CHAPTER 4

Britain and Europe: Managing Revolution

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I The Illusions of Diplomacy

L’Angleterre est une île. A synecdoche, a metonymy, and a metaphor echoing one thousand years of British and French history.

Every country is an island, formed from some geographical or ethnic archipelago, each jealous of its contrived integrity. Following the Siege of Acre in the Third Crusade (1189–91) until the Crimean War (1853–56), the neighbouring islands of Britain and France were serial opponents in war. The French President, Charles de Gaulle, spoke of England as an island in opposing the accession of the UK to membership of the European Communities in 1963. He had also spoken against what he saw as the statist ambitions of Walter Hallstein, first President of the Commission of the European Economic Community. Without saying it, he was saying that Britain and Germany should not be allowed to gain by peaceful means a domination over France that they had not been able to gain through war.

Winston Churchill said, in 1946, that the British must be friends and sponsors of a potential United States of (Continental) Europe. In 1951, he said that Britain is in Europe but not of it, as a ground for refusing to seek membership of the European Coal and Steel Community. What he was saying, without saying it, is that making Europe into an artificial island containing the islands of France and Germany, could be a good idea if it tied them both down and discouraged them from attacking each other, or Britain, again.

De Gaulle and Churchill had an exceptionally vivid sense of history. On the question of British participation in European integration, we may think that they each made a misjudgement. Britain’s presence might have moderated the long march into pan-European statism. Britain would eventually join the enterprise, but when it was far too late to change its evolved nature. And Britain’s presence at the creation might have re-balanced European power. Since the days of Cardinal Wolsey in the 1520s, the Ariadne thread of British foreign policy, pursued through quixotic diplomacy and costly wars, has been the goal of preventing Continental Europe from being dominated by a single Continental power.

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De Gaulle saw the British as ‘Anglo-Saxons’, his peculiar ethnic category which also included those whom he called ‘the Americans’ (of the United States); and there was a penumbra of feeling that seemed to extend the term to cover those whom Churchill had called the English-speaking peoples. For de Gaulle, and for much of the French ruling class, the Anglo-Saxons were, and are, an ‘Other’, an organism with a distinct ontogeny. For the less subtle minds of Britons and Americans, the universal ‘Other’ is ‘foreigners’, of whom particular varieties may be identified as circumstances demand.

Sybilline rhetoric has always been the house style of great-power diplomacy at its best. It is the private language-game of international unpolitics – poetry in the service of pragmatism; and diplomacy-speak can itself be the threat or use of force by other means. Florid ideas of identity have always been used as a way of identifying and opposing an implied ‘Other’ and as weapons of raison d’état.

Such deep subjectivities have an unconscious dimension which affects the private minds of political and military leaders and, still more seriously, affects the public minds of whole societies. The hypothesis that the Protestant Reformation was a product of Martin Luther’s painful health problems is as reasonable an hypothesis as any other. Diseases of the mind that form in the unconscious mind can infect the behaviour of world-historical figures and of whole societies, leading to war and genocide and ethnic cleaning and atrocities of every kind. And they can be the shadow-side of what may otherwise seem on the surface to be rational behaviour.

So it is that these collective subjectivities, deeply hidden and expressed in sophisticated linguistic codes, give its characteristic climate of inspissated indeterminacy to the intergovernmental world of ‘nations’ (genetic or generic subjectivities) and ‘states’ (major polities which may or may not be coterminous with a nation).

Diplomacy seems, in the notorious analogy, like a game of multidimensional chess played in a room without light, in which the outcomes are more serious than the immobilising of a king-symbol. The outcomes may determine millions of human lives and the future of the whole human world.

Anyone who has played the bizarre diplomatic game knows the intense intellectual and personal pleasure of playing the game well, however good or bad the outcomes. Sometimes you win, sometimes you lose; that is what games are like. To go from the arena to the gallery is an experience of withdrawal from an addiction.

No one can say quite why the UK joined the European Communities in 1973 at the third attempt, and not at the other attempts, or quite why it joined at all. Nobody knows quite why any government ever does what it does, even that government itself, let alone other governments. Nobody, after the event, can