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ISAIAH BERLIN: AGAINST THE CURRENT
Raymond Carr interviews Isaiah Berlin

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ISAIAH BERLIN: AGAINST THE CURRENT

Raymond Carr interviews Isaiah Berlin

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*Photo of 'The Club' dining society, 1976, by Jerry Moeran
Top: Roy Jenkins, Robert Blake, Hugh Trevor-Roper, E. T. 'Bill' Williams
Middle: John Sparrow, William Hayter, Isaiah Berlin, Kenneth Wheare
Bottom: Raymond Carr, Peter Strawson
Scan courtesy of María Jesús González*

RC I asked you once why you hadn't written your memoirs and you said you weren't interested in yourself.

IB A perfectly truthful answer. I think one has to be deeply interested in oneself to write good memoirs. Otherwise, it's simply a recital of impressions of persons and events; a collection of conversations, anecdotes, vignettes and reflections; and that, I don't think, makes for good autobiography.

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RC Nevertheless, people are interested in you. Now, you were born in Russia in 1909.

IB Well, you can call it Russia. I was born in Riga, which was part of the Russian Empire but was fundamentally a German city, even though the majority of its inhabitants were Letts.

RC How old were you when you left Riga?

IB My family left Riga very early, in 1915, when I was about four¹ and a half years old, and then we went to what was then called Petrograd, which had been St Petersburg and became Leningrad.

RC But then when did you leave St Petersburg?

IB If you will insist on calling it that, we left Leningrad² in 1919.

RC You must have seen some of the Russian Revolution? What impression did it make on you?

IB I saw both revolutions – the liberal February revolution and the Communist October revolution. I wasn't very old. I suppose I was eight.³ That's quite a good time to see revolutions because one's political opinions are still in the future, and one has, as a child, a very vivid sense and recollection of personalities and events. The first revolution – the February one – I remember very clearly. It was a *coup de théâtre*, exactly as a boy would remember a revolution; great excitement, turmoil, people in excited groups. My parents, who were in favour of the first (liberal) revolution, took me out on to the balcony of a sixth floor apartment, from which I remember seeing a great crowd with banners that said, 'Down with the Tsar', 'All Power to the Duma' (which was the parliament) and 'Down with War', 'Bread and Liberty' – things of that sort. Then we saw the troops advancing on them and suddenly the troops mingled with the crowd – and that was that. I came across no violence of any kind. The only time I ever saw anything horrifying came about through the actions of the police. You must remember that while

¹ sc. six.

² sc. Petrograd.

³ Seven for the first revolution, eight for the second.

lots of people may have begun by remaining attached to the Tsarist regime, the only organised force in Petersburg loyal to the regime – although the books don't report it – was the police. Some of them went to roofs and attics from which they sniped against the revolutionaries below. I was walking with my governess in one of the main streets when I saw a horrible scene...

RC You had a governess. Were you rich?

IB No, neither rich nor poor; an average middle-class family. My father was a timber merchant. His firm supplied sleepers for the railways.

RC They were building a lot of railways then.

IB Not in 1917. My father wasn't rich; he did not own much capital. During financial crises, he tended to think he was ruined. His grandfather had been very rich, and he was his general manager and representative abroad before the revolution – but that's another story. Here was I walking in the street with my governess (I didn't go to school in Russia) and saw a man being dragged off by what I can describe only as a lynching bee – a mob of men dragging off a man towards an unpleasant fate. He was pale, struggling, his face distorted, terrible. He was in policeman's uniform; he had probably been sniping. It was a most horrifying spectacle: a man surrounded by people dragging him away to his death. This gave me a horror of violence, physical violence of every kind, for the rest of my life.

RC It's like Chateaubriand's description of seeing his friends' heads passing the window, on pikes.

IB Yes. Anyone who has ever seen a single person, whoever he was, whatever his crimes, being dragged off to violent execution, is not likely to forget it unless he is brutal, or insensitive, or singularly detached by nature.

RC You have spent a great deal of your intellectual effort on explaining Russian thought.

IB Yes, somewhat late in life. I began doing that only after the war.

RC Spaniards sometimes see, as the Left did in the 1930s, a certain similarity between Russia and Spain. Here, there are two countries on the edge of the central core of Europe and therefore are constantly adopting the major currents of thought in the core of Europe. Now, have you any views about this imitative and adoptive process? For instance, do you find a uniform pattern? At first, the countries on the margin are enthusiastic, soaked with the foreign thought; then they begin to think, as the Spaniards thought in the case of the French, that the French are materialists; and then finally, they go through a stage of saying, 'Look, our culture is better, we have got some genuine values of our own superior to those of foreigners.'

IB Yes, there is a similarity. I don't know Spanish history, I am ashamed to say, and so have no useful comment to make. In Russia it is more or less what happened, as happens in most so-called 'underdeveloped' or declining countries. A society begins by feeling humiliated at being thought to be ignorant, backward, of no importance. Then some of the more gifted people are sent to be educated abroad, and come back intoxicated with a foreign culture, and a desire to impart it to their countrymen. Imitation of this foreign culture begins, sometimes quite successfully. Then national pride revolts against this: there is a growing reaction against aping foreigners, as happened in Germany in the late eighteenth century. An authentic German, it is proclaimed, is better than a third-rate Frenchman. Every society has its own character, created by response to environment, traditions, language, its own centre of cultural gravity – it is shameful to display borrowed plumage, and always ends in squalid humiliation. That was Herder's message to the German-speaking people. Slavophiles in Russia reacted in much the same way. This kind of reaction is, at times, a form of sour grapes. By the end of the seventeenth century, some Germans – especially the pietist preachers – in effect asked, 'What does the dominant culture, the French, really possess? Yes, the French are supreme in political power, in war, in all the arts, they dominate Europe both materially and culturally. But all that is mere dross. The highest value, which is alone worth pursuing', the Germans

said to themselves, ‘is a man’s relation to his own soul, his relationship to God – the inner life – that alone is what matters. Let the French celebrate their secular triumphs, keep their glitter and social graces, let their elegant *abbés* slide across the polished floors of the great *salons*. Such a life is false; the life of worthless, corrupt creatures. Real life is ours – Christian faith, spiritual depth, the inner life. Its art is music, which is inward, an outpouring of the soul – that is our German heritage.’ As in Germany in the late eighteenth century, that is what was said in Russia by the anti-Western Slavophiles in the first decades of the nineteenth century. Most ‘underdeveloped’ peoples tend to react in this defensive fashion, I think, against the pride and arrogance of their greatly admired neighbours.

RC The Russian intelligentsia, I suppose, were most deeply influenced by Hegel?

IB Well, a very small group of intellectuals read him and his disciples, and the other German thinkers of the age also, especially Schelling.

RC The odd thing about Spain is that they picked up a totally second-rate German philosopher, Krause, and were dominated by him. But can I get on to another thing? There is this adoption of foreign models; and the other thing which Spaniards have pointed out is the failure of what one might call bourgeois liberalism in the nineteenth century.

IB I think that can be exaggerated in the case of Russia. The normal account of Russia is that first you have peasants and despotism, then Communism, with nothing much in between, that there never was a middle class. It is true that Joseph de Maistre predicted, in a famous letter written in St Petersburg, that the Russians would pass from barbarism to despotism with nothing in between. But between about 1860 and 1917, there was a growing, Westernised middle class, there was a genuine bourgeoisie, not just in a Marxist sense, there were cultured liberals. The Great Reforms under Alexander II – agrarian, judicial, economic – were not ineffective. The leap forward in industrial production, acquittals by

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juries of revolutionaries, the spread of education, were all symptoms of this. Of course, it was a despotism: there was oppression, particularly of minorities – Jews, Finns, Poles – the pogroms and the Black Hundreds are not an invention of historians; nevertheless, there was no intrinsic reason why the liberal bourgeoisie should not, to some extent, have acquired power; the 1905 revolution was their doing: it failed, but it cracked the old system. They were defeated by the superior tactics of Lenin, who despised their moral inhibitions. Stolypin's creation of peasant proprietors might have worked – he was assassinated just in time. The Bolshevik victory was not inevitable – Lenin was not so very sure how long it would last.

RC You obviously do not share the view of Moses Hess that Russia was the great reserve of barbarism, which would overwhelm Europe if it did not unite?

IB Karl Marx, too, thought that Russia was a huge reserve of reactionary barbarism. He was, of course, anti-Slav anyway. He saw them as a lot of clodhoppers, and refused to sit at the same table as Alexander Herzen.

RC You think it was just the tactical genius of Lenin who had thought about the nature of a revolution?

IB Yes, it was decisive. The point is this. The Russian autocracy was bound to generate left-wing revolutionaries. They couldn't operate effectively – as a socialist party – inside Russia because that was not permitted. They formed secret societies, but the police destroyed their loose organisations, particularly after the assassination of Alexander II. It was clear that a mass party could not be organised; they could operate only from abroad. An effective organisation of a resolute group could be created only outside Russia. This itself created the tight centre controlled by Lenin – more out of the needs of the moment than Marxist dogma or long-term planning. The only methods they, like the Italian Carbonari, could employ were conspiratorial.

RC The Russian thinkers you seem most sympathetic to are the Russian thinkers who spent most of their lives outside Russia, i.e.

Turgenev and Herzen. Why do you like Herzen and Turgenev so much, and if I read you rightly, Dostoevsky so little?

IB I admit that Herzen and Turgenev are both deeply sympathetic to me, even though, despite being friends, they did not see eye to eye politically. I like them because they were undogmatic, capable of scepticism. They were liberals who saw too many sides of too many questions to become fanatics like the terrorist revolutionaries who looked down on them, which I find sympathetic. They are the least narrow, most humane social thinkers in the nineteenth century, even more so than Tocqueville or Mill. They were steeped in Western culture, but they weren't overwhelmed by it. They saw its vices. They did not like the bourgeoisie. They were deeply patriotic but were clearly aware of the full horrors of Russian life, and therefore they knew that they wanted a radical change, but didn't think they would see it in their lifetime. Herzen was more hopeful – far too optimistic, as it turned out. Turgenev remained a liberal sceptic. Both came closer to a realistic assessment of the actual situation, I think, than anybody else. They understood the difficulties but did not give up. Dostoevsky did, and became a fervent supporter of the autocracy.

Another thing which I think is true about Russian writers, which I don't find sympathetic but which is interesting, is this. The whole of Russian literature, Herzen once said, is an indictment against Russian life, and there is truth in that. The writers born in the eighteenth century, the generation of Pushkin, were aristocratic Westerners. They wrote like well-born gentry brought up on French literature. Their work is not especially identified with Russia, they were simply poets, were like writers anywhere. But the majority of those who were born in the nineteenth century became aware of the absence of liberal values in Russia – this was largely a result of the impact of the West, which was particularly powerful after the Napoleonic invasion, when the Russian troops, in particular their well-educated commanders, marched to Paris. Russian aristocratic officers saw in France, which was, after 1815, not a particularly progressive country, one which (like Prussia) seemed to them ten times more advanced than their own. They came back filled with liberal ideas, which led to their failed Decembrist revolt. The consciousness of backwardness found a

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voice in the only form of writing that was permitted – fiction and poetry. Russian literature in the nineteenth century is preoccupied with the problems of Russia – ‘accursed problems’ they were called – illiteracy, serfdom, an arbitrary bureaucracy and gentry, suppression of criticism. Everything the Russian novelists wrote was concerned with the condition of Russia. It was a kind of national narcissism: what is our history? Whither Russia? Shall we ever be a civilised society? Or a free one? Or technologically productive? Will the government and the Church rule us for ever? What is to be our fate? Are we, perhaps, in fact superior to the West? Because we haven’t had a horrid revolution, are we fresher, younger, less ruined and depressed? Have we not a wonderful, uncorrupt peasantry, as opposed to the corrupt, trivial, commercialised bourgeoisie and the degraded proletariat of the West? Is our Church, neither a decadent Rome nor an atomised, Protestant individualism, a purer and nobler Christianity, which may yet save mankind? Or are we mere casualties of the historical process, doomed to look for ever, enviously, at the West? Or can we hope to repeat, or may we skip, the stages of its advance? Should we try to work for something like the French liberal monarchy or republic? And so on. No other writers are so preoccupied with the destiny of their country. You don’t get Jane Austen saying, ‘Whither England?’, or Dickens ‘What is to become of my people?’ – or Stendhal or Hugo on the destinies of France.

RC You do get writers in Spain asking, ‘What is the essence of Spain?’

IB What is it to be a Spaniard? What is the position of Spain in the world? What is our national mission, if any? Have we got one? That’s how it was in Russia. And, I imagine, for the same reasons.

RC But don’t you think the English are beginning to ask this sort of question now?

IB Well, the time has probably come. I think the English have been rich and happy for a very long time: real anxiety about their future is beginning.

RC Can I get back to your intellectual and personal biography? After you left St Petersburg, you came to England?

IB Yes.

RC Then you had an orthodox English education?

IB Completely.

RC Did you, at any time, feel an outsider in this system?

IB No. Rather too little of an outsider, if anything. I might have been expected to feel an outsider – at least to some extent. After all, when I came to England, I spoke only the kind of English sentences which my governess in Petersburg had taught me. I was plunged into an English private school in, of all places, Surbiton, a suburb of London. I was a foreigner – I must have been miserable in the first fortnight or three weeks of being there, though I don't remember it. But at the end of my second term I took part in the school Christmas play. I was second murderer in *Babes in the Wood*. Evidently I spoke English well enough for that,⁴ and felt assimilated, perhaps almost too readily. I was about ten and a half or eleven⁵ when I came to England, and after my private school I went to St Paul's School in London and became psychologically anglicised. I don't know what I seemed like to other people, but inwardly and psychologically Russia became a chapter in a past life, as in some kind of novel or story, somewhat remote, a set of recollections of another life, not connected with anything I was doing now. I remembered it, and I could describe it, but it wasn't real, not continuous with my actual life – an abandoned chapter.

RC Let's come back to your intellectual history. After school you came to Oxford where you read classics?

IB No, not quite; philosophy and ancient history, and after that, philosophy and economics. I never understood economics from

⁴ He recounts elsewhere that his only line was 'I'm a-comin', I'm a-comin'.'

⁵ Ten and a half is right.

the first day to the last. This is still a source of great embarrassment and shame to me. I can't begin to understand it. Then I became a teacher of philosophy at Oxford until 1950.

RC What interests people about you, people who have read your work, is why you switched from being what you might call a technical philosopher to become a historian of ideas. Was this because you felt that your fellow philosophers were playing meaningless games, or did you feel they were glued to some kind of reductionist philosophy?

IB No, I was thoroughly integrated into Oxford empirical reductionism. I wasn't a logical positivist, as some of the ablest Oxford philosophers were before the war, but I was a philosopher among philosophers. I didn't have any sense of reaction against philosophy as it was done in Oxford. I was an enthusiastic, loyal, but rather second-rate, or perhaps third-rate, philosopher. But I enjoyed it very much and I enjoyed teaching it. But I also went on reading Russian. I could (and can) speak and read it without difficulty, but I can't write it easily. I went on reading Pushkin, Turgenev, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Chekhov: Herzen I never knew anything about until I came across him, quite accidentally, on the shelves of the London Library. It was a name which I had come across – it was referred to in modern Russian works. I had a vague idea that he was some kind of ponderous social prophet, perhaps of a rather dreary kind. Then I began reading his memoirs – *My Past and Thoughts*. They are, I believe, the best writing of this kind by anybody in the nineteenth century. Herzen was a writer of genius, as indeed his great Russian contemporaries – Tolstoy and Dostoevsky who did not share his views – fully recognised. He is today a heroic figure in the Soviet pantheon. This is a historical irony which he (who wrote so disparagingly about Marx and Communism) would have been the first to appreciate. No one, not even Voltaire, so brilliantly exposed so many chicaneries in public life.

This brings me to 1934, when Mr H. A. L. Fisher, an eminent English academic historian and politician, invited me to write a small book on Karl Marx. First, he offered it to Professor Laski, who declined; then he offered it to the present Lord Longford, who also declined; then to two or three others. Finally, in despair,

he thought of me, because it seemed to him that I had given no evidence of any political opinions at all, and therefore would be objective. I thought, well, I don't know very much about Marx; clearly he is going to be more rather than less important as the world is developing. Unless I have a pressing reason, I shall never make myself read him properly – the writings are too many, too dense, I shall get stuck. But if I am to write about him, I shall be forced to read more than *The Communist Manifesto*, or the *Eighteenth Brumaire* – a good thing to do if one is going to go on living in the contemporary world. After this, I began reading Marx quite intensively, partly in German but also in a Russian translation, because the great edition of the works of Marx and Engels had been stopped by Hitler but continued in Moscow. As a result of reading both Herzen and Marx, I became fascinated by the eighteenth century Encyclopedists, and then Saint-Simon, Fourier, Sismondi, Fichte, Hegel. That stimulated my interest in the history of social and political ideas, and allied to them, religious and aesthetic ideas too – the relationships are very intimate and close, both in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

That was the first factor. The second factor is more personal; I might as well mention it. During the war, I worked in the British Embassy in Washington. I was a (very temporary) First Secretary. I was given a letter of introduction by my friend, the American Supreme Court Justice, Felix Frankfurter, to a philosopher called Sheffer, a professor at Harvard University, celebrated for his contribution to mathematical logic, a subject about which I knew very little – it was scarcely taught at Oxford in the 1930s. I went to lunch with Harry Sheffer and he said to me, 'You know, it is curious, philosophy is such an odd subject. One can't become learned in it. One can't know at the end more than one knows at the beginning. You can be a learned historian, you can be a learned philologist, but there are only two subjects in philosophy where intellectual progress is genuinely possible. One is logic, where new gadgets – techniques, methods, proofs, tools of knowledge – replace the old ones, and one makes progress – problems are solved, solved once and for all. The other is psychology, an empirical field where knowledge can advance – that is progress. But you can't say of somebody that he is a scholar in ethics, learned in epistemology – that is meaningless. One can be learned

in the history of philosophy, but not in philosophy. Philosophy is not the kind of subject which grows by cumulative knowledge. It is something quite different. It has no rules, no communicable techniques, no discoveries or inventions which, once found, can be applied by competent experts who are not themselves creative or original. It's more like criticism; it's more like the intellectual imagination at work.⁷

I thought about this when I had to go, in 1944, in a bomber from Canada to England on a visit to the Foreign Office. The flight took about nine hours. The aircraft was not pressurised and we were in the dark – one could not read, nor sleep, because one might accidentally press on, and block, the oxygen pipe that fed one. So I was forced to think for all of those nine hours – a painful experience. I think that Descartes, or it may have been someone else, once said that one can think intensively only for four minutes or so, one cannot even muse indefinitely. I have, or had, quite an active mind. Anyway, I thought that here I was, not really a first-rate philosopher. I was not sure how much I wanted to know the answers to philosophical questions. I was, I thought, quite good at playing the game, understanding what other philosophers said, at abstract ideas, at discussing, arguing, refuting, establishing propositions, conceiving possible situations, even possible worlds – but I did not remain awake at night tormented by philosophical problems. On the other hand, I did want to know at the end of my life more than I knew at the beginning, and that could be done in a historical field. What I found gripped me was the history of Russian social and political ideas and movements, which, without set intention, I began reading in my spare time in Washington.

At the end of the war, I was transferred to the British Embassy in Moscow for four or five months, where again I was even more sharply stimulated into thinking about the history of Russian thought, particularly about the forerunners of the Russian revolution. The intellectual history of Russia became a subject of greater and greater interest to me. When I came back to Oxford, I announced to my astonished colleagues that I wished to stop teaching philosophy and begin to apply myself to the history of ideas. They were aghast. The history of ideas as a field of knowledge has never been taught in the average British university. Britain is the one country in Europe where the history of ideas was not, and still is not, regarded as a wholly respectable subject. So I

was told that I must not let my college down, and that I must go on teaching philosophy for a while, at least. If I wanted to switch to something else, I must make my own arrangements. In the end, I managed to persuade my old home, All Souls College, to give me a research fellowship in that subject, and that is how I came to study it.

RC What you have been doing in the history of ideas, it seems to me, is to try to illuminate the major shifts in the way men have conceived of themselves. You locate one of these major shifts in the way men conceive themselves and their relations to the universe as coming in the late eighteenth century. Romanticism, to you, is one of the great formative influences in modern European thought. You came to Vico as one of the fore-runners of these novel ideas. Why, when and how did you come to Vico?

IB Curiously enough, I can't remember. I suspect that I came to Vico because Collingwood, who was an Oxford philosopher, delivered lectures on the philosophy of history in which Vico was discussed – he had translated Croce's book on Vico into English. Vico then was a strange name to most philosophical ears.

RC Do you think that Vico's view of life is ultimately pessimistic?

IB No, I don't think so. Let me say a little more about my interest in Vico. As I told you, as a result of my interest in Herzen and Karl Marx, I studied the French Encyclopedists – Holbach, Helvétius, Diderot, Condorcet, Condillac, of course Voltaire – who had fewer original or arresting ideas than the others, but wrote wonderfully and had a gigantic influence. And lesser figures – La Mettrie, Galiani, Mably and the like.

RC It always struck me that you were a bit unfair to Voltaire in the sense that Voltaire, like Montesquieu, had, in a very crude way, the idea of the *esprit*, the spirit of a civilisation.

IB That's what I have against him. Voltaire invented the concept, more or less, of the history of culture or *moeurs*, but when you look at the actual historical works of Voltaire, they are perfectly

conventional. The history of Charles XII, the history of Peter the Great, are simply series of anecdotes.

RC It's the *Histoire des moeurs* that I was thinking about.

IB *L'Histoire des moeurs*⁶ seems to me to slide over the surface. He had an important, original idea of history, much wider than an account of wars, and reigns, and constitutions, and political activities, but what he says remains conventional. Voltaire was certainly the most famous writer of his time, and must have freed more people than anyone in the whole of the history of mankind from religious or intellectual obscurantism and oppression – the greatest liberator of modern times. His services to civilisation are immense. For the same reason I became – and still am – an admirer of the Encyclopedists, the great liberal materialists of the eighteenth century, who performed the noble task of mocking and undermining a great deal that was obscurantist and odious in the Europe of the time. But as in the case of Voltaire, it seemed to me that what they said was too simple and too dogmatic, too unaware of, or uninterested in, the complex nature of human societies and of how they came to be what they were; so that what followed in the nineteenth century appeared to me to be a natural reaction against them, in some respects dangerous, but always interesting.

I began reading Vico. Here was a paradox. On one side Voltaire, the most famous thinker in Europe, and one of the most influential. On the other, a poor Italian professor of rhetoric in Naples, whom nobody of importance read, known mainly to jurists, a man who pathetically writes to, for example, an editor of a scholarly journal begging him to mention his name, to do something for his reputation. Vico writes in an archaic, contorted Italian, a source of headaches to his readers to this day. Yet there is a sense in which Vico won. If you ask what thought in the West has been like from the early nineteenth century onwards, the biggest single shift in the European consciousness was made by novel, Romantic, historical ideas of which Vico was a forerunner. Vico saw through and rejected faith in linear progress. He developed the understanding of the variety of cultures, of the attitude to reality which lies at the heart of each individual culture; indeed, of what cultures are, the differences between the

⁶ *Essai sur les moeurs et l'esprit des nations* (1756).

successive changes of collective consciousness which constitute the history of men and sentient beings. He was not a Romantic himself. But he did realise that the key which the eighteenth century used to open doors to the truth in every region was totally inadequate as a means of understanding the lives of societies, of their sense of themselves, particularly of primitive societies, conveyed by their myths, language, rites, poetry, religion. This indeed created new methods and new fields of thought and knowledge – the history of culture, of art, of literature, of ideas, anthropology, and generated a major shift, a new beginning.

RC I came across Vico through Michelet.

IB Well, Michelet caught fire from Vico. Michelet suddenly grew deeply excited. He was introduced to Vico, I think, ultimately by Victor Cousin, who was a polymath, and directed him to Italian writers living in Paris, on Vico. Michelet produced a very eloquent, beautifully written, free translation of the *New Science*, unreliable as a translation, but marvellously readable. Towards the end of his life, Michelet declared that Vico was his only master, that in the little pandemonium of the *New Science* all the German historicists were already contained – that he owed everything to the Neapolitan of genius.

RC What I am saying is I think Vico is pessimistic because I always feel – mind you, it's thirty years since I've read Vico – that he rather regrets that we have passed from the age of heroic poetry to prose and philosophy; that somehow or other, the Homeric age had a vitality which is irrecoverable.

IB This is both true and untrue. You're perfectly right. He is the first person to write on the Homeric age as if it had values and energies and achievements of its own, which we in our civilised societies cannot reproduce. And the recognition of those values and what they grew out of is one of the great things about him. He says that the people of the Homeric age were brutal, mean, avaricious, cruel – not at all an age for someone like Vico himself to have lived in – but that the great epics could have been created only by semi-barbarians of this sort. His point is that every culture

lives in the light of its own unique values, which other cultures lose. But I don't think there is actually a lament, as if a decline had occurred. His idea is that men ascend. They start from wild barbarism, the *orribili bestioni*,⁷ those frightful cave-dwelling monsters, brutal, stupid, insensate, hardly distinguishable from animals. Gradually, as a result of the work of benevolent Providence – Vico remained a Christian, though some people have denied it – their very acts, brutal and motivated by low passions, lead to unpredicted consequences of a beneficial kind. This is the work of Providence, which causes the victims of savage assaults by stronger men to [create] forms of self-protection, which in their turn lead to tribal culture. This culture gradually becomes civic. Then we have the age of the heroes, which is, I suppose, the Homeric age, chieftains, tribal leaders, oligarchies. And from that develops the modern period, ending in democracy. Vico is acutely aware of the shortcomings of democracy (which he does not much like), because he thinks that religion and obedience to authority are part and parcel of what makes societies secure and strong, as expressed in certain social manifestations; and when that inevitably disintegrates, people become over-individualistic, totally absorbed in themselves, isolated from one another, social co-operation, social links are broken, society becomes degenerate, and there follows what he called the new 'barbarism of reflection' (i.e. destructive scepticism), in which each cycle of cultures ends. Then savages, bows and arrows again, and a new cycle begins to rise. This apparently goes on indefinitely. This is certainly not orthodox Christian doctrine.

RC This is a personal question – you needn't answer it if you don't want to. I am always surprised in your work, the great sympathy you have – after all, you called Vico a 'religious humanist' – you have great sympathy with deeply religious people like Hamann, for instance. Are you a religious man yourself?

IB No, I am not. But I do not regard religious faith and its institutions as hateful or absurd, as they seemed to Voltaire and his disciples in our own century, Bertrand Russell, H. G. Wells, Lytton Strachey and so on. I think the religions express attitudes and values which are universal. The eighteenth century German writer,

⁷ *New Science*, para. 374.

Hamann, says that men are not simply rational creatures; that at all periods they want to worship, to believe, to sacrifice themselves, to trust in Providence, that they have a sense of the numinous. To dismiss all this as so many relics of a barbarous infancy – superstitions and nonsense – as the French *philosophes* tended to do, is rather like ignoring or denying the importance of sexual drives, or fear of death, or the search for salvation, in human lives: blindness to empirical reality. Hamann said that God was not a mathematician but an artist, he creates as he pleases. The acts of his will are not to be caught in our neat, rational nets; hence the interpretation of men and nature in mathematical or physical or biological terms leaves out what is most profoundly human in human beings, that which has to do with imagination, poetry and the life of the spirit. Bone-dry atheists, who look on all this as so much infantile nonsense, seem to me to lack understanding of what men live by – like the relation of the tone deaf to music. I am, therefore, not unsympathetic to the religious temperament, without being at all religious myself. I value tradition. I am glad of irrational links. I do not wish to think that everything is spick and span – that the universe is an unbreakable system of cause and effect in which everything is, in principle, predictable, governed by iron laws which science can one day completely discover. I wish there to be breaks. I wish there to be ‘swerves’, as Epicurus called them – the possibility of exceptions, oddities, unpredictable events, moments of illumination with no rational foundation, sudden, inexplicable flowering of entire schools of art, thought, ways of living – otherwise there is no room for genius.

RC I have always been puzzled when Vico constantly asserts that men make their own history. Let us take the Russian Revolution – in what sense did the Russians make the Russian Revolution? Without the Great War, which obviously the Russians didn’t ‘make’, there wouldn’t have been a Russian Revolution.

IB Well, Vico does say that men make their own history. This, in the literal sense of the word, is obviously false. First of all, there is a world of nature. Nobody is going to deny that the physical environment – and the laws of nature in general – have a dominant effect on sentient creatures, as on all creatures. Then

there are the unpredictable consequences of deliberate human actions. Therefore, in what sense do men *make* the events in their history – mental or material – that they don't intend? To say that men make their own history seems a violent exaggeration. But what I think Vico meant was that men create their own culture, which is all that he was interested in. He was plainly not interested in a simple succession of historical events. He wasn't writing about wars and revolutions, or the influence of geographical or genetic factors, or about economic life – though he did take some interest in it. What he claimed to have done was to have discovered the impact on men of their own efforts to understand the world, to explain it to themselves, of how this caused them to be and do and suffer, of what the reactions of human beings were to the aims and results of their own efforts. All this he looks on as being some kind of self-creation. Of course, you can say this is a minute part of what goes on in the world. What Michelet initially got from Vico was this very idea that the history of culture is a history of human endeavours to control their own lives and move in certain directions. For Michelet, I suppose, this was mainly the desire to achieve liberty from the despotism both of nature and of men, to struggle and defeat forces which he regarded as deleterious to the realisation of human potentialities in the social and political sphere: for instance slavery, or clerical tyranny. The idea that culture is the process of self-transformation by human beings into something which they cannot wholly predict is Vico's central invention. There is something not dissimilar in Hegel and Marx.

RC All your work is – I don't say a rejection – but a criticism of what one might call monism, I mean that you see all these people you admire destroying the idea that human beings are made of the same stuff. Now, is your rejection of monism and your constant reassertion of the value of pluralism – do you see monism as some sort of moral error that leads to unfortunate simplifications, or do you see it as an intellectual error?

IB I think it is an intellectual error that can have appalling moral consequences. When I am reading these admirable Frenchmen of the eighteenth century, I have great sympathy for them. I am not a Romantic. I am not a follower of Hamann or Kierkegaard or Nietzsche. I believe in rational conduct of human life, within

limits. I don't believe in a wild, buzzing, Romantic confusion at all, and I don't believe in the reality or value of some unending, unintelligible spiritual storm. I believe in planning of a liberal kind, based on knowledge, experience, science, limited by respect for humane values. I am not against any of these things. But in the eighteenth century this went too far – it ignored the empirical evidence by which it claimed to be guided. And what emerges from these Encyclopedists, and is reflected afterwards in Marx and Marxism, is the notion that it is possible to organise human life in a systematic way, based on eternally true premisses, by means of methods which, once discovered, can be depended on for ever. That, in my view, does create suffocation. I don't think that the admirable Diderot, Helvétius, Condorcet actually meant to curtail human freedom to that degree. But manipulation, coercion follow from the exaggerated belief in the possibility of government of human beings in the light of scientific principles. Marxism appeals to scientists largely because Marx also believed this. The only difference was that he thought this could not be done until the world in which men exploited other men, and there was the reign of false consciousness, which led to all kinds of distortions – until that world was destroyed root and branch, and men therefore became free and rational and harmonious and lived happily for ever after. I don't think this is a possibility, even in principle. I think it is neither realisable nor desirable. Variety, deviation from norms, the incalculable activity of human genius are, I hope, unsuppressable.

RC The odd thing about these people who thought there was a standard human stuff and therefore some 'true' solution to human dilemmas, is that they let in pluralism by the back door. Hobbes thought the unchangeable human stuff is other than Condorcet thought it was. I agree with you that what one might call their methodology is the same.

IB Their psychology – their ideas about the nature of man – are different. Everything is based on what you think basic human needs are. Their diagnoses are different, and therefore their prognoses differ too. I cannot deny that pluralism is my fixed belief, which nobody has ever been able to shake out of me. Not

very many people – certainly not many philosophers – agree with my belief that some of the ultimate values by which we live, whether they are objective or not, can collide. And since they collide, and something is lost as a result, the very idea of a perfect harmony, where all true values fit, like the solution of a crossword puzzle, is conceptually – not just empirically – fallacious and logically incoherent, at least not coherent with human experience. Let me go further than this and say something I do not think I have said before.

RC Good Lord! Steady on! Steady on!

IB It is this. Some of our best-known thinkers tell us that mankind pursues certain permanent ideals. For example peace, or security. These are regarded as human goals to be found from the earliest times, ends which take different forms in accordance with differing circumstances. I wonder if this is true. I have been reading one of the fathers of sociology, the Scottish eighteenth-century writer, Adam Ferguson, who points out that, for example, the proposition that men seek peace and have always sought it, and fight only to avert danger from actual or possible enemies, is simply not true. He happened, at one point in his life, to be the Chaplain of the Black Watch Regiment in Scotland, and noticed that some pretty savage and dangerous games were played by the Highlanders. He asked himself, ‘Why do these people take risks which end often in physical damage and sometimes in death, when nothing forces them to take part in such sports – certainly not any perception of danger from their enemies?’ And he came to the conclusion that men positively liked danger, that they engaged in dangerous exercises because they wanted to be excited, because they were threatened with tedium if they were at peace for too long – they tended to become aggressive because they got bored.

RC This is William James’s moral substitute for war in peacetime?

IB Yes. Ferguson remarked that one of the most glorious ages, we were always told, was the fifth century BC in Greece – the marvellous culture of Athens and of other Hellenic towns. He pointed out that never was the peninsular so covered with blood as in that glorious century, when city fought against city, crops were

constantly burnt, men killed, military prowess admired beyond everything. Yes, peace was a desirable state of affairs, but not so very many have sought it, or believed, even the wisest among them, that peace was best. However wise men were, they might still want to climb the highest mountains, they might still want to risk their lives for the sake of excitement, of satisfying ambitions which are not compatible with peaceful lives. The same thing is true of security. When people have been secure for too long, they seek the opposite – or, at any rate, some antidote to the protected life. Ideals not only collide, but are themselves impermanent and insufficient. There's a double jeopardy here. On the one hand, not all ultimate goals are compatible. On the other hand, they are not even ultimate for everybody at all times. The idea that if only men were wise, they would know what the true goals are, and that all these goals are harmonious, turns out to be false on both counts. So what are we to do? My conclusion is excessively unexciting. It lacks the fire of inspiration. All we can do is to try to keep the human show on the road, try to advance by systematic compromises. When you have goals which collide, or human beings who, let us assume, like fighting, and other human beings too weak to resist them successfully, all we can do, it seems to me, is try to prevent massacres or enslavement or oppression – or at least diminish their frequency or strength, by whatever means we can – by trade-offs, by allowing so much to this, so much to that; so much to peace, so much to courage, so much to liberty. Total liberty is evidently not compatible with total equality; but equality is an eternal human ideal, too, one I am strongly for. You probably don't agree?

RC Certainly not.

IB But I believe it. I think inequality is a most painful condition.

RC Very painful, but it's also a stimulating condition.

IB Yes, but so is war. War may be the greatest mother of invention there has ever been, but that is not a good enough reason for wars, extermination and oppression. All human beings should be

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entitled to a certain degree of security, respect and dignity – simply as human beings.

RC I don't call that equality; it's respect for other human beings.

IB I do not believe in universal equality in all respects. I am in favour of whatever the Spanish equivalent might be of meritocracy in intellectual matters. Of course I don't agree with Bakunin, who wanted to abolish universities just because they bred inequality, because those who had been to universities felt themselves to be superior to those who had not, and tried to dominate them. But nothing is more ludicrous, and often odious, than thinking oneself self-evidently superior to everybody else. Bakunin thought that of Marx, who was indeed very vain. I don't know if you remember Bakunin's condemnation of Marx as a triple tyrant – as a German, as a Hegelian, and as a Jew. But social and political equality is another matter.

RC Is all this why you are so dismissive of de Tocqueville?

IB I just don't take to him. I think Tocqueville's terror of equality can be overdone. I think equality is as desirable as liberty, as happiness, as the self-inflicted torments of creative artists and thinkers. On the one hand, you can say that if people are psychologically in pain, it is desirable to cure them, and relieve their ills by psychoanalytic or any other means that are available. On the other hand, it seems clear to me that if Beethoven had been 'cured', made a carefree, totally satisfied citizen of Bonn or Vienna, we should not have had the posthumous quartets.

RC I sometimes doubt that.

IB I think that art sometimes springs from wounds, from what is spoken of as divine discontent.

RC There are exceptions to this. Was Tolstoy deeply wounded?

IB He was certainly guilt-ridden. I think that if Tolstoy had been a contented Count living on his estates, a jolly fellow occasionally coming for the season to Moscow or to Petersburg, we should not

have had *War and Peace*. He was a proud, difficult, self-punishing, socially uneasy, contemptuous man. People like that are not made for happiness.

RC So much of your work has been detecting the great swings in men's conception of themselves, explaining those who have been sensitive to these swings in advance. Do you detect today any groundswell now which a perceptive Vico ought to be aware of?

IB You mean in the modern world? I am not much of an observer of the modern world. I regret that we seem to be living in a period of comparative artistic sterility. It seems to me difficult to say, in the age in which we are living, that painters of genius, composers of genius are known to be alive – perhaps only one or two. Maybe in fifty years' time it will turn out that I was quite wrong. There are only two arts, I believe, which appear to be advancing. One is the cinema, of which there are masters; the other is architecture, in which we are vastly superior to the nineteenth century.

RC Who are the architects you particularly admire?

IB A good many. Among the living: Kenzo Tange, Arata Isazaki, Philip Johnson, Kevin Roche, I. M. Pei, Robert Venturi, Richard Meier; I admire the man who built the library in Mexico City, whose name I can't remember.⁸ Among others in our century, those who built the Rockefeller Center in New York; Alvar Aalto, Louis Kahn, Pier Luigi Nervi, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. I don't wish to mention British architects, that would be too invidious.

RC I hope you don't admire Le Corbusier, whom I regard as a disaster.

IB No, I happen not to. I admire the masters of the Bauhaus, and I admire the enemies of the Bauhaus. I admire the early Russian constructivists, and postmodernism, and neoclassicism. We are now in a post-technological age. So much the better. I wish I admired more contemporary composers.

⁸ Alberto Kalach.

RC You don't think Britten a genius?

IB I have a blind spot about him. Britten is a great British icon. One is not allowed to say a word against him, nor do I wish to. But I prefer Tippett. I think the last composer of indubitable genius in our time was probably Stravinsky. And the last great painter, with the possible exception of Bacon, was, I suppose, Picasso. And that's it.

RC But you really admire Picasso, don't you?

IB Very greatly. You don't.

RC It's all too easy. I think of works of art as being the result of many difficult processes.

IB One can't tell. Mozart seems to have composed easily. Beethoven didn't, so far as we know. I can't believe that Bach was tormented. He was just a composer in Leipzig who wrote new pieces for Sunday services in the Thomaskirche. I have thought of something which I would like to add. Here was Johann Sebastian Bach, and there was Jean Philippe Rameau. Here was Voltaire and there was Vico. Voltaire knew that, so long as culture lasted, people would read the eighty volumes of his writings with total fascination; that his plays, in which he took great pride, would be performed ceaselessly, more than Shakespeare's: whereas Vico hoped he would be read, but was pessimistic on that account. So, too, Rameau knew that so long as music existed, his superior genius and originality would be admired in every generation. Bach was a provincial composer in Leipzig, who, when Frederick the Great invited him to Berlin, became immensely excited, and never, perhaps, expected that any of his work would last the century.

RC Once the Romantics came, they did think ...

IB They developed the cult of genius. Beethoven is almost the origin of the image. Whenever people try to imagine a genius, it is always the dishevelled head of a man living in a garret, producing divine masterpieces, full of tension and of inner pain. Beethoven,

alas, is the prototype of that commercialised image, his death mask more particularly. This has been vulgarised beyond belief.

RC Can I go on to one of your other essays, which is the only essay of yours that I don't really like? The one which I love is the one on Machiavelli, because that is where the clash of values comes out clearest. You can either be a Christian or you can be a Roman patriot.

IB You pays your money and you takes your choice.

RC Some people would say you regard life as replete with tragic devices – a view which you have been rather against. I will tell you a sentence of Hegel's which I read when I was sixteen or seventeen and have never forgotten – 'Tragedy is the conflict not between right and wrong, but between right and right.'

IB A famous statement. But he thought the conflict could be resolved at some higher level. My point is that every choice entails a loss of something. Choices needn't be tragic, because they may be trivial: if you ask for red wine, you will not be given white wine. If you go to the cinema, you can't also read a book. Yet every choice entails some kind of loss. That being so, it is one of the rare a priori truths that one cannot have everything. But of course I don't want to imply that life is full of endless, agonising crises.

RC It occasionally is.

IB When it is, it is. But sometimes agonies can be pointless. Agonising may lead to no value, merely to misery, it can be futile and destructive and lead to nothing at all. No generalisation about this can be made. Let me add one more thing. Fundamentally, I sometimes wish that all these lucid, empirical, science-minded, anti-clerical thinkers of the eighteenth century had got it right. I am on their side in many ways; and on the side of the Russian intelligentsia, many of whom believed, mostly, the same sort of thing. Turgenev, Herzen and their friends were deeply liberal, deeply anti-conservative, and hated serfdom, hated Napoleon III, hated German philistinism, but above all the lack of liberty, the

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arbitrary will of odious bureaucrats and landowners in their own country. But although I am on their side, and shall always be that, I can't help being fascinated by the errors in them, detected by their enemies. That's why I have always found it profitable to have relations with the enemy. That's what makes me interested in de Maistre, or Hamann, or Sorel – the 'nasty' thinkers. Fundamentally, I am against them. They are not people with whose view of life I have natural sympathy, but they do discover the chinks in the armour of the progressives. And they are very important, sometimes fatal, chinks.

RC A person like Sorel: I suppose you think, like Sorel, that people – which I have always doubted and which you obviously don't – that people don't want security, they don't want happiness. They really want to create something.

IB Not everybody all the time. Some do.

RC He thought a whole class might.

IB He was surely wrong. You might ask how one could take an interest in a man who equally admired Lenin and Mussolini. Sorel fundamentally was a violently reactionary radical. He got hold of truths which the liberals wouldn't admit. The point is that Georges Sorel is a good piece of leather against which liberals ought to strop themselves – test their conventional convictions. He saw something which the others didn't want to admit. Therefore I am always attracted to the disagreeable thinkers who tend to prick balloons, to blow up the complacent satisfaction of the people to whom I feel naturally sympathetic. Sorel is a typical 'unpleasant' thinker. He seems to me to have wanted to cause pain.

RC There are two last questions. There is one about your essay on nationalism, which has always puzzled me because you say the great lack of perception of nineteenth century thinkers was that they never thought nationalism important, or prophesied that the twentieth century would be dominated by nationalism.

IB I do think that nationalism – certainly its growing power in our time – was not predicted. Some of the nineteenth-century

prophets, for all that they are called utopian, were prophets with insight. They weren't all starry-eyed or foolish. Saint-Simon did prophesy industrialism; Fourier did prophesy what are called the contradictions of capitalism, the evils of unbridled competition, which leads to a tremendous waste of human resources; Karl Marx did prophesy big business; Burckhardt did prophesy the military-industrial complex. All this is true. But not one of them – to take the major figures – thought that nationalism would become the more or less dominant force in our day. Whoever thought that? Take Karl Marx: when he writes about India, he thinks of Indians entirely as victims of the English who may be of importance in the coming revolution because they must be hostile to the system of their oppressors – capitalism, colonialism, exploitation. His attitude is the same towards Ireland. He never supposed that the Indians would have a state of their own, with a parliament; he did not imagine that Asia and Africa would be covered with sovereign states. China, which was a decayed independent state, seems to have been of little interest to him. Capitalists thought of the colonies as areas for commercial exploitation; colonial officials thought of the natives as children, to be guided; liberals and revolutionaries as victims to be rescued. But sovereign states? Nations in Asia, Africa? Whoever predicted that?

RC Mazzini?

IB Nothing, so far as I know, about Africa – nor Asia. Mazzini was a liberal nationalist who simply thought that if one liberated the nations from imperialist yokes, they would all live peacefully together. But he thought only of Europe – perhaps the Ottomans.

RC Do you know something about Mazzini which I have just discovered? As far as I can see, he is the first advocate of terrorism.

IB *The first?* You mean terrorism as a weapon?

RC Yes, as a weapon to achieve national liberation. Let's talk about terrorism now. When people talk about terrorism, they commit a great semantic error by calling it an 'armed struggle', as if it was

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some massive uprising. Terrorism is different from that, isn't it? Terrorism, as practised now, is not a guerrilla war, but the choice of individual acts of terrorism.

IB You mean like the anarchists, who practised terrorist methods in the 1890s – threw bombs at cafes. Or like Robin Hood? Guy Fawkes?

RC Do you think there are any circumstances in which terrorism is justified?

IB I used to think it was true of the Russian Socialist Revolutionaries. When I thought of the suffering of the minorities – some minorities – under the tsarist regime, I thought that such reactions could be justified. But I no longer think this. Our time has brought this home to me. I think you could justify terrorism if you said to yourself that no regime could, literally, be worse than the present; that death – extinction – was preferable; a decent man, who thinks that can justify terrorism to himself. During the Franco–Algerian war, I wondered: would I sign a document in favour of Algerian terrorism against de Gaulle? I was asked to, but I didn't, because I thought that de Gaulle wasn't a Fascist tyrant. It didn't seem to me to be true that the French oppression in Algiers, the *pièds noirs*, was a regime than which nothing, literally, could be worse, totally inhuman, unspeakable. Terrorist methods tend to create situations which are worse than the situations they destroy. Therefore one has to be careful.

RC Would you argue this about Israel?

IB Yes. I was against the Irgun. I was against the Stern Gang. I was so from the beginning.

RC One might argue that the state of Israel might not have come into existence without terrorism.

IB I don't begin to believe that. I don't think the British troops left Israel because of terrorism. I don't think it was a major factor. Of course the troops wanted to get home. The reason why Israel was abandoned by the British was, I believe, military considerations.

India had gone; so the passage to India was no longer a factor. The only important factor was the Suez Canal. If control of Palestine had been a vital interest to Britain, the terrorists would have been crushed, like the Mau Mau in Kenya. Who can say that the Irgun could not have been destroyed by a superior British force? I understand the terrorists' motives – after the Holocaust, they thought that force, desperate resistance alone could save their lives and their settlement. But I think they compromised the future of Israel. I am in no way an admirer of that episode: although of course the motives were human enough, as in the case of all resistance to superior authority. But they were mistaken.

RC Just one question, irrelevant to what we have been talking about – the United States. You have been very closely connected with America over the years. Now what is obvious, if you look at the last NATO vote in Spain, is that there is a very considerable wave of anti-Americanism all over Europe, including England. How do you account for this?

IB I don't know. I suppose there is always a natural resistance to countries which are too strong and have clients and dominate. Western Europe is today a protégé of America, its resentful client. To be a client is a natural cause of resentment. Europeans know perfectly well that if America disappeared off the map – at least off their map – their own future, their political independence, would be in grave danger. That is not a thought which any proud nation likes to think. All this quite apart from materialism, vulgarity, commercialism, all the usual things, which are said against America. The feeling is stronger than that. I do not share it.

RC Why?

IB I like America. I liked my years in America. Moreover, although Americans are, by and large, guilty of some obvious defects, they are an idealistic nation. They are always called materialists. Mistakenly. Moral principles can upheave America as they cannot upheave countries in Europe. I don't say it's always a good thing – Macaulay may be right to jeer at such moods – but I find it

sympathetic. Watergate had an effect which it couldn't have had in France, in Italy, or I dare say in Spain.

RC Well, that's just because they're slightly more mature politically.

IB No, I don't think so. Idealism is not necessarily a sign of immaturity, only of innocence. It is a fact – and I find it sympathetic and moving – that Americans want their Presidents to be good men, either father figures, wise, noble, impeccable; or heroes, leaders, honourable, brave and right. Washington, to them, was both, so was Lincoln. Truman and Eisenhower (it does not matter if they were really what they were thought to be, or not) were fathers – Roosevelt and Kennedy, leaders, Lochinvars. The first President not thought to be good or nice was Lyndon Johnson; and after him Nixon. Hence the victories of the decent Carter, the admired father Reagan. This may be childlike, but it appeals to me – Europeans fall too easily into cynicism. Morality is a genuine factor in American politics, and since I think that politics is simply the application of morality to human affairs, how can I dislike it?

RC Well, because it might be on the wrong moral road.

IB Of course: then we have a disaster.

RC But aren't you frightened by the terrific resurgence of religious fundamentalism in the US?

IB I am indeed. It has reared its hideous head everywhere save in Old Europe. I think I stand with the old Russian intelligentsia of the nineteenth century about that. At the beginning of this talk, you said Spain was rather like Russia. Let me tell you a respect in which this seems to me to be so. The concept of an intelligentsia is, I believe, real only in countries where there was some degree of clerical tyranny, where the enemy was a powerful Church. This was true of Russia. It was true of France. It was true, I suspect, of Spain. It is not true of England. Nobody can say that the Church of England is regarded as a menace, or as a sinister, obscurantist power. But it is true of Italy for exactly that reason. All Italian liberals have been anti-clerical to some extent. English liberals do

not need to be. People speak of ‘being in the hands of the priests’; no one speaks of ‘being in the hands of clergymen’. You will find that even liberals belong to the Church of England. There is nothing in the least odd about that.

RC Perhaps there is an American intelligentsia which is going to emerge.

IB Well, if the moral majority goes on as it is doing, I think we shall get an American intelligentsia. There is a species of American intelligentsia in New York. It is not quite clear to me what dominant power they are, or were, against, but presumably against some analogous phenomenon, perhaps naked capitalism of some sort. One of the explanations for its rise is that much of the intelligentsia in New York comes, by and large, ultimately from European, particularly Eastern European, stock. Their parents carried the outlook with them from Europe – not from Britain or Scandinavia, but from Catholic and Greek Orthodox lands. I suspect there must be some kind of intelligentsia in Japan, probably because there was some kind of religious power there. But I do not know. There is little of that in England, in Scandinavia, in Holland – not what I mean by intelligentsia: embattled intellectuals who stand for certain principles against an enemy against whom they feel in some measure Voltaire’s *écrasez*.⁹ The French *lumières* in the eighteenth century are exactly what I mean; they are the fathers of it all. Germany – at least North Germany, Lutherans – tend not to breed intelligentsias. Vienna did, because it is Catholic, produce a real intelligentsia, a very gifted one.

RC Now what about intelligentsias in revolutions? You were saying that the Spanish transition shows that the Russian Revolution needn’t have happened?

IB If you ask whether the Russian Revolution was inevitable, or were any of the central European revolutions inevitable – yes, in

⁹ ‘Écrasez l’infame’ (‘crush the scoundrel’, sc. religious superstition). Voltaire first uses this expression in a letter to d’Alembert of 23 June 1760: ‘Je voudrais que vous écrasassiez l’*infâme*.’

so far as anything is inevitable. By 1915–16 the tsarist regime seemed bankrupt, militarily and otherwise, and therefore the February Revolution, which nobody planned, took place. It happened and it could not be stopped. But the October Revolution need not have happened. There is no reason for thinking that if a brick had fallen on Lenin in 1916, the Communist Revolution would necessarily have occurred. Not all that happens has to have happened. Other events might have occurred – could have taken place, I believe. You might have had a liberal government – there would have been resistance to it. White armies might have fought against it; they might have won. Kornilov’s victory might have generated something like the rule of King Alexander of Yugoslavia; and in due course there might have been a revolution against that. One cannot tell what might have happened, but not necessarily anything like the October Revolution. It was not inevitable, and people who didn’t anticipate it cannot be blamed for political or historical blindness. Those who least anticipated it were Lenin and his followers. As we know, after it had lasted for longer than the Paris Commune – that is, longer than three months – he kept on saying to himself, ‘Commune plus one, Commune plus two ...’. Any period longer than the Commune was already a great gain; it sowed the seeds from which the coming final revolution would grow. You will not be astonished to hear that I do not believe in historical inevitability: perhaps that springs from my reluctance to believe that all is prearranged in some great rational scheme which curtails individual initiative, indeed, individual genius, too severely. But there are, as I have tried to show, against prevailing views both on the Right and on the Left, good reasons – and not merely temperamental tendencies – for my unpopular thesis.

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