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RECENSION

Winston Churchill y su época. El político bipolar

(Winston Churchill and His Age: the Bipolar Politician)

José Ignacio Domínguez García de Paredes

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Prologo de Juan José Laborda



The hymn *Jerusalem* was composed by the English poet William Blake around 1804 and set to music by Sir Hubert Parry, as early as 1916, during the First World War. In 1922, Edward Elgar wrote its orchestration in homage to the composer after his death.

The text is inspired by Milton and the legend of the passage of Jesus and St. Joseph through Glastonbury (Somerset). He speaks of founding a new Jerusalem in England from a pastoral perspective as opposed to an industrialised world symbolised by “satanic mills”. The hymn is available on YouTube and it is definitely worth listening to.

This music, which symbolises the essence of the nation, has sometimes been played as England’s national anthem since, being a part of the United Kingdom, it has no official anthem of its own. Hugh Hudson’s *Chariots of Fire* (1981) takes its name from one of Blake’s verses quoted to describe the British elitist atmosphere of the 1920s within the context of the Paris Olympics.

It is precisely this idea and spirit that underlie the book *Winston Churchill y su época. El político bipolar (Winston Churchill and His Age: the Bipolar Politician)*. This 678-page book, published by *Silex* in 2022, was written by José Ignacio Domínguez García de Paredes, with a foreword by the former President of the Spanish Senate, Juan José Laborda. Domínguez, a great lover of history, has a degree in law and is a political analyst. He has been a Labour and Social Security Inspector since 1975 and in addition to possessing diplomatic experience.

In this work, the figure of Churchill, who was a highly active participant in the decisions of the time, is used as a script or *leitmotif* to describe a time and characters (Chamberlain, Halifax, Patton, Eisenhower, Montgomery) of great interest today. It is set in a pivotal period of history, following Queen Victoria’s reign and the first reconfigurations of the Middle East. One might even call it a watershed moment, or following Chinese tradition, it may well be described as “interesting times”, due to the geopolitical, political and social changes it embodies. This translates into a remarkable density of events of historical significance, as well as the characters that deal with them and are, therefore, of strategic interest.

There is a transition from one empire, the British, to another, the American, which gains awareness of itself and turns into a global power within the context of the changing *status quo*. This is the replacement of an unbalanced multipolarity by a bipolarity made up, moreover, by emerging actors.

This experience is useful. History consists of empirical or inductive knowledge and its use as a tool is, moreover, in the best British tradition, in opposition to the deductive and archetypal nature of French rationalism. To quote Mark Twain, history does not repeat itself, but it often rhymes.

Churchill, the source of many opportune and audacious quotes, is a figure deformed by myths and emotions, but also by the relevance of his political contribution to the history of mankind, which makes it easy to be lenient with the mistakes of an impulsive

man. In fact, as he himself stated, concerned about how history would portray him, he decided to do it himself, winning no less than the Nobel Prize for Literature in the process. A very timely and intelligent course of action. As an example, Lord Balfour considered his seminal work *The World Crisis*, devoted to the First World War, to be “a brilliant autobiography, disguised as a history of the universe”.

He had a highly complex life. Born at Blenheim Palace in 1874, his father was the third son of the 7th Duke of Marlborough; and his mother was the American socialite Jennie Jerome; they had two children in total. It was a marriage of money and nobility. The price paid was, however, high. His father died of syphilis in 1895, at the age of 45, and his mother had multiple lovers. As a result, he would be educated with affectionate coldness, albeit in the best boarding schools, and while his scholastic journey was without any special lustre, it would be complemented by a self-taught education favoured by his mother. He also made provision in his will for funds to maintain his nanny’s grave, which he personally tended.

He thus belonged, by right and culture, to the most stale and distant of the British aristocracy, of whose lifestyle and standards of conduct he could serve as an exponent. This of course required a huge financial outlay, which he met by his own means all throughout his life. He married Clementine Hozier, of humble though noble origins, with whom he had five children. Despite this, the family’s life was not a happy one. Indeed, alcoholism and depression —an illness from which the Prime Minister also suffered and which he referred to as his “black dog”— were not uncommon, to the extent that one of his daughters eventually committed suicide.

He entered Sandhurst military school, in the cavalry, and after completing his studies —a year and a half— he was posted to India. He travelled to Cuba as an observer accompanying Spanish forces. He travelled to war zones as a journalist and commenced a literary activity that would become a constant in his life. Thus, he was in Malakand (north-west India), in Omdurman during the Mahdist War, and in the Second Boer War where he was taken prisoner, but escaped.

Following this military and operational transition, he entered the political world in 1900 and would not leave it until 1964, the year before his death. It was a time when, initially, the aristocracy still dominated the country’s politics and culture. Churchill was its last great representative, thus definitively ushering in the bourgeoisie and the welfare state following World War II, in which the leader who had led the nation to victory was defeated at the polls following a poorly conducted election campaign.

He was viewed with suspicion in peacetime because his vigorous nature was ill-suited to the problems of the day; yet he proved to be an unequalled encouraging leader only because he was more dominant and more aggressive than any of his peers. In 1945, after the end of the conflict in Europe, he was ousted from power. His case proves that, in a democracy, those who win a war rarely remain leaders in peace, especially in low-militarised societies. They fulfil their tasks, after which societies look to other leaders to solve new problems.

Personally, he combined pride with a need for recognition. Sharp-witted, his work as a politician and writer, two appropriate means of earning a living for members of his class, reinforced each other and benefited from each other.

Thus, his political work benefited from his communication skills at a time when popular opinion was already indispensable for political action. His oratory, the best of British parliamentarianism, has left famous and historic speeches that are references for humanity. And his literary work benefited in turn from his political experience and, above all, from his access to people, documents and sources that served the decision-making process. And, again conversely, it was used to valorise or justify his political activity and decisions; and even to justify himself and his past rivals. In his writing, he took ownership of the truth.

His political life, which was spent between the Liberal and Conservative parties, was marked by war, as he was a member of the British cabinet during World War I and led it during the World War II, and he also had to deal with the problem of Ireland, which became independent in 1924. War is the abrupt and bloody disruption of geopolitical relations, which explains the times in which he lived. His return as Prime Minister in 1951, at the age of 77, and until 1955, when his health began to fail, is redolent of those times.

As Juan José Laborda points out, his multi-faceted personality combined thoughts, convictions and desires that he could not integrate into a single space, and even less so, within his moral foundations. Thus, an agnostic, he was an archetypal imperialist who did not understand Gandhi or decolonisation but supported the creation of the State of Israel, and, although he viewed colonialism in a positive light, he disagreed with slavery and racism, being particularly wary of dictators who disregarded the necessary limits of political action, and which are precisely the foundations of British parliamentarism. Indeed, he was among the first to comprehend the danger posed by Hitler.

Once the urgency imposed by a war together with its black and white perspective faded, the result of many contradictions became schizophrenic within the political sphere and it is not surprising that it ends up spreading into human side and deriving into pathology. Unless the opposite was true; or, more likely, the overlapping of the two processes made him the man of the hour. Gifts and defects, when they are great, upset the always difficult balances with which personalities are built. And it is even more likely when they are coupled with a permanent will for power, which accentuates the always complex balances of personality.

By means of Domínguez's work, it is worth mentioning that leadership is a process that, when assumed, is self-nourishing, so that the leader will increasingly demand

more power and be more demanding in terms of receiving it¹. In this vein, Nixon², quoting McGregor Burns, argues:

“Presidents must possess a will to power or they will not be successful presidents. They must constantly seek power, building it, if necessary with every shred of formal authority and personal influence they can find. They must constantly guard whatever power they have achieved. They must hoard power so that it will be available in the future³”.

Compare this with the view expressed by Vallejo-Nájera:

“The born leader is one because he has imbued his entire being with the passion to command and with it an almost fanatical condition of commitment to the contagion of his ideal and the willingness to sacrifice everything to achieve it... and automatically to impose it. Talent is not enough, nor are personal conditions; what is needed is a motivation so emotionally charged that it goes beyond the premises of what is reasonable⁴”.

From a psychological approach, one can explain a person's struggle to rise to the top of power as a form of compensation for personal complexes that leads them to face difficulties head on⁵. Such is the case with Churchill and the reason that made him a providential leader.

In any case, because of his determination and proclivity for action, Churchill is a controversial and even feared figure by all and sundry. His great value, of which there is no doubt, was his clear understanding of the dangers embodied by Nazism, which led him to actively combat it, positioning himself from the outset against both a pacifist right and a pacifist left.

But there are also a number of failures, a natural result, perhaps, of his proactivity and of being permanently on the front line. Some of these are well known, such as the defeat at the Dardanelles (Gallipoli) when leading the British navy during World War I.

1 Various authors (1999). *Apuntes de Polemología*. Escuela Superior del Ejército, Escuela de Estado Mayor. Documentos de Trabajo del Departamento de Estado Mayor. Chapter X.

2 H. R. Haldeman, Chief of Nixon's Cabinet between 1965 and 1973, reveals in his memoirs the former US President's paranoia. Not only was he obsessed with image, but his fury boiled over when he read press summaries contrary to his policies. Matey, P. (1994). Delirios de Grandeza [online]. *El Mundo*. [Accessed: 2024]. Available at: <http://www.elmundo.es/salud/1994/129/00500.html>

3 Nixon, R. M. (1980). *The Real War*. Barcelona, Editorial Planeta, p. 281.

4 Vallejo-Nájera, J. A. (1992). *Locos egregios*. Editorial Planeta.

5 Various authors (1999). *Apuntes de Polemología*. Escuela Superior del Ejército, Escuela de Estado Mayor. Documentos de Trabajo del Departamento de Estado Mayor. Chapter X.

There have been other cases, similarly controversial yet less emphasised, perhaps in recognition, as has been said, of his efforts against Nazism. This is the case of the handing over of Poland to the USSR when its invasion, as a consequence of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Agreement, had been the cause of the world war. All prisoners of Polish origin who had fought on Germany's side during the war were transferred to the USSR and the former Yugoslavia. Or, in the context of the latter, the refusal to aid India during the Bengal famine whose immediate cause was a typhoon in 1943, which may have killed 1.5 million people.

In short, Churchill is the *leitmotif* of a book that highlights an entire era and a specific type of strategic leaders. His personality demonstrates how determination, bravery, courage and tenacity are essential for this purpose. Leadership and courage are inextricably linked. Without courage, there is no decision and without decision there is no leader. In many cases, attitudes are more relevant than skills. Additionally, when skills are added to attitudes, recklessness is discarded and results are obtained. Strategic leaders must have a certain aggressiveness dominated by reason. In this way, they always move along the limits of possibility, creating and expanding the framework of available options.

His mythification and the forgetting of his failures have made him a hero, a cross between a god and man, a myth to which he undoubtedly contributed with a remarkable writing of his own history, as Domínguez says, portraying an entire cast of leaders and a decisive era.

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