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A Tribute to Arthur Lehning

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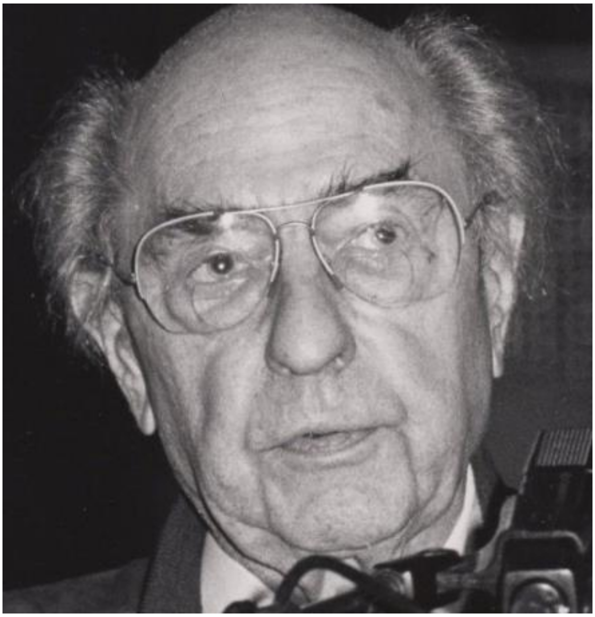
A Tribute to Arthur Lehning

Contribution to *Arthur Lehning in 1974* (Leiden, 1974: Brill)



TO ARTHUR LEHNING

15 July 1974

Wolfson College, Oxford

My dear Lehning,

I remember vividly the first occasion on which I learned of yourself and your work. Shortly after the end of the Second World War my friend and colleague Douglas Cole told me about the archives of the Institute of Social History in Amsterdam, which he had had deposited in the Bodleian Library. He described some of the contents, and the name of Bakunin cropped up, and this naturally caused him to mention your name.

I must begin by explaining that Cole, whose entire life, as you know, was devoted to the cause of social justice, and who, in common with other true socialists, believed in the principles of internationalism and the breaking down of walls between men, whoever and wherever they might be, was temperamentally devoted to England, its history and its traditions, and looked on all foreigners with insular suspicion and distaste. He was for years one of the few Englishmen whom foreign socialists knew and admired, and came to see when they were in England; he attended international conferences; he took part in international socialist work; but he remained a little Englander at heart, and it needed exceptional qualities on the part of Frenchmen, Belgians, Dutchmen, Germans, Scandinavians, Italians, and particularly Americans, to gain his confidence or affection.

He spoke of you with warmth and admiration, although I am not sure whether he had so much as met you at that time; but despite his theoretical adhesion to social democracy, he loved anarchism and anarchists because he cared for liberty more than for efficiency or organisation, and liked generosity, both of personal character and ideas – even when these took wildly eccentric and visionary forms – far more than bureaucratic virtues or ability in matters of theory or the organisation of knowledge: qualities with which he himself was well endowed. He reacted to social and political opinions emotionally – as we all do, however much we may rationalise our attitudes – and while he admired Marx and wrote about him more intelligently than most of his contemporaries, he disliked him a great deal, as indeed he did Lenin: he had to remind himself that Lenin 'saved the Revolution', a position from which, at least in conversation, he retreated in later years (I can speak only on the basis of my personal memories of him, principally from the 1940s and 1950s). Anarchism seemed to him the most humane, morally admirable of all types of socialism, even at its most utopian. He spoke with enthusiasm about Bakunin – an enthusiasm he keeps carefully tempered in his history of socialism – and with great respect of your own life and work.

I trusted Cole's moral intuitions implicitly. Consequently, when we met, I was delighted not to be disappointed in any degree. If anything he had underestimated your unswerving dedication to what you believe to be true and right, your concern for liberty and justice, absence in you of dogma, of scholarly jealousies and secret hatred, from which even the greatest scholars are not always free – your profound understanding of the moral essence of the revolutionary thinkers with whom you are concerned, Babeuf, or Filippo Buonarotti (he deserves the Italian spelling), Blanqui and Herzen, Marx and Bakunin – all the nineteenth-century enemies of despotism, capitalism, militarism, nationalism, the world of exiles and émigrés, which despite the sordid intrigues and quarrels and violent, often absurd recriminations, despite the personal shortcomings of individual revolutionaries or reformers and the confusions of their personal lives, the hysteria and fanaticism that occasionally broke out, even their follies and occasional crimes, remain, as I am sure you will agree, a nobler, more courageous and more disinterested company of men and women – a greater moral asset to mankind – than even the best of those whose power they wished to destroy.

Movements of liberation do not merely seem, but are, more inspiring and noble during the years of struggle than after either failure or success, which lead to compromise and betrayals; and historians of ideas and others who are engaged on reconstructing the world historically are bound to be affected by the quality of these men's feeling, the power and attractiveness of their ideals, the dedication and, at times, martyrdom of their lives. I felt this when, as a mere dilettante, I was trying to write about Russian radicals in the 1840s.

I found a ready response to this, if I may say so, in yourself, who, since you are a deeply serious and infinitely scrupulous researcher, indeed a great scholar, understood these things more profoundly; and this attracted me to your works and conversation, and inspired me to further work in this field. If I do not do it, it will not be your fault, but solely that of my own shortcomings. Whenever we have met – on either side of the Atlantic Ocean – this has been a source of unalloyed intellectual and personal pleasure to me. Your humanity, your integrity, your standards of learning, are a source of pride to your country and your movement, and to the entire world of scholarship, not least to your personal friends, among whom I am proud to count myself.

But apart from my admiration for your work and your life and character, there is another, profounder, source of sympathy that creates a bond between us: your deepest concern has always been, if I am not mistaken, with the cause of human freedom. The fundamental sense of this much abused word, in my view, is freedom from chains, from imprisonment, from enslavement to other men – all other senses of freedom are an extension of this. Men do not live only by fighting evils. They live by positive goals, individual and collective, a vast variety of them, seldom predictable, at times incompatible; unless men have a reasonable degree of freedom to choose between them, without frustrating the similar freedom of other men, their lives will lack purpose, and, in the end, they will lose all that makes them human. This is a view which my friend Professor Chimen Abramsky has attributed to me in words better than those I have ever used, and I am happy to accept them as a true formulation of what I believe.[1] Unless I am profoundly mistaken, you think this too, and your entire life and work has been a monument to this belief, and you have seen through efforts to dilute it, or turn it into its opposite, in theory and practice. This creates a bond of sympathy between us which I am happy to acknowledge.

You told me that you found All Souls College an agreeable place to belong to and work in. I only hope that the Fellows of that College were aware of whom they were entertaining. Long may you live for the benefit of scholarship and your admirers and friends.

I am glad to have been given an opportunity to say all this to you – for I could not say it to your face without embarrassing you acutely – but it is only those who are likely to be embarrassed by direct praise, however justly deserved, that one can love and admire.

Yours ever,
Isaiah Berlin

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[1] Somewhat comically, IB here attributes to Abramsky a passage from ‘Political Ideas in the Twentieth Century’ (Men do not live […] at times incompatible’: L 93) which Abramsky had just quoted approvingly to IB in a letter. Abramsky had not made entriely clear that he was quoting IB, who, having forgotten his own words, took them to be Abramsky’s. To Abramsky, also on 15 July 1974, he wrote: ‘As for the motto you ascribe to me, I accept it with gratitude. It is better formulated than anything I have said or, I daresay, could have said, and I am moved and delighted by it. Thank you very much. […] I must write a letter in praise of Lehning. I shall shamelessly plagiarise from your formula.’