

Doctrinaire Liberalism

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... the liberal rarely needs to be ashamed of the realities created in his name as the socialist has to be much of the time.

(Ralf Dahrendorf <1>)

Liberal writers, at least in the last forty years, have made a speciality of claiming that, unlike almost all other doctrines, and certainly unlike socialism and communism, liberalism is quintessentially non-doctrinaire and, indeed, anti-doctrinaire. 'The essence of the liberal outlook,' Bertrand Russell once wrote, 'lies not in what opinions are held, but in how they are held: instead of being held dogmatically, they are held tentatively, and with a consciousness that new evidence may at any moment lead to their abandonment. This is the way in which opinions are held in science, as opposed to the way in which they are held in theology.' <2> The title of this article implies, and is intended to imply, that this claim is, in some respects at least, untrue, and is, as a generalisation, misleading and historically inaccurate. Liberalism has been, and in some of its forms still is, quite as 'doctrinaire' as the rival ideologies which liberals so freely denounce.

To my mind this is a very obvious and simple point to make. Yet it does not appear to get stated very often. There has been a tendency to take liberalism, and liberals, at their own evaluation. The liberals' own account of their own history and ideas has commanded a wide and uncritical acceptance. Given this, it may not be entirely superfluous to go over this ground once again, and remind ourselves of some aspects of the history and character of liberalism which the liberals themselves have, understandably enough, tended to sweep under the carpet. Or, to change the metaphor, let us unlock a few cupboards and parade one or two of the hidden skeletons of liberalism across the spotlight stage of the history of ideas.

The liberal self-image

First we must recall the self-image of liberalism as it has been presented in the period of the Cold War and of so-called 'totalitarianism', and particularly as it was developed in the decade and a half between 1945 and 1960. One major source of this self-image was Karl Popper's excessively influential book, The Open Society and its Enemies, which appeared in 1945 - the ideal moment for it to make the maximum impact. Popper found the fundamental conflict between liberal reason and totalitarian dogmatism everywhere, even in classical Athens, where it was Socrates 'who taught the lesson that we must have faith in human reason, but at the same time beware of dogmatism,' while his pupil Plato epitomised the anti-rational, dogmatic spirit of totalitarianism <3>.

One distinguished person who was, for a time, much influenced by Popper was Bertrand Russell. The short essay of his already quoted 'Philosophy and Politics' - and to

some extent the whole collection in which it appeared, Unpopular Essays (1950) - is a classic, condensed expression of this version of liberalism:

The Liberal creed, in practice, is one of live-and-let-live, of toleration and freedom so far as public order permits, of moderation and absence of fanaticism in political programmes.

... only through a revival of Liberal tentativeness and tolerance can our world survive.

<4>

At about the same time (1949) similar sentiments were being expressed by Isaiah Berlin in the journal Foreign Affairs:

What the age calls for is not (as we are so often told) more faith, or stronger leadership, or more scientific organisation. Rather is it the opposite - less Messianic ardour, more enlightened scepticism.... What is required is a less mechanical, less fanatical application of general principles, however rational or righteous, ...

<5>

The vocabulary of denigration that constantly recurs in these writings of the late 1940s and 1950s, the period of the frostiest Cold War, is familiar: dogmatic, doctrinaire, fanatical, Messianic, chiliastic, ideological ... and so on. Here are two more examples:

The less, therefore, man clogs the free play of his mind with political doctrine and dogma, the better for his thinking ... what shams and disasters political ideologies are apt to be, we surely have had opportunity to learn ...

<6>

... empiricism is the ally of freedom, and the doctrinaire spirit is the friend of totalitarianism.

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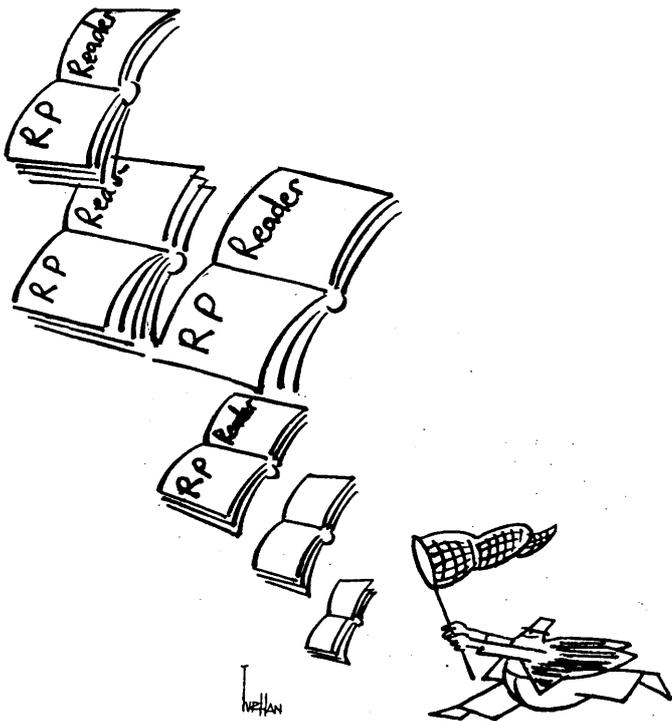
The only difference is that these last two quotations come, not from liberal writers, but conservative ones, Sir Lewis Namier and J.L. Talmon, both also writing in the 1950s.

Liberalism, we have repeatedly been told, stands for a rational, open-minded, 'tentative' approach; for flexibility and empiricism (respect for the facts), as opposed to dogmatism, fanaticism and ideological certainty. It is these latter attitudes, embodied in the dominant ideologies of the twentieth century, which are supposed to lie at the root of all the worst cruelties and tragedies of our time. Liberalism, far from being rendered obsolete by these tougher creeds, has become more relevant than ever. Probably this was most famously and concisely expressed by E.M. Forster, in his credo of 1939, 'What I Believe'. This began 'I do not believe in Belief', but ended by rejecting the feeling of shame he had sometimes felt at being 'an individualist and a liberal who has found liberalism crumbling beneath him...' <8>. It was Forster too who summed up much of the anti-ideological case in three words: 'Programmes mean pogroms' - this in an essay on Orwell written in 1950 <9>.

Re-defining liberalism

Those who interpret liberalism as a creed of scepticism, as opposed to commitment, have not had any difficulty in discovering a distinguished line of ancestors. Sometimes, as with Popper, it is traced back, rather implausibly, as far as Democritus and Socrates. Another writer called in Peter Abelard as a witness to the liberal faith. But the less anachronistic lineages usually begin with such figures as Erasmus and Montaigne, and others who stood aside from the religious conflicts of the early modern period. Locke is usually invoked, but from among the many Enlightenment thinkers who might qualify, it is the unrepresentatively conservative figure of Montesquieu who is singled out for praise, rather than Diderot or Voltaire or Condorcet. From the nineteenth century, Benjamin Constant, de Tocqueville, Alexander Herzen, the younger Mill and, sometimes, Lord Acton, are chosen. Other names could be added to this list.

But it is at once clear that this is a highly selective, not to say stingy, list of liberal luminaries. Where are Milton, Voltaire, Beccaria, Jefferson, Paine, Wollstonecraft, Bentham, Shelley, Goya, Byron, Mazzini, T.H. Green, Hobhouse, Russell and so many others? What has happened to the creators of liberal economics, Adam Smith, Malthus and David Ricardo. The answer is that the history of liberalism was being quietly rewritten to exclude from its annals any person or writer who might have been, or indisputably was guilty of displaying any of those characteristics so deplored by Berlin, Popper, Forster, Albert Camus and the rest: fanaticism, dedication, Messianic ardour, and so forth.



For if there is one generalisation that can safely be made about such varied figures as Milton, Voltaire, Paine, Shelley, Jefferson and Mazzini, it is that they were anything but 'tentative' or 'sceptical' in their basic political commitments. Voltaire's crusade against superstition and the cruelty and torture sanctioned by organised religion was anything but 'tentative'. Those many liberals who in the early nineteenth century dedicated themselves to the causes of Greek or Italian or Polish independence did so with an ardour which would no doubt appal Sir Isaiah Berlin. And even Bertrand Russell, in his political commitments, did not of course conform to his own prescriptions of caution, tentativeness and an instant readiness to abandon views and beliefs.

So whatever may be true of contemporary liberalism, it is manifestly not true that liberals have always displayed those qualities of scepticism and moderation which are now held to be fundamental to liberalism.

Classical liberal economics

The overall tradition of liberal thought and practice can hardly be considered without reference to what is often thought of as liberalism's major intellectual achievement: classical political economy from Adam Smith to Malthus, Ricardo and the younger Mill. And Liberal economics supplies a second, and very different, counter-example to the recent image of liberalism.

Of the great classical economists Adam Smith was the least ideological - using that term in a derogatory sense. That is to say, Smith was the most searching, the most complex, the most honest and detached of the classical economists. What was made of his theory is another matter. But if we leave aside Smith, then there are few groups who can be more appropriately described as dogmatic, doctrinaire and inflexible than the chief proponents of liberal political economy, both as theory and practice, in the first half of the nineteenth century. Nor were theory and practice set wide apart. Many of the leading theorists of liberal economics were deeply involved in policy creation in this period.

It is a favourite ploy of apologists on behalf of this or that influential thinker or writer to claim that their hero is guiltless of the various unsavoury distortions, interpretations and applications of their theories devised by their proclaimed followers and disciples. Marx was not responsible for Marxism, Darwin would have disowned social Darwinism, and so on. It is certainly important that we distinguish between what a particular person thought and what others think or assume that that person thought, between Marx and Marxism, Darwin and Darwinism, etc. But this process can be carried too far - to the point where it sometimes seems that the world is divided between blamelessly enlightened original thinkers, on the one hand, and the mass of their crass, unscrupulous, so-called followers on the other.

This has certainly happened with the liberal economists, on whose behalf a whole school of apologists has grown up in recent decades. If the more enthusiastic of these apologists were to be believed, we would have to conclude that not one of the major liberal economists was 'really' committed to anything so crude as *laissez-faire* or free trade. All of them were 'really' flexible pragmatists, ready to allow or support interventionism whenever a good case could be made out for it <10>.

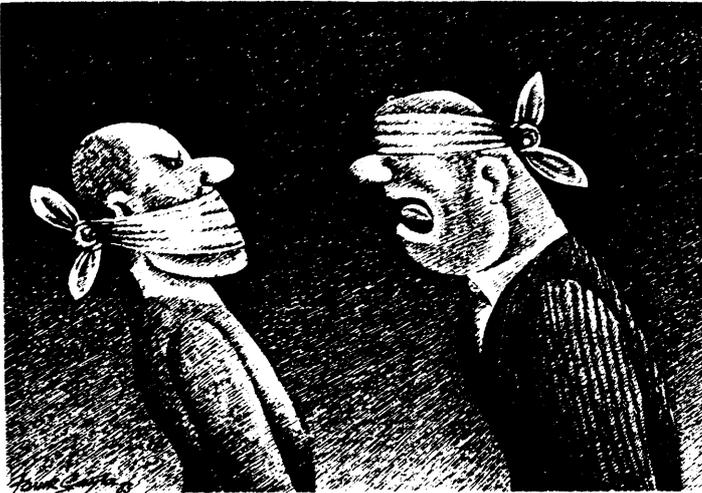
Reading this type of apologetics, one is inclined to suspect, a priori, that it is all a little too good to be true. And so it turns out to be in this particular case. It was not just the simplifying politicians and propagandists who were responsible for the horrors and cruelties that resulted from the implementation of market principles. The theorists themselves were involved, supporting and encouraging the politicians, offering advice, and helping to devise new policies and legislation.

The New Poor Law of 1834

One notorious product of this involvement was the New Poor Law of 1834. Whatever judgement is made on this piece of legislation and its implementation, it certainly cannot be said that it was the politicians and civil servants who were exclusively responsible for either <11>. On the contrary, two of its principal architects were prominent theorists and intellectuals, Edwin Chadwick and Nassau Senior, and Chadwick became secretary to the Poor Law Commission which had the responsibility for putting the new act into effect. Chadwick described the law as 'the

first great piece of legislation based upon scientific or economical principles'; while Lord Brougham, defending the bill in parliament, remarked pityingly of the originators of the Old Poor Law that 'they could not foresee that a Malthus would arise to enlighten mankind upon the important branch of science - they knew not the true principle upon which to frame a preventative check to the unlimited increase of the people' <12>.

Nor can it be claimed that the harshness of which poor people complained as soon as the new law was put into operation was a mere by-product of the policy, or the responsibility of those usually described in this sort of context as 'over-zealous' administrators - a classic euphemism. Harshness was indispensable to the whole project. This is abundantly clear from the Report itself. Workhouses, said the Report, should be 'objects of terror'. They commended the policy which had been adopted at Cookham in Berkshire, where the labourer found 'that the parish is the hardest taskmaster and the worst paymaster he can find'. They also recommended, not a minimum, but a maximum diet for workhouse inmates, 'leaving to the local officers the liberty of reducing it below the maximum if they can safely do so' <13>.



It is hardly necessary to say much about the consequences of the putting into practice of this openly avowed policy of 'terror'. The horror and hatred which these new institutions immediately aroused is indicated by the fact that within three years Dickens made it the object of his characteristically fierce and humane satire in his second novel, *Oliver Twist*. Satire is often closer to truth than it suits us to admit, and the editor of the Penguin edition of the novel assures us that Dickens 'does not greatly exaggerate' the meagreness of the diet which prompted the famous demand for more <14>. The other point to notice is Dickens' constant use of terms like 'philosopher' and 'philosophical' to describe the guardians of the workhouse and others associated with its administration. He had grasped that this law was the product of a theory - a point taken up two years later by Thomas Carlyle in his essay on *Chartism*, in which he wrote of the Commissioners: 'They are not tigers; they are men filled with an idea of a theory...' <15>.

There is no gap between the principles of classical liberal economics and the practice of the New Poor Law. The one was a direct deduction from the other. And the consequences were appalling. Edward Thompson's comment is perfectly apt:

The Act of 1834, and its subsequent administration by men like Chadwick and Kay, was perhaps the most sustained attempt to impose an ideological

dogma, in defiance of the evidence of human need, in English history.

<16>

That makes my point precisely. The liberal economists were guilty of exactly the kind of moral offence for which they so regularly and righteously condemn the 'ideological' movements of today: that of sacrificing the happiness and well-being of individuals for the sake of, or in the name of, a theory or a principle.

One notorious, much hated, aspect of the new workhouses was the strict segregation of the sexes. This was a measure inspired, as Brougham implied, by the very influential theory of Malthus. Everything should be done to prevent the poor from 'breeding', since this would only multiply the numbers of the poor and destitute. Once again, it is implausible to claim that the New Poor Law represents a distortion or a crudification of Malthus's own views. In fact Malthus's only objection might have been that it was too generous a piece of legislation, since he believed that all forms of poor relief ought to be abolished. When Malthus appeared before the House of Commons committee on Emigration in 1827, he suggested that parishes should cease to pay the rent of paupers, and urged that taxation should be used to discourage the building of new cottages. Landlords who pulled down empty cottages were commended <17>. Malthus, far from being a theoretician standing aloof from the practical consequences drawn from his own theory, was actively involved in drawing those conclusions himself. Marx was right when he remarked that 'The hatred of the English working class against Malthus ... is therefore entirely justified' <18>.

Keynes, who described Malthus's *Essay on the Principle of Population* as being 'profoundly in the English tradition of humane science', was also at pains to point out that Malthus himself was kindly and well-liked, and not 'the cruel and vicious monster of pamphleteering controversy' <19>. This is, of course, entirely beside the point. It is not his personal characteristics which are at issue, but the principles and policies which he advocated. Malthus, like Chadwick, was not a tiger, but a doctrinaire of exactly the kind condemned by contemporary liberals. Even John Stuart Mill, often held up to us as a paradigm of the open-minded liberal intellectual, was an enthusiastic supporter of Malthus in his youth, and a consistent supporter of the New Poor Law. As late as the mid-1840s, when its harshness had been repeatedly exposed in well-known scandals, he was still denouncing its opponents as 'sentimental' <20>.

British liberals and the Irish famine

One further instance of the impact of liberal economics deserves mention: British responses to the Irish famine of the mid-1840s. In general those responses were dictated, not by the elementary human concern to rescue people from death by starvation or disease but, by a concern to abide by the principles of liberal market economics. In so far as human concern did modify this 'principled' economic response, this was the responsibility of the Tory administration of Sir Robert Peel, which did make some effort to provide cheap food and a public works programme. But once the Whigs came into office in 1846, even these quite modest measures were abandoned.

Wheat, oats and barley were actually exported from Ireland in these years of famine. This did not bother Sir Charles Trevelyan, the Treasury civil servant with responsibility for policy in Ireland. 'Do not encourage the idea of prohibiting exports,' he wrote to a British official in Dublin, 'perfect Free Trade is the right course.' As for importing food into Ireland, Lord John Russell, the Prime Minister, said 'We think it far better to leave the supplying of the people to private enterprise and the ordinary trade.' And so - no positive measures were taken, and the Irish people starved to death - about a million and a half of them in four years or so. It was the British Lord Lieutenant of Ireland who wrote to Russell in 1849: 'I don't think

there is another legislature in Europe that would disregard such suffering as now exists in the west of Ireland, or coldly persist in a policy of extermination.' Sensible, moderate, balanced British readers, who think that the Irish tend to exaggerate what they have suffered at British hands, should note that last phrase 'a policy of extermination', used by the senior British administrator at the time of the famine <21>.

Doubtless the Whigs did not intend that the Irish should starve to death. But they were sure that they knew what the best way of responding to the tragedy was, and that was to leave its remedy to the operation of market forces. 'The more I see of government interference,' wrote Sir Charles Wood, Chancellor of the Exchequer, 'the less I am disposed to trust to it, and I have no faith in anything but private capital employed under individual charge' <22>. It is an attitude which has recently been extensively revived - once again with cruel consequences.

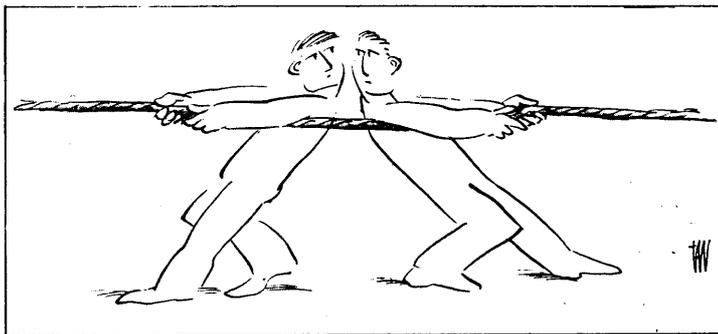
In addition there was the baleful influence of the Malthusian approach, which made it quite natural for an economist like Torrens to talk about Ireland's 'redundant population', and for Nassau Senior to remark, according to Benjamin Jowett, that 'he feared the famine of 1848 in Ireland would not kill more than a million people, and that would be scarcely enough to do much good'. A British official in Ireland, Sir Randolph Routh, wrote to Trevelyan in 1846, 'You cannot answer the cry of want by a quotation from political economy.' But that is precisely what Russell, Wood, Trevelyan and the Whig government as a whole did do. As Cecil Woodham-Smith wrote in her magnificent study, *The Great Hunger*: 'The influence of *laissez faire* on the treatment of Ireland during the famine is impossible to exaggerate' <23>. This influence, this rigid adherence to an economic doctrine, is the only thing that renders the behaviour of the British administration at all intelligible.

Bertrand Russell, in the essay already referred to, wrote that 'it is seldom justifiable to embark on any policy on the ground that, though harmful in the present, it will be beneficial in the long run'; and that 'empiricist Liberalism ... is the only philosophy that can be adopted by a man who ... desires human happiness more than the prevalence of this or that party or creed' <24>. Russell might have recalled the role played by his own grandfather (in whose house he was brought up) between 1846 and 1850. It clearly transgressed both these principles. But it was not that Lord John Russell's conduct in this case, or in that of his support for the New Poor Law, fell short of his own principles. On the contrary, it showed the reverse: a rigid attachment to doctrine and principle despite their manifestly dreadful results. Here, in fact, was liberalism living up to its own principles. But they were not the empiricist principles outlined by Bertrand Russell.

Why is this doctrinaire strain within liberalism not more generally recognised? The basic reason, as was suggested earlier, is surely that the history and interpretation of liberalism have been largely in the hands of the liberals themselves. It is not that they have deliberately suppressed episodes which are an embarrassment to them - though this may have sometimes happened. Two explanations are possible. Either they have been simply the prisoners of their own ideology - and Russell's forgetfulness about his own grandfather's role over Ireland must surely be an example of this. Or else they have been engaged in a large-scale redefinition of liberalism, its history and tradition(s), which has meant that those individuals and episodes not conforming to this conception are banished from the re-defined tradition.

The definition of what constitutes liberalism is, of course, to some extent an open matter, and it will change as historical perspectives change. Nevertheless, historical facts do themselves set some limits to what is legitimate. It must be relevant, though not in itself decisive, that many of those tacitly omitted from the current liberal canon certainly believed themselves to be liberals. It is

also relevant to consider what was thought of at the time as being liberalism - although, equally, the fact that the term 'liberalism' did not acquire its modern political meaning until around 1820 should not deter us from applying it to earlier episodes and persons. It makes no sense to deny that Locke, to take an obvious example, had something to do with liberalism as it is commonly understood. Therefore a definition, explicit or implicit, of liberalism which contrives to exclude the whole tradition of liberal economics, both theory and practice, must be regarded as unacceptable. The fact that that tradition displayed characteristics which are now regarded as illiberal is no doubt embarrassing, but ultimately irrelevant. We cannot reasonably demand that an ideology with a long history should at all stages of that history conform to what is now conceived of as the ideal model. That such an ideology should, on occasions, assume a dogmatic and inflexible shape ought not to surprise or even much dismay us.



For any ideology at its most dynamic is bound, for better or worse, to be in some ways doctrinaire and in some ways inflexible. And its tendency to 'fly in the face of the facts' is not as unambiguously deplorable as the empiricist supposes. On the one hand, it may well represent an attempt to force reality into patterns dictated by theories held a priori, without regard either to fact or to human costs. British policy during the Irish famine clearly falls into this category. On the other hand, it may also mean simply a brave refusal to accept the world as it is, a refusal to accept present facts as immutable - which is, of course, the root of any radical or revolutionary project. The two are, no doubt, not so very far from one another. Where a radical determination to change the world becomes a brutal indifference to reality and suffering is not always easy to determine. But both characteristics are likely to be present in any doctrine or ideology when that movement of ideas is at its most dynamic; and liberalism is no exception to that rule.

When liberals believed most strongly in their own values and principles, it was liberalism which appeared to its conservative opponents as dogmatic and anti-empirical. Twentieth-century liberals do not share that degree of conviction. They are full of self-doubt. But that is not a good reason for failing to recognise that liberalism has not always had that character, or for rewriting the history of liberalism to make it conform to this twentieth-century model.

How non-doctrinaire is contemporary liberalism?

Whatever may be true of contemporary liberalism, liberalism in the past, then, has not always had the empirical, sceptical character which is often claimed to be essential to liberalism itself. We must now look a little more closely at twentieth-century liberalism. Is it true that contemporary liberalism, by contrast with those other creeds of Left

and Right, is flexible and undogmatic? And even if that is the case, does that necessarily make it more humane than its competitors?

It is certainly the case that many liberals in our century have identified liberalism with hesitancy, uncertainty, tentativeness. This is particularly common among 'literary' liberals. E.M. Forster has already been cited. He could point also to Cyril Connolly, in The Unquiet Grave, to Angus Wilson's first novel, Hemlock and After, and to Lionel Trilling's only novel, The Middle of the Journey. In both novels a contrast is made between a sensitive, indecisive liberal and some intendedly representative figures of the Left, who are insensitive and even arrogant to the point of obtuseness. Connolly's book first appeared in 1944, Trilling's novel was published in 1947 and Hemlock and After in 1952. A study of the culture of the 1940s and 1950s would reveal a great concentration of works expressive of this vein of liberalism.

In so far as liberalism has become more sceptical about political action of any kind, more hostile to general ideas and principles, it has, of course, moved closer to what has traditionally been a conservative position. This is illustrated by the striking identity, or closeness, of the views quoted earlier, of Russell, Foster and Berlin on the one hand, and the conservatives Namier and Talmon on the other. It was in no way accidental that Talmon's best known book, The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy, another product of the early 1950s, should have been taken into the canon of liberal literature of that period, despite the author's avowed conservatism.



Yet this Cold War liberalism, which was officially so dedicated to humane and flexible empiricism, was not notable for the empiricism or flexibility of its response to communism, or to Leftism more generally - which was subsumed under the heading of 'communist sympathies', one of the smear terms of that period. For evidence of this, one would need only to consult the pages of Encounter, the monthly magazine founded with the support of CIA funds in 1953. One test was the response of liberal intellectuals to the anti-communist witch hunt usually known as McCarthyism. Some liberals - Arthur Schlesinger Jr would be one example - came out of this test well. But many did not. Karl Wittfogel, author of another fashionable text of that period, Oriental Despotism (1957), named M.I. Finley as a former Communist. Finley denied it, but lost his job at Rutgers University nonetheless. Sidney Hook, Arthur O. Lovejoy and Leslie Fiedler - the latter being Encounter's chosen commentator on McCarthy and the trial and execution of the Rosenbergs - all agreed that 'proven communists' should not be allowed to teach, on the grounds that, as Lovejoy put it, 'a member of the Communist Party ... has engaged his intellect to servility, and therefore professionally disqualified from performing his functions as a scholar and a teacher'. The Presidents of Harvard and Yale Universities at that time agreed with this view. Hook, Irving Kristol, then an editor of Encounter, and Daniel Bell were among those liberals who argued that Communists were not en-

titled to the same civil rights as the rest of the population, on the grounds that, as Kristol put it, Communism was not an 'opinion' like any other, but 'a fanatical conspiracy' <25>.

At a more theoretical level, we find that this Cold War liberalism adheres very firmly to the traditional liberal hierarchy of values. That is to say, regimes are judged, not by reference to the progress or otherwise that they make in improving the lot of the mass of the people, but by the degree of freedom they permit - freedom being defined in the traditional liberal way, as political and legal freedom. Thus Cuba after the 1959 revolution - 'that imprisoned island', as the liberal hero, President John Kennedy, called it - was strongly condemned in the pages of Encounter for its infringements upon civil and human rights; but no interest at all was shown in the achievements of the new regime, the improvements in health or the spread of literacy, for example. That still is the characteristic liberal mode of judgement upon left-wing or revolutionary regimes, and it is not self-evidently a less dogmatic, or more empirical mode than other kinds of judgements which might be made.

Hot-war liberalism: Vietnam

These kinds of attitudes issued ultimately in the American war on Vietnam between 1965 and 1975. Anti-Communism is, of course, by no means the exclusive property of liberals, but the description of Vietnam as 'a liberal's war' <26> is justified for two reasons. Firstly, the war was run by liberal presidents, until 1968, supported and encouraged by liberal intellectuals within and outside the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. Secondly, the war was constantly justified in liberal terms, as a war for freedom, against communist tyranny, and so forth.

Among the opponents of the war there were a number of longstanding proponents of an essentially conservative realpolitik such as Hans Morgenthau and Walter Lippmann. Their opposition was based, not on radical principles but, on the realistic belief that the war was unwinnable, a costly mistake. They were proved right, and they may be said to represent the genuine, traditional kind of near-cynical pragmatism; while the liberal supporters of the war displayed a dogmatism quite at variance with their proclaimed hostility to ideology and ideological politics. Barrington Moore's comment is apt:

The calm confidence - or ecstasy - of the political leader who sends masses of humanity to their death for the sake of a shining distant future is indeed abominable. Equally abominable is the complacency of those liberals willing to rain terror from the skies while they prate about the virtues of pragmatic gradualism.

<27>

But there is in any case a more fundamental paradox which is raised in an especially acute form by the example of war. War, whether justified or not, is an extreme and extremely clear example of a situation in which present and tangible benefits, including present lives, are being sacrificed for the sake of some supposedly greater or more distant good or benefit. Everyone who is not a pacifist accepts that such sacrifices can on occasion be necessary, and so justified. What is odd, and finally quite unconvincing, about the contemporary liberal position is that the suggestion that liberalism is the only approach to politics which does not condone, and does not require such sacrifices. Liberals are not generally pacifists, and this fact alone belies this claim.

The truth is that any politics, however humane in purpose, unavoidably involves calculations about what sacrifices of present happiness and welfare are necessary for the sake of expected or hoped-for future benefits. Isaiah Berlin has quoted with approval a passage of Bentham which he asserts is 'at the heart of the empirical, as

against the metaphysical, view of politics':

can it be conceived that there are men so absurd as to ... prefer the man who is not to him who is; to torment the living, under pretence of promoting the happiness of them who are not born, and who may never be born?

<28>

The simple answer to Bentham and Berlin is that societies collectively, and people individually, are so absurd all the time. The continuity of any society depends upon making provision for future generations, and this will almost certainly involve imposing sacrifices, or voluntarily making sacrifices, in the present for the sake 'of them who are not born, and who may never be born'. Liberals themselves accept this in practice, if not in theory. Berlin's own answer to a questionnaire about the Vietnam war sent out to writers illustrates this very well:

It is frightful that Vietnamese villages should be bombed and the innocent continuously killed. But it seems to me even more dreadful to abandon people to massacre by their enemies. How is one to guarantee that this will not happen? Or that a precipitate and total American withdrawal would not cause other South-east Asian governments to be intimi-

dated into knuckling under to regimes which many of their citizens would surely hate?

<29>

In stating his dilemma in this way, Berlin shows that in reality and in detail he is well aware that the 'empirical' view of politics, just like the 'metaphysical', can involve the torment of the living for future goals whose realisation is inevitably uncertain.

One of two conclusions seems unavoidable. Either liberalism is less empirical and more doctrinaire than it claims to be; or else the empirical approach is not automatically or self-evidently more humane than the alternative supposedly doctrinaire and ideological approaches.

What is beyond dispute is that liberalism was, in some of its nineteenth-century forms, quite as dogmatic as any twentieth-century ideology. But here we come full circle. 'You cannot answer the cry of want by a quotation from political economy.' No? The revival of liberal economics presided over, intellectually by Hayek and Milton Friedman, and politically by Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, has displayed those characteristics of obtuse and heartless dogmatism which we noticed in relation to its earlier incarnation. This form of liberalism remains as rigidly doctrinaire as it always was.

Footnotes

- 1 This splendidly compact claim comes from Rolf Dahrendorf, Life Chances (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1979), p. ix.
- 2 Bertrand Russell, 'Philosophy and Politics', in Unpopular Essays (Allen & Unwin, 1950, 1968 edition), p. 21.
- 3 K.R. Popper, The Open Society and its Enemies (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1945, 1962 edition), Vol. 1, p. 185.
- 4 Russell, op. cit., pp. 21 and 23.
- 5 Isaiah Berlin, Four Essays on Liberty (Oxford University Press, 1969), pp. 39-40.
- 6 Sir Lewis Namier, 'Human Nature in Politics', The Listener, 24 December 1953.
- 7 J.L. Talmon, The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy (1952, Sphere Books, 1970 edition), p. 4.
- 8 E.M. Forster, Two Cheers for Democracy (Edward Arnold 1951, Penguin edition 1965), pp. 75 and 83.
- 9 ibid., p. 70.
- 10 For some examples, see A.W. Coats (ed.), The Classical Economists and Economic Policy (Methuen, 1971). And see my The Rise and Decline of Western Liberalism (Blackwell, 1984), pp. 250-51.
- 11 See Robert Pearson and Geraint Williams, Political Thought and Public Policy in the Nineteenth Century (Longman, 1984), pp. 31-35.
- 12 See Arblaster, op. cit., p. 255, and Raymond G. Cowherd, Political Economists and the English Poor Laws (Ohio State University Press, 1977).
- 13 S.G. and E.O.A. Checkland (eds.), The Poor Law Report of 1834 (Penguin, 1974), pp. 277, 337 and 419.
- 14 Oliver Twist (Penguin, 1966), Appendix A, p. 483.
- 15 Thomas Carlyle, Chartism in Selected Writings, ed. Alan Shelston (Penguin, 1971), p. 164.
- 16 E.P. Thompson, The Making of the English Working Class (1963, Penguin edition 1968), p. 295.
- 17 See Cowherd, op. cit., pp. 161-62.
- 18 Ronald L. Meek (ed.), Marx and Engels on Malthus (Lawrence and Wishart, 1953), p. 123.
- 19 J.M. Keynes, Essays in Biogoraphy (Macmillan, 1972), pp. 86 and 92.
- 20 I have summarised Mill's views on the New Poor Law in op. cit., p. 281.
- 21 Most of this material is taken from Cecil Woodham-Smith, The Great Hunger (Hamish Hamilton, 1962), pp. 125 and 381, and also R.D. Collison Black, Economic Thought and the Irish Question 1817-1870 (Cambridge University Press, 1960), p. 117.
- 22 Black, op. cit., p. 39.
- 23 Woodham-Smith, op. cit., pp. 375-76 and 54.
- 24 Russell, op. cit., pp. 24 and 25.
- 25 For liberal complicity with McCarthysm, see Arblaster, op. cit., pp. 313-15. Also Christopher Lasch, 'The Cultural Cold War', in The Agony of the American Left (Alfred A. Knopf, 1969), pp. 82-83; and David Cauter, The Great Fear (Secker & Warburg, 1978), pp. 405 and 413.

- 26 I take the phrase from Murray Kempton's contribution to a revealing symposium, 'Liberal Anti-Communism Revisited', in Commentary, September 1967.
- 27 Barrington Moore, Jr., Reflections on the Causes of Human Misery (Allen Lane, 1972), p. 27.
- 28 Berlin, Four Essays on Liberty, p. 171.
- 29 Cecil Woolf and John Bagguley (eds.), Authors Take Sides on Vietnam (Peter Owen, 1967), pp. 60-61.

For the purposes of this essay I have borrowed shamelessly from my own recent book on liberalism, but the materials used for the particular argument of this essay are arranged quite differently in the book.



"Any obsolescent material?"