

*Civil Wars: A History in Ideas*, David Armitage, Newhaven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017. xi + 349 pp. £10.99 (paperback). ISBN 9780300149821.

Burke, writing in 1777 to the Sheriffs of Bristol to explain the opposition of the Rockingham Whigs to British government policy in America, found it a consolation that he and his constituents were of one mind on 'this great and arduous subject':

We are heartily agreed in our detestation of civil war. We have ever expressed the most unqualified disapprobation of all the steps which have led to it, and of all those which tend to prolong it. And I have no doubt that we feel exactly the same emotions of grief and shame in all its miserable consequences; whether they appear, on the one side or the other, in the shape of victories or defeats, of captures made from the English on the continent, or from the English in these islands; of legislative regulations which subvert the liberties of our brethren, or which undermine our own.

A few pages later he had more to say about the evils of this particular kind of conflict:

Civil wars strike deepest of all into the manners of the people. They vitiate their politics; they corrupt their morals; they pervert even the natural taste and relish of equity and justice. By teaching us to consider our fellow-citizens in a hostile light, the whole body of our nation becomes gradually less dear to us. The very names of affection and kindred, which were the bond of charity whilst we agreed, become new incentives to hatred and rage, when the communion of our country is dissolved.

To call the conflict between Britain and the American colonies a 'civil war' was already to talk contentiously. To the king and to many in parliament, those who took up arms against the British army were rebels guilty of sedition and insurrection, who deserved the fate of traitors. Part of the point of Burke's letter is to point out the inconsistency between this general attitude and specific policies adopted in the course of the conflict so far, for instance the exchange of prisoners. To the signatories of the Declaration of Independence, on the other hand, America had announced to the world its new status as a sovereign state fighting not a civil but an international war with what had once been, but was no longer, the mother country. The theme of David Armitage's fascinating book is the impossibility of arriving at a straightforwardly neutral definition of civil war, such as would enable the historian to decide when and how, for example, unrest in America turned from rebellion to civil war, and from civil to international war. The very concept of civil war, he argues, is political through and through. Whether or not a given conflict can be called a civil war will often be one of the very things that is being fought about.

Armitage shows that from the very beginning, which is to say, from the latter stages of the Roman republic, when the term *bellum civile* was coined, civil war was regarded as something unnatural and monstrous, as something apparently endemic to civic life and yet also impossible to conceptualise using the basic elements of the language of political thought. For how, Romans asked, could there be *war* (as opposed to

mere violence) *within* the city, between fellow citizens, not strangers? War was armed conflict, fought against an external enemy, in a just cause. How was it possible to be sure, in this kind of war, where justice lay? And yet conflicts that demanded to be called *civil* wars kept on taking place. Burke's heightened sense of the peculiar horror of civil war sounds like an echo of Lucan's great poem on the subject, written soon after the demise of the republic. Lucan's theme, announced at the start of *Civil War*, would be 'a mighty people attaching its own guts with victorious sword-hand', 'kin facing kin', 'universal guilt, standards ranged in enmity against standards, eagles matched and javelins threatening javelins'. 'Over the course of the almost five centuries to follow, roughly from Caesar to Augustine', Armitage observes, 'Roman historians intrepidly struggled to understand their civilization's greatest curse' (75). They developed three rival explanations as they did so. There was the republican narrative, adopted by Lucan among many others, which portrayed internal conflict as endemic to Roman civilization as such. Rome after all had come into existence by way of Romulus's murder of Remus, and struggle for precedence between plebeians and patricians ensured was something that it was not reasonable to expect would ever end. The goal of politics was merely to contain that struggle, understood as an unfortunate but inevitable side-effect of liberty and of the belligerent spirit upon which liberty depended. A rival narrative, to be found for example in Appian, offered a cure to the disease of civil war in the form of imperial power as achieved by the Caesars. Then, in contrast to both republican and imperial analyses, there was the Christian diagnosis arrived at by Augustine in *The City of God*, according to which, as Armitage puts it, 'civil war was the besetting sin of a city or commonwealth dedicated to the things of this world rather than to the glory of God' (89).

It is important to Armitage's argument that it was to Rome, not Athens, that early modern Europe looked for means of making sense their calamities. The ancient Greeks, he argues, never arrived at the concept of distinctively *civil* war. Their word *stasis* did not imply actual conflict or combat within the political community. For them, war was the antithesis of political life. A war within the *polis* was a contradiction in terms. There could be *domestic* war, within and between households, but not war among citizens. It was, therefore, Lucan and the many other Roman poets and historians who wrote on the city's intestine conflicts who haunted the imagination of Europe as it struggled to understand the civil wars that ravaged it during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. 'Early modern Europeans', Armitage explains, 'saw their own internal troubles as the culmination of a cycle of similar wars that had played out across Europe since the fall of the Roman empire and which seemed to follow the pattern of Rome's civil wars' (101). Grotius, who wrote in *The Rights of War and Peace* that 'A Civil War is worse than the necessity of submitting to an unlawful Government', and insisted that 'Any Peace is preferable to a Civil War', produced his own edition of Lucan. Hobbes prefaced *Behemoth*, a history of the English deeply indebted to Roman models, with an adaptation of the opening lines of Lucan's poem. Sir Robert Filmer -- or his editors -- used a passage from Lucan on the title page of *Patriarcha*. Both Hobbes and Filmer, of course, took up the imperial version of the Roman analysis of civil war, and argued, albeit in dramatically different ways, that only a single and undivided locus of sovereignty was capable of establishing peace in the commonwealth. Algernon Sidney, on the other hand,

emerges from Armitage's narrative as an important exponent of the republican approach to civil war. Armitage quotes Sidney's claim in the *Discourses* that 'Popular Governments are less to subject to Civil Disorders than Monarchies; manage them more ably, and more easily recover out of them'. At the same time, Sidney believed that 'Civil tumults and wars are not the greatest evils that befall nations'. Internecine conflict is undeniably awful, he admitted, but 'it is worse, to bring nations to such misery, weakness, and baseness, as to have neither strength nor courage to contend for any thing; to have nothing left worth defending, and to give the name of peace to desolation'.

In *Common Sense* Thomas Paine would echo Sidney's condemnation of over-reaching monarchy as a prime cause of civil war. The 'whole history of England', Paine claimed, falsifies the idea that monarchy preserves a nation from civil wars. Yet Paine was in most ways a republican of a very different kind to Sidney. He had little of Sidney's Machiavellian nostalgia for the sort of 'spirit of liberty' that makes 'tumults' inextricable from healthy political life. He understood what was happening in America as pointing forwards towards a new kind of future for human beings, rather than as pointing backwards to republican Rome. And, by the same token, it was crucial to Paine's version of the war in America that what was happening was (*pace* Burke) *not* a civil war, which was to say, *not* one more iteration of the cycle of violence between people and patricians that had begun in republican Rome. It was, instead, a *revolution*, defined as the beginning of a new political age. 'What were formerly called Revolutions', Paine announced in *The Rights of Man*, 'were little more than a change of persons, or an alteration of local circumstances. ... But what we see now in the world, from the Revolutions of France and America, is a renovation of the natural order of things'. This new concept of revolution, as Armitage says, was meant 'to repress memories of civil war and to replace them with something more constructive, more hopeful, and more forward-looking' (120). And yet, he argues, it will not do to take at face value, as Hannah Arendt did in *On Revolution*, the binary opposition set up by Paine between revolution on the one hand and civil war on the other. It is impossible cleanly to separate the emancipatory kind of conflict that deserves to be called a revolution from the ugly, wrenching, tragic violence of civil war. Most so-called wars of liberation were, at root, civil wars that were successfully 'rebranded' as revolutions. '[W]hen tracing the genealogy of modern revolutions', Armitage concludes, 'we should seriously consider the hypothesis that civil war was the genus of which revolution was only a species' (158).

Writing in 1791, Burke accepted that something unprecedented had happened in France. A '*new species* of Government' had been created, 'on new principles'. But he contended also that, because the state of France nevertheless deserved to be called a civil war, there would be legitimacy to Britain intervening on the royalist side. In the current state of things, he wrote, '(that is in the case of a *divided* kingdom) by the law of nations, Great Britain, like every other Power, is free to take any part she pleases'. Britain's failure to take the right part, as Burke saw it, would later become the angry, agonized theme of the *Letters on a Regicide Peace*. War with France would not be war with the entire French nation, he claimed there, but only with one element of it. In his insistence on the right of intervention in a civil war Burke followed the lead of the Swiss natural lawyer Emer de Vattel. Vattel is presented by Armitage as a crucial figure in the development of the idea

that civil war is susceptible of proper legal definition, such as would enable it to be distinguished clearly from rebellion. In *The Law of Nations*, published in 1758, Vattel argued that in civil war the two sides 'stand in precisely the same predicament as two nations, who engage in a contest, and, being unable to come to an agreement, have recourse to arms'. Conflict between two such parties, therefore, was subject to the law of nations, and not domestic law. This placed limits on how the two parties could treat each other's soldiers. It also meant that where superior military might was judged by a third party nation to be on the side of an unjust oppressor, there was a right of intervention. As Armitage explains, Vattel's key example of legitimate intervention was William of Orange's landing in England in November 1688. Armitage traces the continuation of Vattel's project of giving legal definition to civil war on through debates in America in the 1860s, and then to more recent efforts of social scientists to provide combatants and politicians with clean, value-free means of sorting internal conflicts into insurrections, rebellions, and civil wars. In the final chapter of *Civil Wars* he argues that this is, ultimately, a hopeless project. 'All ... attempts at precision', he writes, 'are as doomed as they are illusory for the simple reason that civil war is an essentially contested concept ... Being precise, in the sense of using clear definitions, turns out to be inescapably political' (226). Recent history in, for example, Iraq and Syria shows how much is at stake in deciding whether or not a conflict merits being called a civil war. The second Bush administration refused to allow that the situation in post-Saddam Iraq could be called a civil war, so as not to complicate the question of its backing of the new regime. Bashar al-Assad, backed by Vladimir Putin, refuses to allow that Syria is currently in a state of civil war, so as to problematize the legitimacy of Western intervention on behalf his opponents. And so on.

In his book's introduction, Armitage says that approaching civil war as an intellectual historian entails the rejection of the idea that civil war might have an 'essence'. What history shows is 'that civil war has had no stable identity or agreed definition. A fundamentally *political* concept, it has been reinterpreted and redeployed in multiple contexts for multiple purposes throughout the centuries. It may look descriptive, but it is firmly normative, expressing values and interpretations more than any stable identity' (18). Also in the introduction Armitage draws the reader's attention to the prevalence of civil war in world affairs since the end of the Second World War. 'Our own time demands an unblinking encounter with civil war', he observes. 'The three hundred years between 1648 and 1945 constituted an era of war *between* states; the last sixty years appear to be an age of war *within* states.' (7) Here at the beginning of the book he is hopeful that a properly historical understanding of civil war will reveal 'the contingency of the phenomenon, contradicting those who claim its permanence and durability'. 'It is my aim', he explains, 'to show that what human beings have invented, they may yet dismantle; and that what intellectual will has enshrined, an equal effort of imaginative determination can dethrone'. The belief that civil war is a permanent and necessary condition of human civilisation stands to be undermined, according to Armitage, by showing that the *concept* of civil war 'has a history with an identifiable beginning' (11). By the end of the book, however, he strikes a note both more sombre and, I think, more compelling. 'Civil war is an inheritance humanity may not be able to

escape', he says in conclusion (237). He is careful to distinguish such a claim from the assertion that human beings are naturally competitive, greedy, and aggressive. What he means is that concept of civil war is not one that we are likely ever to be able to do without. There is indeed every reason to think that, no matter how contestable and contested, it will remain a concept we need in order to make sense of the conflicts with which human societies seems permanently disposed to lacerate themselves. For history reminds us that politics, when it works well, is precisely *not*, to use a currently fashionable phrase, 'civil war by other means'. History tells us what armed conflict in a divided country is really like, and tells us that it is among the worst things which human beings can experience. Hobbes was right to say that politics is, or should be, first and foremost the attempt to prevent civil war -- no matter how civil war is defined.

It will be obvious from this review that over the course of six chapters and 239 pages of text Armitage covers a lot of ground. He is unapologetic about his use of relatively broad historical brush. He thinks that, in order to bring out the essentially political and contested nature of the concept, civil war needs to be examined in terms of the way in which Roman ways of thinking about it have been adapted and changed over very long periods of time. His book focuses on three key moments in this process: the genesis of the concept of civil war in ancient Rome, its transformation in early modern Europe, and its application to modern-day problems since the middle of the nineteenth century. *Civil Wars* is thus intended as an alternative to 'the rich reconstruction of historical particularity' characteristic of most books on the English Civil Wars, the American Civil War, or the Spanish Civil War (19). As his 2014 book (co-written with Jo Guldi) *The History Manifesto* makes clear, Armitage believes that history writing which makes a virtue of being focused on the 'Short Past' is inadequate to the challenge of making a contribution to the most serious debates -- for instance, those concerning climate change, international governance, and economic inequality -- of the present age. There is, he knows, a danger that large-scale work on the history of ideas will be read as a resurrection of the kind of 'history of abstractions', in Quentin Skinner's phrase, that so much work in intellectual history over the past fifty years has aimed at burying forever. That is why his book has the subtitle 'A History in Ideas'. But he makes no attempt to provide a definition of history *in* ideas as opposed to history *of* ideas, other than to say that "The "ideas" that lend this kind of history its structure are not disembodied entities, making intermittent entries into the mundane world from the idealism's heavenly realm, but rather focal points of arguments shaped and debated episodically across time, each instance being consciously -- or at least a provably -- connected with both earlier and later ones' (21). This makes it sound rather as though long-range intellectual history, à la Armitage, is to be constructed out of a judiciously chosen series of 'reconstructions of historical particularity', à la Skinner (and his many followers). If so, then the return to the *longue durée* advocated by Armitage could be seen as a supplement to, not a replacement of, detailed explorations of the Short Past.

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