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Conrad's 'Nostromo' and the Third World - novelist Joseph Conrad

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The problem with bourgeois societies is a lack of imagination. A person raised in a middle or upper-middle class suburban environment, a place ruled by rationalism in the service of material progress, has difficulty imagining the psychological state of affairs in a society where there is little or no memory of hard work achieving its just reward, and where life inside a gang or a drafty army barracks constitutes an improvement in material and emotional security. Even to encounter first-hand such a society - whose instincts have yet to be refined by several generations of middle class existence - is not enough in the way of an education, since the visitor tends to see it as a laboratory for his or her middle class ideals, and thus immediately begins to find "evidence" for "pragmatic" solutions. For example, the belief among Clinton administration experts that Haiti - which, with the exception of a U.S. Marine occupation from 1915 to 1934, has not known a civil regime since before the French left in 1804 - could be made "democratic" by yet another, even less comprehensive occupation demonstrates how our elites just don't get it.

The problem is further compounded by the separation of literature from history and of both from political science in this age of academic specialization, creating policymakers ignorant of the very books that explain places like Haiti and Somalia far better than any social science "methodology." While the usefulness of history is accepted and needs no elaboration, the usefulness of literature is less so among the policy elite, even as Marco Diani, a senior researcher at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique in Paris, writes that, "The anguish of any society can be found in its literature, often earlier and more clearly revealed than in its social sciences."⁽¹⁾ That is because the future lies inside the silences, inside the very uncomfortably sensitive issues that people are afraid to discuss at dinner parties for fear of what others might think of them. And yet it is a principle function of social science to accumulate information precisely on what people are not afraid to talk about in front of a researcher's tape recorder (which is also why conventional journalism is often the most deceptive form of reporting on a society).

Literature, alas, may be the only salvation for the policy elite, because in the guise of fiction a writer can more easily tell the truth. And in literature's vast canon there is no book of which I am aware that both defines and dissects the problems with the world just beyond our own as well as Joseph Conrad's *Nostromo: A Tale of the Seaboard*, a 1904 novel about Westerners and indigenous inhabitants of an imaginary South American country, Costaguana.⁽²⁾ *Nostromo* is neither overly descriptive and moodily vague like Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, nor is its ending entirely unhappy. For a civil society-in-the-making does emerge in Costaguana, but it is midwived by a ruined cynic of a doctor who has given up on humanity, a deeply skeptical journalist, and two bandit gangs, not by the idealist whose actions had helped lead to the country's earlier destruction. Conrad never denies the possibility of progress in any society, but he is ironic enough to know that "The ways of human progress are inscrutable", and that is why "action is consolatory" and "the friend of flattering illusions." Charles Gould, the failed idealist of the novel, who believes absolutely in economic development, "had no ironic eye. He was not amused at the absurdities that prevail in this world."

Nostromo is at once Conrad's best and most difficult work. It is rather long, 465 pages of small paperback print, and to skim it for even a few paragraphs is to risk losing the thread of the narrative. In this media-obsessed age - when "intellectuals" spend their evenings watching C-SPAN and CNN - people may be better acquainted with *Heart of Darkness* than with *Nostromo* only because the former is exceedingly short, as well as amenable to skimming, on account of a thin plot and lengthy landscape descriptions. In *Nostromo*, however, landscape ambiance is a tightly controlled, strategic accompaniment to political realism. The book is Conrad's "statement on what he thought of as the truth about the world", writes Martin Seymour-Smith in his introduction to the Penguin Classics edition.

It is a tribute to Conrad's insight that his description of Costaguana and its port, Sulaco, captures so many of the crucial tidbits and subtleties about troubled Third World states (particularly small and isolated ones) that foreign correspondents of today experience but do not always inform their readers' about, because such details do not fit within the confines of "news" or "objective" analysis. There are, for example, the handful of foreign merchants in Sulaco, without whom there would be no local economy; the small, sovereign parcels of foreign territory (company headquarters and embassies) to which people flee at times of unrest; and the obscure army captain who has spent time abroad hanging about cafes in European capitals, and who later finds himself back home, nursing resentments, and at the head of a rebellion provoked by soldiers who drink heavily. There is, too, the "stupendous magnificence" of the local scenery - what Conrad calls a "Paradise of snakes"; the conspiracy theories begot by deep isolation and the general feeling of powerlessness and "futility"; and a wealthier, more developed part of the country that wants to secede because its inhabitants are even more cynical about the political future over "the mountains" than any foreigner. Conrad shows us, too, how bad forms of urbanization deform cultures: "the town children of the Sulaco Campo", for instance, "sullen, thievish, vindictive, and bloodthirsty, whatever great qualities their brothers of the plain might have had." He describes oscillations between chaos and tyranny, and political movements named after their leaders - Monterists and Ribierists - because in Costaguana, despite the talk of "democracy" and "liberation", there are no ideas, only personalities. He describes "the dread of officialdom with its nightmarish parody of administration without law, without security." He describes a port, an ocean port no less, that because of Costaguana's lawlessness is "so isolated" from the world. His conclusion is of a sort that a novelist can make with less damage to his reputation than a journalist: "The fundamental causes [of the Monterist terror] were the same as ever, rooted in the political immaturity of the people, in the indolence of the upper classes and the mental darkness of the lower." Giorgio Viola, an Italian who fought with Giuseppe Garibaldi and now lives in Costaguana with his dying wife and two daughters, believes, moments after several bullets strike his house and a mob tries to set fire to his roof, that "These were not a people striving for justice, but thieves."

Conrad is relentless in his willingness to confront every unpleasant truth. He will not even admire a beautiful edifice: "The heavy stonework of bridges and churches left by the conquerors", he writes, "proclaimed the disregard of human labour, the tribute-labour of vanished nations." It is in the totality of his realism that the author - a Pole who knew Russian tyranny as a boy and later spent fifteen tough years in the merchant marine - achieves fairness. (In one sentence he demolishes North and South: "There is always something childish in the rapacity of the passionate, clear-minded, Southern races, wanting in the misty idealism of the Northerners, who at the slightest encouragement dream of nothing less than the conquest of the earth.") And it is in his sympathy for individuals, rather than for groups, that Conrad achieves humanity. For Nostromo, like any great story, is about individuals and their desperate need for love.

The focus of the novel is the defunct San Tome silver mine, once run by the late father of Charles Gould, an Englishman. Gould's father had been ruined by corrupt Costaguanan governments that sunk their teeth into his mining profits. Though his father warned him to stay away from Costaguana and the mine, Charles Gould returns to restart its operations, confident that the mine, in addition to making his own fortune, will give Costaguana the wherewithal to modernize. For like so many colonialists and idealists (the two are more closely connected than many think), Gould, Conrad observes,

cannot act or exist without idealizing every simple feeling, desire, or achievement. He could not believe his own motives if he did not make them first a part of some fairy tale. The earth is not quite good enough for him.

Gould thinks like many members of the international aid community: quantitatively, as though determined to avoid any subjectivity whatsoever - even as subjective thinking would have given him to understand what had ruined his father. Gould sees the problems of restarting the mine as merely technical. But it is only when he surmounts the technical difficulties of extracting the silver for handsome profit that the problems to which his father alluded begin. The very success of the mine, rather than creating money for modernization, destabilizes local politics. That is because the mine, and the cash it produces, become - in

the absence of other development - a target of malicious rumors and the magnet for local bandit groups to fight over. The mine represents Gould's ingenuity, not that of the indigenous inhabitants; just as oil and natural gas and mineral concerns in the developing world represent the ingenuity of Western corporations that, and that alone, have the organizational and technical know-how to make it all happen. Thus, the fighting that ensues in Costaguana because of Gould's success with the mine is not unlike the violence that wracked Congo-Brazzaville recently, where oil concessions became a treasure over which murderous factions could fight. In such places, Conrad suggests, anything "merely rational fails."

Dr. Monygham, an expatriate English doctor in Costaguana, understands all of this and is determined to help Gould - not because he likes Gould, but because he admires Gould's wife, Emily, who, he realizes, intuitively understands the reality of the country to which her husband appears deaf and dumb. Dr. Monygham is the dark cynic of Nostromo, whose very morality is thought to be in question. Dr. Monygham has met "the impossible face to face", through the eyes of dying patients whom he cannot save. He sees through the seductive lie that all situations are clean slates open to broad possibilities. He is wise because he has had experience: the experience of undergoing torture under a previous Costaguanan regime. Torture, Conrad explains, was like a "naturalization" procedure, since it allowed Dr. Monygham to understand life like a true Costaguanan. Indeed, he has become the psychological "slave of a ghost": the ghost of the inquisitorial priest who abused him. (The author alludes to a bright future for torture in the twenty-first century, because as man's passions grow more complex, helped by technological development, his ability to inflict pain on his fellow man will grow infinitely more refined - just look at the twentieth century! Torture may be but an offshoot of progress.) Though Dr. Monygham himself might be beyond redemption, as another character in the story concludes, "He saved us all from the deadly incubus of [the warlord] Sotillo, where a more particular man might have failed."

Another savior of Sulaco - who draws up a blueprint for what would become its successful and humane secession from Costaguana - is Don Martin Decoud, a somewhat radical journalist and among the more intriguing characters in literature. Decoud is a boulevardier, a person without accountability, who affects deep concern for humanity and progressive politics in a manner that is at once fashionable and irresponsible. But when he returns from abroad to his homeland, Costaguana, and falls in love with a woman while the country is disintegrating, he is confronted for the first time by a political event that actually matters to his own life. Decoud soon finds himself in a situation whereby he can either help save Sulaco from the warlord Montero, or stand by while the Monterists, once in power, torture him to death. Faced with that, Decoud becomes both devious and heroic, and thus finds his moral salvation through action that, because it is not "merely rational", helps, in an ironic way, to save a whole population from ruin.

Assisting Decoud and Dr. Monygham - I am gravely simplifying a complex plot - are two bandit groups that are no better than the ones that would reduce Sulaco to thuggery. But one of the lessons of Nostromo is that in such situations one has to mix with evil in order to deflect it. Among the novel's best moments is when Decoud patiently explains to Mrs. Gould why, in order to save her beloved schools and hospitals, it will be necessary to join forces with the country's most terrifying gang, led by one Hernandez - "the living, breathing example of cruelty, injustice, stupidity, and oppression." Decoud's plan - a savvy one, it turns out - is to make Hernandez a general in the army that will rescue Sulaco.

But the person most crucial to the effort to save Sulaco is the Italian-born leader of the dock workers, Gian' Battista Fidanza, known to the European community as "Nostromo", an Italian corruption for "our man." Nostromo is that "fellow in a thousand" who, as a brave, charismatic, and streetwise leader of men (whose personality bridges that of the Europeans and the natives), is the only one who can actually put Decoud's and Dr. Monygham's plan into action. Without Nostromo, the kind of hands-on chap who knows how to safeguard Gould's silver, how to contact the bandit allies, and much more, the besieged Europeans, for all of their heated discussions and knowledge, would simply be lost.

Here Conrad shows mastery of a situation that Westerners have faced in the Third World through today, especially when such Westerners have the best interests of the indigenous population at heart. I remember that in Khartoum and in Mogadishu during the Horn of Africa famines of the 1980s, and in West Africa

during the various crises of the 1990s, the Western aid community was at the mercy of a handful of local Greeks in Khartoum, of local Italians in Mogadishu, and of local Lebanese in West Africa, all of whom knew how to do things: how to obtain visas from the police, how to get cargo through the ports, how to ship food past road blocks - details without which the aid efforts would have collapsed. These people were often cynics: they would smuggle contraband as well as famine relief supplies. But they were cynical because they had experience, and because they had experience they were able to be effective toward a good cause. In the person of Nostromo, Conrad has condensed them all.

Conrad's ending, which I will not give away, is often criticized for its weakness, as if Conrad got fired and did not know how to complete such a great novel. Great books, of course, are not necessarily perfect. But it is possible that the critics are wrong. The last fifty-or-so pages of Nostromo focus on the personal lives and motivations of Dr. Monygham, Decoud, and Nostromo, and particularly on Nostromo's ill-fated love for Giorgio Viola's youngest daughter, Giselle. The novel, in fact, becomes ordinary as the extraordinary political events fade. But isn't this the way life is? Moreover, by nailing down how the most personal of motives were responsible for the political action of these three characters, Conrad places his pessimism where it belongs: within the rubric of humanism. The author shows that even authentic heroes like Nostromo are motivated by personal vanity rather than by ideals, and that such vanity, rather than something bad, is the true source of incorruptibility. Dr. Monygham and Decoud are brave because each wants to impress a particular woman. Nostromo is brave because he seeks a high reputation that is exchangeable for money. Again, I am crudely simplifying complex literary personalities, but the point is that we often do the most noble things in politics for the most personal of reasons, and not for 'those we publicly espouse. And that is our salvation: because people who are truly "committed" are often the most dangerous, or at least the most sanctimonious. The desire for wealth, or for the admiration of a beautiful woman, may, in fact, preserve objectivity far better than the desire to save a million people.

But how does one convey such truths to the policy community? Even to discuss them is difficult. And it is especially difficult to teach them in the classroom, because so many students who gravitate to political science and journalism these days tend to come from well-off backgrounds and hold idealistic views - as opposed to other young people I have encountered at universities and in the corporate world, from harsher backgrounds, who are unashamed about just wanting "to make money." It is ironically the latter - those with no interest in political science but who have been conditioned as realists - who may be better equipped psychologically to comprehend the situation in many troubled places in the world. Thus, fine fiction like Conrad's may be the only hope for the next generation of journalists and policymakers.

1 See Diani's introduction to Honore de Balzac, *The Bureaucrats* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1993).

2 The version of the novel used here is Joseph Conrad, *Nostromo: Tale of the Seaboard* (New York and Middlesex, England: Penguin Classics, first published 1904).

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