

DEMOCRACY, COMMUNISM
AND THE INDIVIDUAL

I

THE ROOT of both democracy and Communism in eighteenth-century rationalism. Belief that all questions, including those of morals and politics, can be answered with absolute certainty, like those of science and mathematics, by correct use of reason or correct observation of nature. Rousseau formulates the basic proposition of Communism, Fascism and all other totalitarian orders, namely that if one is sure that one has the correct solution to the questions 'How should men live?' and 'How should society be organised?' one can, in the name of reason, impose it ruthlessly on others, since if they are rational they will agree freely; if they do not agree, they are not rational. This denies that different ideals of life, not necessarily altogether reconcilable with each other, are equally valid and equally worthy.

II

In the eighteenth century men believed that it was rational to seek liberty, equality and fraternity. Mr Stephen said that these were three beautiful but incompatible ideals. The belief that equality and liberty, however unlimited, are compatible is the basis of all anarchist theories, and liberalism is merely a watered-down version of this. But we now know that liberty, if not restrained, leads to inequality, and equality, if rigidly carried through, must lead to loss of liberty. This is the lesson of the nineteenth century, of which Communism denies the truth.

III

Doctrines divide into those which idealise liberty and those which idealise equality. The pro-liberty school wishes to leave the State as little power as possible, the equality school as much as possible.

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Marxism tries to have it both ways by asserting that the class struggle alone makes them incompatible.

IV

If the class theory of history is accepted, the nation or democracy is automatically destroyed. Democracy presupposes that every man is in principle capable of giving answers to personal and social questions which are as worthy of respect as any other man's, that communication is possible between all men, or at least all men within a single society, because men are prepared to act on behalf of ideals and not merely be actuated by possibly unrecognised interests, and persuasion can be used to induce them to modify their present aims and recognise the value of those of others. If the theory of class struggle is correct, there are always at least two worlds, members of each of which are in principle incapable of agreeing with one another or indeed of conceiving the world in sufficiently similar ways to make fruitful intercourse between them possible or desirable. If Marxism is correct, our ideas are conditioned by our place in the social and economic structure. History has a discoverable direction and discoverable laws, and only those who are historically on the victorious side in the struggle between the classes have beliefs which are worthy of consideration and likely to be successful in coping with reality. The other side is doomed to destruction, cannot face this, and rationalises its ineffective ideas as valid moral and political principles. The losers and their ideas can be ignored with impunity whether they represent the losing (for example, bourgeois) class in the given society or the losing (for example, democratic or monarchist) States in the world struggle. This gives great strength to the Marxists, who are thereby enabled to ignore the attitudes of their opponents, who, having been condemned by history, hold views unlikely to be useful to those who wish to survive. This justifies the use of any weapon whatever against the enemies of progress, from censorship to killing. This undercuts the concept of democracy, which presupposes that individuals are not made worthless or incapable of rescue by the mere fact that they belong to a class different from your own. In practice this means that democracy, whether Christian (belief in the immortal soul as the source of knowledge and value) or agnostic or atheistic (belief in human nature as this source), is irreconcilable with the belief in the

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privileged status of the elect appointed by history to guide and govern the rest: and later Marxist, theocratic, technocratic, Platonic, Fascist etc.

V

In theory neither Marxists nor democrats believe in the sacrifice of the individual to the State as such. Marxist view of the State contrasted with the view (*a*) of liberals like Mill, (*b*) of Hegelians and Fascists. State as coercive apparatus like pistol wrested from the grasp of the enemy but not to be thrown away until it has been used to shoot the enemy. So long as enemies occur anywhere no holds are barred. There is no argument against suppression, deception and violence except the right to be free of such treatment. But history does not confer such rights equally on victors and vanquished.

VI

Contrast between the Utopian vision of the classless State, in which conflict is automatically eliminated, men are 'adjusted' to one another and government is unnecessary, and the view of liberal democrats, who desire a necessarily precarious balance between incompatible ideals based on the recognition of the equal or nearly equal validity of human aspirations as such, none of which must be subordinated to any single uncriticisable single principle.

VII

A principle of supreme importance emerges out of the difference between the Marxist and democratic conceptions of the individual, which crucially affects education and indeed the whole of the conduct of private and public life. From the democratic assumption that the ultimate and only source of authority for the rightness or wrongness of legislation and wider social action is the moral sense of the individual, there follows the basic concept of the inalienable right of the individual. Whatever the difference of view about the nature of this right – whether you think it is absolute, inherent, planted by nature herself, irremovable by

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human action, as, say, Locke and Jefferson thought, or conferred by God and untouched by human arbitrary judgement, as all great religions teach, or dependent on or necessary to the happiness of society, because the invasion of the minimum liberties enjoyed by an individual ruins social morality and social welfare, as the utilitarians suppose, or dependent on the free consent of the community bound by a social contract, explicit or implicit, as modern democratic theorists following Rousseau think – in all these cases the removal of such rights or liberties, except in extreme cases sanctioned by laws themselves deriving either from the consent of individuals or a supernatural sanction, is rightly regarded as subversive of the foundation of all social morality, that is to say, of whatever it is for the sake of which life is considered worth living, or whatever it is that makes any action at all worth doing. Hence the notion that problems, social and personal, must be decided ideally by each person asking himself, in accordance with his own lights, what he should do and how he should live and how he should behave to his fellows. Even if this is the ideal often fallen short of in practice when crises arise, it is the only justification of an act which is properly sought for – though there may be much hypocrisy about the application of this criterion, yet such hypocrisy is better than cynical denial of it, since it keeps the notion of such a criterion alive.

Marxism, deriving from this tradition – the Hegelian notion that the proper way to live is discovered by experts wise enough to detect the direction of history, to which the wise will adjust their lives – argues that the right answer to questions of behaviour can be discovered by the ‘scientific’ study of society, and those who wish to act differently necessarily place themselves in opposition to the juggernaut of history, that is to say, are behaving suicidally, which proves that they are irrational, blind, mad, not worth listening to, and indeed a nuisance and, if incurably set on their path, to be swept away as an obstacle to progress. Moreover their views are of interest only as the patient’s to the psychiatrist. The psychiatrist knows what the patient does not: why he behaves as he does. The patient neither understands his own condition nor deserves to be treated as an equal. The pronouncements of the individual soul are valuable only if that soul is in a position to discover the true path. If it does not, the chosen few – or chosen many: it makes no difference which – provided they know which way things are moving, have a right to coerce the dissentient

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minority in the name of the verdict of history. This naturally justifies a despotism of the most absolute kind in the name of the new absolutism, scientific morality. Stalin's famous pronouncement that intellectuals are 'engineers of human souls' acquires a genuinely sinister import. The metaphor is one whereby there is only one healthy or efficient condition for the soul, namely when it harmonises with the inexorable movement of society governed by unalterable historical laws, and the business of intellectuals is to adjust the individual soul to the complex mechanism or organism – it does not matter which it is called – independently of its own conscious desires, ideals, aspirations. This not only gives unlimited power to the experts – the Guardians, whether Platonic or Marxist – over their fellow men, but denies utterly the value of individual experience over the impersonal needs of society, which in a sense are independent of what individuals think good or true or beautiful.

This violent contrast emerges most clearly in the conception of education: Western education since the earliest times has consisted in teaching men the techniques of answering for themselves the questions which most tormented men – what to be, what to do, how to treat others, what to seek above all other things. Much blood has been shed by the schools of thought and religions advocating different ways of seeking replies to these questions. But even those most despotic in practice have paid at least lip-service to the idea that men must be so taught as to want to seek the right ends freely, because they believed in them and not because they were socially or morally conditioned into believing nothing else. But the task of a Communist educator is not to supply knowledge and develop the faculty of assessing critically, but principally that of Stalin's engineer – of so adjusting the individual that he should only ask those questions the answers to which are readily accessible, that he shall grow up in such a way that he would naturally fit into his society with minimum friction. History decrees how the society must behave if it is not to be destroyed. Only those are happy who are not self-destructive. There is, therefore, only one nostrum for happiness and this the 'social engineer' applies in creating those human arts or limbs and organs of which the 'progressive' social mechanism or organism must consist. Curiosity for its own sake, the spirit of independent individual enquiry, the desire to create or contemplate beautiful things for their own sake, to find out truth for its own sake, to

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pursue ends because they are what they are and satisfy some deep desire of our nature, are henceforth damned because they may increase the differences between men, because they may not conduce to harmonious development of a monolithic society.

This view is widespread beyond the confines of Russia today. The pursuit of social health has made people forget the ends which alone make such health or adjustment worth having. If you take a low view of human nature, as the Russian Communists plainly do, society is a correctional institution, a cross between a reformatory and Dotheboys Hall, governed by men who are a compound of prison inspectors and Dr Squeers. If you take a more benevolent view, society is an enormous hospital and all men are inmates, each suffering in greater or lesser degree from some kind of malaise or maladjustment, which it is the duty of education to cure or at least to make bearable. Only the humanitarianism of the latter view conceals the degrading view of human nature which it imposes. Its tacit presupposition is that all men are in some degree cripples, halt or lame or blind, and should spend their lives in helping each other over the stiles and pitfalls of the rough ground which willy-nilly they must traverse. It is a caricature of the proper ideal of social service, whereby it ceases to be a necessary aid to the making free of individuals to pursue whatever their minds and hearts are set on, with a minimum of control to prevent them from frustrating each other, and becomes a means of benevolent enslavement and the gradual atrophying of disinterested creative impulses, not necessarily directed to the improvement of the lives of others. It is only in the present age that it may seem paradoxical that no great work of art or of science, no permanent achievement of any of the faculties of man, was ever conceived or executed by men with an eye on the direct social consequences of their action. Nevertheless this is largely true. It is a measure of the corrosive influence of the social ideal of which Communism is merely the most consistent and extreme expression that this crucial truth, upon which the history of civilisation has depended, should seem surprising to the present generation.

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