterated before the 2015 and 2017 elections, and reflected in the 'hostile environment' programme.[33] This policy has so far failed: net migration to the UK remained 230,000 in the year ending June 2017.[34]

The Tories' immigration- and globalisation-sceptic approach was further demonstrated in Prime Minister May's controversial 2016 claim that "if you believe you're a citizen of the world, you're a citizen of nowhere."[35] While perhaps not the "evil" it was described as by Liberal Democrat Leader Vince Cable, it was certainly symptomatic of broader attitudes towards sovereignty and migration within the Conservative Party and the UK as a whole.[36] It directly dismissed the notion of an 'international community'. Despite such rhetoric, there has been a significant and growing immigrant population in Britain since at least the mid-20th century. Between 1951 and the early 1960s, a large proportion came from newly independent colonies in, *inter alia*, the Caribbean.[37] The failure of their integration, and the abject racism they faced – perhaps most clearly expressed by Conservative politician Enoch

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Powell in his divisive 1968 "Rivers of Blood speech" – culminated in riots,[38] for instance in Brixton in 1981.[39] More recently, a larger proportion of migrants to Britain have originated from other EU members, particularly those in Eastern Europe.[40] Concerns with the free movement brought by the EU, and globalization more broadly, both contributed to the success of the Vote Leave campaign in the 2016 'Brexit' Referendum.[41] This campaign was faced by Conservative politicians Boris Johnson and Michael Gove, and its anti-EU stance has since been incorporated into Conservative policy.[42]

Conservative attitudes towards immigration, including of Syrian refugees since 2011, fit within the communitarian outlook. Drawing on the works of Aristotle and Hegel, and in direct opposition to cosmopolitans, communitarian thinkers such as Michael Sandel and Charles Taylor, emphasize individuals' ties to their communities or home nation-states.[43] They believe in shared values and mutual responsibilities within individual national groups, and see states' responsibilities as in the distribution of economic resources. Communitarians argue that citizens' interaction with the global community should be expressed through their nation-states.[44] The success of politicians espousing communitarian values has been noteworthy: during the 1990s, *The Economist* was compelled to report that "in politics, they are all communitarians now."[45] Communitarianism remains significant in Britain today: both older Conservative voters,[46] and residents of more "communitarian" parts of the country were far more likely to vote for 'Brexit'.[47]

The divides between cosmopolitan and communitarian thinking are abstract, but they have deep material effects on British political decision-making. This is certainly true within the British Conservative Party. Politicians Boris Johnson and Tobias Ellwood, amongst others, demonstrated an inherently cosmopolitan attitude in their condemnation of the destruction of Palmyra – a tacit recognition of a shared moral value that spans the 'international community'. This attitude is not, however, reflected in migration policy, including for refugees fleeing the Syrian Civil War. Prime Ministers Theresa May and David Cameron, *inter alia*, have shown a deeply communitarian view of sovereignty and the influx of migrants to Britain from Europe and beyond. These attitudes are inconsistent. To value the cultural heritage lost in Palmyra is to acknowledge a universal human worth, and deep shared moral values. As a rich, multicultural nation-state, the UK should be obliged to accept a fairer share of Syrian refugees – no doubt in some cases the descendants of the "modern" *Palmyrenes* that Johnson expresses such admiration for.[48] The crucial difference between the two issues is perhaps that Conservative politicians, through Government, have far more agency on issues of domestic migration policy than on the course of the distant War in Syria. A somewhat contradictory anti-immigration policy is perceived as likely to win votes.

The tension between Conservative politicians' cosmopolitan and communitarian policy reflects a new stratum of division in British politics more broadly.[49] According to research conducted by the think-tank Global Future, voters under 45 are typically more 'open' or cosmopolitan in their attitudes towards migration and globalization.[50] They were also far more likely to vote for the Labour Party in the 2017 General Election. [51] The coexistence of cosmopolitan and communitarian positions among Tory politicians might further indicate a trend away from the binary implicit in the literature. As individuals hold varying positions on, for instance, the destruction of cultural heritage and immigration, the distinct categorisation of cosmopolitan and communitarian outlooks loses its clarity. This trend must be addressed in future studies for the theories to retain their legitimacy and relevance.

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