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1

REASON IN SOCIAL STUDY[1]

Truth, Sir, is a cow, which will yield such people no more milk, and so they are gone to milk the bull. DR JOHNSON

I

Academic readers in this country and in France have recently been treated to several doses of conservative anti-rationalism. There are indeed signs that in political and social philosophy as well as in ethics it is again becoming fashionable to look for antidotes to reason and to find them in history, intuition and tradition. The attitude is sufficiently recent to attract the young, and its recipe is sufficiently pungent to please the jaded. I can therefore predict it a flourishing career in the next few years, and this alone makes its argument (and for all its anti-rationalism the new fashion cannot do without an argument) worth looking into. But the argument must be treated to its own medicine and considered as an historical phenomenon. For thus considered the 'new look' of political philosophy may well turn out to be a modish variant of an ancient and recurrent outline.

Distrust of reason is indeed a perennial feature of conservative thought. The appeal to tradition, as if it were the opposite of thought, or to history, as if it were the opposite of invention, have always been the favourite themes of the conservative argument on politics and state. And not only on politics and state. Conservatism, like the rationalism it attacks, is not so much a view of social organization as a version of personal life; and in matters personal the attachment to inherited moral conventions goes hand in hand with aversion from intellectual standards. To conservatives the threat of thought is one and indivisible. It spells its dangers to the established order in all its departments – political, social, ethical, aesthetic – and therefore forces upon the philosophical conservatives a bias universally and indiscriminately anti-rationalist.

In some form and in some degree this mood is always with us. Contrary

[1] Published as 'The Revulsion from Thought' in *The Cambridge Journal*, vol. I, no. 7, April 1948. It was offered as a reply to Michael Oakeshott's article against rationalism in social and political thought, *ibid.* nos. 4 and 6.

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to all vulgar notions, we are all born little conservatives. As I shall have to stress again, all social existence presupposes some stable element, and all political thought must contain a justification of some part of the established order and must express a desire to maintain it. No revolution is so revolutionary as not to appeal to some anciently established ideal; similarly, no system of individual ethics is so anarchic as not to attach itself to some conventional principle of good. But even if the conservative elements of non-conservative thought could at certain times remain unnoticed and unfelt, there would always be men willing to advertise their devotion to the established order. Thus in addition to the undercurrent of unrational or even anti-rational thought running deeply beneath all systems of ideas, there will always exist surface pools, however small and stagnant, of doctrines openly and wholly anti-rational.

The anti-rational mood is thus endemic, but at times it can assume every aspect of an epidemic. In certain historical situations the distrust of reason from being the philosophy of the few becomes the conviction of the many; and doubts about the omnipotence of reason, hitherto mere saving clauses of rational argument, begin to stalk the world as major propositions. Historians, with their gift for carving out epochs and giving them names, have called historical situations like these 'periods of romantic reaction'. Romantic is perhaps too inaccurate an adjective, but there is no doubt about the accuracy of the noun. The conservative situation is always a reaction (though to avoid the political opprobrium attaching to the word, I am going to call it 'revulsion'). It derives its inspiration and its substance from the dislike of change.

To this extent the anti-rational condition, if not wholly pathological, is at least hypochondriacal; and of the two situations the rational is the less morbid. For the rational outlook is not formed by thinking about thought; it is merely implied in the reasoned answers to individual problems. And if, in a paraphrase of Carlyle's, the end of philosophy is not thought but man's action, it is not the function of philosophy to inquire into itself – at any rate as long as all goes well with action. It is only when acts founded in reason have ended in misfortune, or have raised an inner conflict, that the ethical person begins to question his very ability to decide his conduct for himself. And it is when political decisions and political actions have brought failure, disaster and conflict, that human mind turns against its own works and stages a kind of palace revolution against itself.

Periods of great intellectual and political unsettlement, of painful or disastrous revolutions, are thus almost invariably succeeded by periods of

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conservative revulsion. Every schoolboy knows that one such period followed the French Revolution; and a discerning man may discover one or two such states both before and after the eighteenth century. One of them may perhaps have occurred some time in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when the counter-reformation in both its manifestations, the catholic and the calvinist, established itself over the minds of men: perhaps earlier still, when in the fourteenth century the leaders of canonist orthodoxy and Dominican conformity succeeded in laying the moral and intellectual turbulence of the thirteenth century. But even if it were too fanciful to read into the religious controversies of the middle ages and the reformation the intellectual problems of our own day, there would still be little doubt about the revulsive nature of conservatism of the nineteenth century and of our own time.

When, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, Savigny and Puchta ushered in the historical and conservative theory of law, they were not thereby propounding an independent and timeless doctrine. They were impelled by their recent recollections, by the regrettable attempts of Montesquieu's pupils to construct systems of law, and by the even more regrettable attempts of Napoleon to enact them. When at the same time Bonald and de Maistre appealed to the ancient wisdom of hereditary monarchy and the historical church, the verities they sought were not those which Aristotle had ascribed to the monarchy, and not those which Hildebrand had claimed for the Church. They were verities which offered the most potent antidote to revolution. Similarly, when less than a generation later the German economists, Knies, List, Roscher and their innumerable followers, proclaimed the birth of the historical school of political economy – a school which undertook to eschew the logical and dialectical exercises of Adam Smith and the physiocrats, and sought guidance from the economic experience of German history – they were merely reacting, and reacting violently, against the economic revolution, of which the classical and rational school of political economy approved, and against the *laisser-faire* policies, which it inspired.

The same also holds of the subsequent outbursts of anti-rationalism. Gobineau was in full flight from the bourgeois democracy of France; a couple of generations later Georges Valois and Charles Maurras led a similar flight from social democracy; Pobedonostsev, Riazanov, Bulgakov, and all the other leaders of Russian neo-orthodoxy were in spiritual resistance to the revolutionary currents of 1905. Such thoughts as the Nazis generated – and even they generated a few – also contained all the elements of a conservative revulsion. The main inspiration of Rosenberg's

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writings was anti-Bolshevik and, to that extent, Baltic; but judged at second hand it embodied most of the reactionary German arguments against the Gotha programme and the Weimar republic. No wonder its recipe contained all the ancient ingredients of German romanticism – the appeal to intuition against reason, blood against intellect, communion with the people against personal judgment.[1]

Thus placed against the historical background of European tradition the recent manifestations of anti-rationalism fall at once into the right place in intellectual genealogy. Their faces are like many others in the family album, and even their dress comes from the family heirlooms. Now, as so many times before, the family is cashing in on the bankruptcy of the age, on the failure of the perfectionist world of the 1920s, and still more on the collapsing vision of the post-war millennium. So once again the purpose of political argument is to banish argument from politics, and once again the resources of reason are mustered to prove that reason has no resources. The mood is thus again one of revulsion, and the argument a mere antithesis. What is more, it is an antithesis to a thesis too disliked to be properly understood.

II

All this is obvious to the point of being trivial: but like all historical demonstrations it does not prove very much and disproves even less. For the case against rationalism, unlike its occasion, owes less to historical circumstance than to certain permanent themes of European culture. As I have said, distrust of thought is endemic in the history of thought, and the ideas on which it is based are part and parcel of that limited armoury of ideas with which the Almighty furnished Adam on the sixth day of creation. It is as a rule compounded of two arguments differing in range and depth. One is essentially polemical and tactical, bent on refutation, and therefore bearing more openly its aspect of revulsion; the other is more positive in that it suggests an alternative system of ideas. It is thanks to this system that the purely revulsive nature of conservative ideology so often fails to be observed.

In its short range and on its polemical side the anti-rationalist argument commonly descends to the familiar technique of the fictitious adversary. An impartial student of ideas will not fail to notice to what extent the

[1] Mr Oakeshott's rationalist is a composite monster; but ideology is one of his hall-marks; this presumably is the reason why Mr Oakeshott insists on treating the Nazis as rationalists. If so, there must be something wrong either with his definition of rationalism or with his definition of ideology, or with both.

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efficacy of the anti-rationalist case depends upon intellectual misdeeds which rationalists do not in fact commit. In reading Savigny it is sometimes impossible to believe that the rationalist notions of law he so brilliantly destroyed had never existed. Lawyers are of course apt to delude themselves and others into believing that law is entirely compounded of reason. Even the English lawyers, even the founders of the common law, might give expression to some such pretensions. We all know Sir John Powell's proud dictum that 'nothing is law that is not reason'. And even Sir Edward Coke, that minor prophet of precedent and tradition, could claim not only that 'law is the perfection of reason', but also the reverse, that 'reason is the life of law'. Pretension to pure reason is indeed an occupational delusion of the legal profession. But need historians and philosophers share it? In the whole history of legal thought it is impossible to find more than a couple or so of great lawyers who in fact based their legal systems on reason and nothing but reason. There was Bentham; there was perhaps Beccaria. Some of us may have also heard about the more recent miracles of disembodied reason in the legal system of Herr Kelsen. But they were not and, apart from Beccaria, could not, on chronological grounds alone, have been the real quarry of Savigny's hounds. What they were out to catch and savage were the legal reforms and constitutional projects of the revolutionary and Napoleonic age in Germany, and they blamed them on Montesquieu, Rousseau and Condorcet. Yet what historian would ascribe to these men the pure doctrine of rational law of Savigny's imagining! After an interval of 200 years *L'Esprit des Lois* reads as an anticipation of the relativist theory of jurisprudence rather than as a plea for abstract reason in law. Read without prejudice it will inevitably suggest to the modern reader an essentially conservative view of law and society.

Similarly the *bêtes noirs* of the historical school of political economy, Say and Adam Smith, were in many ways more conservative and certainly more historical than their critics. Say, like the rest of the physiocrats, concealed behind the garb of rationalist syllogism the unquestioning attachment to the economic tradition of rural and agricultural France. In fact, his attachment to history was more intimate and less rational than that of his German 'historical' critics, so conscious of their historical evidence and so determined to rationalize it. Adam Smith was fundamentally more detached from tradition than Say. Yet, for all his Scottish background and education, his values were uncritically Anglo-Saxon and his method was as fully historical as that of any historian. Reckoned by the printer's measure, the historical argument forms a larger proportion

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of the *Wealth of Nations* than it does in List's *System of National Economy*.

But no image can be more fictitious than that of Rousseau as we find it in French conservative writings of the early nineteenth century. Judged by their outlook *in toto*, and not by particular arguments, Rousseau the perfectionist and Chateaubriand the reactionary (and Rousseau's adversary) were much nearer to each other than either was to any other political writer of the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century. Both were driven by the emotional turbulence within themselves into a state of revolt; both defended the free and natural man against law and politics as they found them. It so happened that Chateaubriand found the revolution all round him and therefore enlisted his wild man in the service of Church and King; while Rousseau's *milieu* was that of the *ancien régime* and his message therefore became revolutionary. Yet he was no more of a rationalist than Chateaubriand. Childe Harold knew him well: 'the self-torturing sophist, wild Rousseau.'

Indeed, it is doubtful whether the rationalists whom the anti-rationalists habitually attack have ever had an influence great enough to deserve the attention the anti-rationalists give them. Men who believe in pure reason to the extent of offering rational explanations for the universe in its entirety or who base all action on intellectual concepts will not be found at large anywhere outside a few Geneva *salons* of the eighteenth century, or the provincial debating societies of the time when H. G. Wells was young, or the RPA. Doubtless the historian, hunting among the humdrum and the second rate, may find in all places and in all ages philosophers *à la* Hudibras, who 'for every why had a wherefore'. Perhaps the Encyclopaedists were of this type; though even some of them proved their rationalism by selecting subjects, mostly those of mechanics and natural sciences, which were capable of being wholly resolved by reason; and not by forcing explanations wholly rational on every subject under the sun.

In fact, the out-and-out rationalist is a man of straw; most of the great figures in the history of thought commonly classified as rationalist are surprisingly free from the sin of exclusive intellectualism. As a group, they are what they are not by virtue of the claims they make for reason, but by virtue of the reasonable argument which they apply to problems to which reason applies. They ply a rational trade, they do not propound a rationalist metaphysic. Who was it who said (I think it was Rathenau) that by sticking to his last a cobbler does not thereby wish to demonstrate that the universe is made of leather? When it comes to actual claims on

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behalf of reason, to the defences of reason against faith, or to epistomological argument about argument, the thought of men commonly labelled as rationalists is, as a rule, far less simple than the anti-rationalist indictment might suggest. Thinkers who use reason, and who rely on it, can on the whole be trusted to know how far reason can or cannot be relied upon. The record of the so-called rationalist thought is haunted by the awareness of reason's frontiers: a fact which even Lecky's history cannot wholly obscure and which even a brief historical survey will show.

III

Whether there was any philosophical rationalism in the middle ages or not, claims on behalf of the intellect, and very exalted ones at that, were made throughout the middle ages. From Gottschalk and Berengar to the Averroists it is possible to trace a continuous tradition of philosophical intellectualism asserting the right and the power of human argument. But to assert the rights of reason did not necessarily mean erecting it into an alternative to faith. To St Augustine reason was part of divine order and its exercise was a form of revelation: so to speak a revelation supplementary disclosing and amplifying the revelation primary. To other men less orthodox and further removed from the fountain heads of medieval orthodoxy, reason may have had a meaning nearer to our own and more sharply differentiated from faith and revelation. Yet even they did not as a rule claim for reason exclusive dominion over man's spiritual activities or over his conduct. The furthest limits of the rationalist claim in the middle ages was that of the 'double truth', i.e. the claim that philosophical truth was as valid within its sphere as truth vouchsafed by revelation was in religion. Even the extreme advocates of double truth, even the worldly and sceptical Averroists of Padua, did not refuse to render unto faith what was faith's and did not claim for rational argument the entire province traditionally religious. All they claimed was the right to ply their logic in fields where they thought logic could be plied.

The notion of double truth remained the established tradition of European intellectualism to our own day. Bacon may have thought he had discovered something in the nature of an intellectual technique for the manipulation of problems of natural philosophy; but what reader of Bacon will ever find him asserting that his empirical method was capable of disclosing all the mysteries of natural philosophy or that natural philosophy comprised all the mysteries of the universe? He knew that there was 'superstition in avoiding superstition'; that there was 'nothing

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more fabulous and unbelievable than that universal frame was without mind'. And he denied that 'God and the permanence of the universe are the truth which depth of philosophy bringeth'. If these themes are not blazed forth in *Novum Organum*, this is merely because *Novum Organum* was an essay on natural phenomena. And those who having read it conclude that experimental technique was all there was to Bacon might again be reminded about the cobbler and the leathery universe.

There is no need to labour this point in relation to Descartes. The founders of the scientific philosophy of the seventeenth century, like the seventeenth-century scientists themselves, never claimed for reason universal dominion and never themselves trespassed its agreed frontiers. It is now generally accepted that Descartes and Harvey, especially the latter, were rooted in medieval scholastic tradition more deeply than behoves even a moderate rationalist; and were wont to render unto faith many a tribute that might just as well have been reserved for reason. Similarly, if Newton's outlook were viewed as a whole, no one could ever accuse him of a superstition of avoiding superstition. In the time-table of his life as in the scale of his personal values, the laws of gravitation, the theory of light and all the mathematical paraphernalia attaching to them, were no more than specialized inquiries into regions where mathematical reason had entry. Elsewhere the Bible and its fable were his guide.

What is so abundantly true of the origin of European rationalism is equally true of its age of maturity in the mid-nineteenth century. There is no denying the first half of the nineteenth century produced some important men who were fired by an intellectual optimism which may strike us now as excessive. There was Bentham, Comte and perhaps Spencer;[1] and there was of course Marx himself. The hard and glittering crust of Marx's intellectualism is there for all to behold. His lavish and self-adulatory use of the word 'scientific', the certitude and finality of his rationalism, were later to be echoed in the writings of Marxist propagandists: Engels, Bebel and a multitude of smaller fry. Indeed, no school of European thought was so aggressively rationalist; and no other school had gone so far in reducing all intellectual approaches to what Mr Oakeshott appears to mean by 'technique'.

Yet how complete and how permanent was in fact Marxist intellectualism? Marx's own attitude to concrete problems of society and

[1] Probably the out-and-out materialists, especially the Germans of Bruckner's and Mach's school, and the Russians of Pisarev's, should be classified with the rationalists. This will swell their number, but will hardly increase their weight in the history of political and social ideas. Such permanent influence as these materialists have had is almost entirely due to the love-hatred which the Marxists have conceived for them.

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politics was shot through with the rose-pink hue of contemporary liberalism, largely sentimental, curiously uncritical, and fundamentally at variance with the anti-liberal bias of the Communist manifesto.[1] And before long the sentimental digressions, which, in Marx's own life and in relation to his own system, were no more than minor inconsistencies, entered into the main stream of Marxian thought and practice. In all the countries where Marxists became a political force, the very need to think out and work out its practical implications led them to import a great deal of foreign matter, some of it highly unrationalistic. In Germany the growth of socialism at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and the political responsibilities thrust upon it after the collapse of Bismarck's repressive measures produced the back-to-Kant movement within the Marxist ranks. Its argument is familiar. Marxist dialectic was insufficient to provide the complete justification of the socialist ideal or the practical guide to socialist activity; so the absolute moral precept, the traditional notions of good and bad, truth and justice, had to be called in.

However, by far the most remarkable is the metamorphosis which has occurred in Russia in our own time. The journalists may still follow the Soviet authorities in describing the official theory and doctrine as Marxist and may still think that the formula, Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist, summarizes the logical evolution of fundamentally the same idea. Few serious students of communism will be thus taken in. No doubt the sociological terminology is still Marxist just as the official political phraseology is democratic and as the language of the constitution is liberal and individualistic. But stripped of its verbiage the Russian communism reveals itself as non-Marxist as it is anti-democratic. The Soviet conception of the Party, the store they lay by propaganda and heroic example, their emphasis on education and youth movement, to say nothing of their choice of countries to be socialized, cannot be easily fitted into a consistent system of ideas except on a view of personal behaviour, of human motivation and of historical causation much nearer to what must have been the outlook of the 'Utopian' socialists of 1840 (or of Jesuit missionaries in South American colonies of the seventeenth century) than to the world of ideas of the Marxist emigration in Geneva of 1910.[2]

[1] I have tried to show this at somewhat greater length in an essay in *The Great Democrats*, 1934, reprinted below, pp. 154–68.

[2] The rationalists in this brief survey have not been classified in accordance with Mr Oakeshott's definitions (ideology, technique, etc.). The latter are part of Mr Oakeshott's private vocabulary and cannot safely be employed by an outsider. I have used the more commonly accepted criteria. Hence the occasional differences in the two collections.

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IV

In short, the image of the rationalist as we find him in the black bestiary of the conservative anti-rationalists is a figment of their terrified imagination. For one thing, the average rationalist has been less doctrinaire than the critics make him out, and than the critics themselves often are. Whereas mystics, prophets and poets can without difficulty capture that elusive bluebird of philosophical monism and attach themselves to a single source of ideas and an all-embracing rule of conduct, students treading the hard path of intellectual inquiry are often compelled by the nature of their trade to eschew unified ideologies. The intellectual method must start and end with things outside its reach. An axiomatic postulate must be the starting point of every intellectual process; and some residium yet unresolved must also remain at the end of most inquiries reasonably conducted.

Therein lies the main intellectual difficulty of the revulsive anti-rationalists. If attack they must, they prefer to attack the out-and-out rationalist, the extremist of reason. When it comes to long-range arguments, the more intelligent rationalists might themselves be found disapproving of reason, if it happens to be taken in over-large doses. On its part conservative anti-rationalism could be as half-hearted in its denial of reason as rationalism is in its confirmation. The great conservative theoretician – a Gobineau, a Pobedonostsev, or a Pareto – is far from refusing intellect its place in the established order of the universe. Pareto for one was himself too proficient in the exercise of thought to fall into the obvious errors of solipsism. On the purely practical plane both he and the others admitted reason to society provided it was not equally distributed. It was a highly dangerous instrument and its use had to be therefore confined to the few. Gobineau and to some extent Pobedonostsev would allow the exercise of thought to the men whom they also allowed the possession of weapons; Pareto might treat it as a toxic substance and by implication allow its unrestricted use to doctors like himself, who knew the lethal dose. Podedonostsev would thus restrict its use to the autocrat, Gobineau to the ruling class, Pareto to Pareto; but none of them would deny its power or spurn its service.

The doctrine of anti-rationalism in its moderate and philosophic formulation might concede to reason a greater place still. The most important and philosophically the most respectable of the anti-rationalist arguments is that which divides the universe into spheres which belong to reason and those which do not. In its commonest version it distinguishes

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