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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1. THE PROBLEM OF THE IRRATIONAL

Whether the positivist tradition has been the dominant one in modern English intellectual life is perhaps a question too imprecise to be debated usefully. In a wider context than political theory, it is certainly possible—Professor Basil Willey, for example, has seemed at times to be engaged in doing it[1]—to present English intellectual history since the seventeenth century as a battle for survival by those who wished to give emotion and spontaneity their due, to defend intuition as a valid source of understanding, tradition as a valid justification, and the life of the imagination as something more than a holiday from reality, against an all-eroding positivism. This is to make Coleridge and Newman and Arnold—to go back no further than the nineteenth century—into a kind of opposition, voices crying in the wilderness. There is some truth in this, even if often it seems an unusually populous wilderness, noisy with major and minor prophets.

But of course the dominant positivist tradition—if dominant *is* correct—was never monolithic or invulnerable, not only because of what was formidable in its opponents' case, but because of the inconvenient surprises which its own programme, the attempt to apply scientific methods to as wide a variety of social phenomena as possible, inevitably laid in store for it. It is with some aspects of this vulnerability that this book is concerned. In particular it is con-

[1] Basil Willey, *The Seventeenth Century Background* (1934), *The Eighteenth Century Background* (1940), and *Nineteenth Century Studies* (1949).

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cerned with the attempts of an initially rationalist, utilitarian approach to the study of social relations and institutions to comprehend non-rational modes of thought and conduct and the existence and viability of institutions which seem, though cherished, to serve no purpose that is readily describable in utilitarian terms.

'Non-rational' conduct may be regarded, for our present purpose, as conduct which is reverential, ceremonial, status-ordered, as distinct from practical, calculating, 'useful'. Another way of putting it might be to consider it in terms of its opposite, rational conduct, which in turn might be negatively described as conduct which does not *per se* invite sociological explanation, for example, selling at the highest price and buying at the lowest. Hence the connection, which will be stressed throughout this book, between awareness of the problem of non-rational behaviour and rejection, in favour of sociological investigation, of a model of society as a set of rational, calculated relationships entered into for the sake of the advantages they confer.

Such difficulties present themselves with peculiar acuteness in the case of alien and, above all, of primitive societies, on whose behalf familiarity and acceptance are not available to turn aside awkward questions. One light in which this book can be regarded is as an attempted contribution to the history of social anthropology, but it has also a wider relevance than this. One of the ways in which men are led to make most vividly manifest the values and habits of thought which underlie their own social attitudes is by contact with ways of life and thought which are alien to them. Recognition of this has contributed to one of the stock devices of satire. The situation is potentially a tragic one, particularly where there are great disparities of power between the two societies; and any attempt by intellect,

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imagination, and whatever hints may be provided by established intellectual disciplines to produce some ordered appraisal of it is worthy of attention.[1]

At this point a word of warning is appropriate. We shall not be directly concerned, though free to refer to it whenever it may seem convenient, with the problem as it presented itself to colonists or to the rulers of Empire, but as it presented itself to intellectuals trying to answer historical and moral, as well as political, questions. Nor, however, need much notice be taken of the occasional use of what would now be called anthropological data to reinforce a purely philosophical argument: for example, its use in the debate about the existence of innate ideas, and particularly the idea of God. Of course, such preoccupations could lead to a serious interest in primitive societies, but we are concerned with them only *in so far as* they did, not with their merely random and occasional use in controversy.

The 'savage' had always represented a potential problem for the theodicies, moral ideas, and philosophies of history of civilized men. His existence can readily offend against too tidy an idea of the Divine plan, too narrow a view of human history, or against moral and political creeds and susceptibilities based on too ready an assumption that the people one has to deal with are, in point of beliefs and way of life, roughly similar to oneself. This egalitarian assumption was given a dogmatic foundation in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries by the widely held belief in the universal and more or less equal diffusion of reason among men; hence the savage, if one allowed oneself to think about him at all seriously, badly needed accounting for.

[1] For an account of European attitudes towards the tribes with whom the traffic in slaves was carried out, see K. George, 'The Civilized West looks at Primitive Africa, 1400–1800', *Isis*, XLIX (1958).

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It is certainly an oversimplification, but perhaps a venial one, to represent attitudes to the savage in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as oscillating between two extremes, either of which, taken seriously, withdraws the savage from scrutiny as a problem. One view, by a denial of his humanity, entails that whatever problems his existence may pose they are not problems concerning the nature of man; the other, by regarding him as the exemplar of essential human nature, converts him from a problem into a measure of other problems—those of civilization.

The former view, the assertion of the non-humanity, or at least the essentially different humanity, of, let us say, the negro, functions more obviously as an apology for vested interests in exploitation than as an intellectually considerable thesis,[1] though, as we shall see, it was sometimes to put on the academic dress of scientific ethnology.[2]

The second view is essentially that embodied in the concept of the Noble Savage, and is worth more prolonged attention because of its relation to some of the most enduring myths of harassed mankind, the myths of innocence: the Blessed Isles, the Earthly Paradise, the Golden Age and the Garden of Eden. It has affinities with both the classical pastoral and the Tolstoian peasant.[3] It is closely related to the distinction between nature and convention which is central to European political thought till the end of the eighteenth century. The amiable savages discovered by Columbus, 'guileless, and liberal of all they have',[4] had a

[1] Cf. for Spanish attitudes to the Indians of the New World, Lewis Hanke, *Aristotle and the Indians* (1959).

[2] It also found a place in the 'Chain of Being' theory. In the eighteenth century some writers saw the Hottentots as a link between anthropoids and man. A. O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being* (Harvard, 1936), p. 234.

[3] H. N. Fairchild, *The Noble Savage* (New York, 1928), esp. pp. 2–3.

[4] *Select Letters of Christopher Columbus*, trans. R. H. Major (2nd ed. 1870), p. 7.

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mythological and philosophical world already waiting for them to step into.

Nevertheless, it is difficult to see the concept of the Noble Savage—in the sense of an equation of the 'natural man' of theory with actual contemporary primitives—as a serious contribution to social thought, even in the eighteenth century. Judged by these standards, the Noble Savage has very much the air of a rococo toy, part of the furniture of a *fête champêtre*, rather than of a tool of social understanding. It was an essentially literary rather than theoretical concept, an ornament of rhetoric or a peg for satire. It has the characteristic of a literary symbol, which is not shared by theoretical postulates, of being readily discardable without any question of culpable inconsistency arising. Voltaire, usually regarded as sharing Dr Johnson's objections to cant about savages,[1] introduces a noble Huron as the hero of his story *L'Ingénu*. This tale belongs to the genre of philosophic fables, the typical protagonists of which are ingenuous or ignorant strangers, innocently, devastatingly inquiring. This cult of the innocent eye, a kind of fictional, semi-playful version of the Cartesian method, had a use for the Noble Savage. He has a niche in its gallery of ingenuous youths and suave orientals. No beliefs about actual primitives are entailed, however, any more than about actual Persians, though in both cases, perhaps, a favourable predisposition is implied, a generous inclination towards unprejudiced cosmopolitanism. Men of the eighteenth century, one might say, were prepared to believe in the wisdom and virtue of savages, if the savages would only co-operate.

The Noble Savage idea, in fact, was anchored only very

[1] Certainly he did not share Rousseau's views, but see the section 'Sauvages' in Voltaire, *Essai sur les Mœurs. Œuvres* (Paris, 1878), vol. ii, Introduction.

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lightly, if at all, in knowledge of actual primitive peoples. Rousseau's reference to the Caribs of Venezuela[1] has an agreeably specific air, but the connection with fact is obviously tenuous, and, as Rousseau himself admits,[2] his descriptions of the pre-social state are not dependent on factual evidence. In any case, his references to pre-social man are notoriously ambivalent.

Diderot's *Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville*[3] is more specific still; the place is Tahiti, the time the present. But this is a mere backdrop to the discussion between the French monk and the untutored but dialectically adroit islander, which is, of course, wholly to the advantage of the latter. The *Encyclopédie*, however, tells a different story. There the Noble Savage is by no means adopted unquestioningly. This is not, of course, to say that the distinction between nature and convention which the notion of the Noble Savage was used to illustrate was not taken seriously by Diderot—on the contrary it was cardinal to his thinking, as to that of the other *philosophes*. All that is in question is the seriousness with which actual primitives were conceived as representing 'nature' in this—primarily normative—sense.[4]

[1] *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes* (C.U.P. 1941), p. 29 (1755).

[2] See below, p. 25.

[3] Not published till 1796. Reprinted in Diderot, *Selected Philosophical Writings* (ed. J. Lough, C.U.P. 1953).

[4] 'L'existence sans lois, sans police, sans propriété, sans religion surtout, sera exaltée comme l'état le plus heureux de l'homme. Il ne reste pas moins vrai que ce n'est là qu'argument polémique, et que, lorsqu'ils se bornent à assembler des faits, pour en tirer une vue et un jugement, d'ensemble, les Encyclopédistes n'ont vanté ni l'état, ni l'innocence de l'homme sauvage' (René Hubert, *Les Sciences sociales dans l'Encyclopédie* (Paris, 1923), p. 88).

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2. THE 'SOCIOLOGY OF ERROR'

In fact, neither of the extreme attitudes to the savage—the denial of his humanity or the assertion of his goodness and even rationality—had, it seems, anything to offer any serious attempt to come to grips with the facts of primitive social life. This does not mean, however, that we have exhausted the attitudes to the savage current in the eighteenth century. Primitive religion, in particular, was a constant source of interest and speculation, and was variously interpreted as allegory, personification of dead heroes or historical events, placation of the terrible gods suggested by a harsh and incalculable environment, or as a political device, justified —like the 'noble lie' in Plato's Republic—or unjustified, of the ruling caste for maintaining its authority. These interpretations have been made the subject of an extremely comprehensive study by Professor Manuel[1] to which reference should be made.

The two schools of thought most relevant to the development of an essentially evolutionary approach to the problems raised by primitive societies, the approach with which this book is directly concerned, are represented by the *histoires raisonnées* or philosophic histories produced by the Enlightenment in France and Scotland respectively. The nineteenth-century descendant of the first is Comte and of the second James Mill. It would be a specialist task in itself to trace the relations between the two traditions, though Montesquieu is clearly a key figure in both. All that can be offered here is a brief outline of each.

In France, the philosophies of history of the Enlightenment characteristically derive their theories of progress from

[1] F. E. Manuel, *The Eighteenth Century Confronts the Gods* (Harvard, 1959).

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the central concept of rationality.[1] The Cartesian doctrine of the infallibility of clear and distinct ideas, and of their accessibility to all men, seemed, quite apart from the philosophical difficulties it raised, incompatible with the known facts of human life, particularly of life in primitive societies, and of the past history of civilized peoples. Error and irrationality became, given the acceptance of this doctrine, not a normal part of the fabric of life, but pathological, something requiring explanation. Much the same implications ensued from belief in the 'natural goodness' of man. Somewhere, somehow, something has happened which should not have happened, something not predictable from the model of human nature which has been set up. That something is the register of crimes and follies which made up, for Gibbon, the history of mankind.

This discrepancy between the ideal model and the actual record underlies, in the form of the nature–convention dichotomy, much of the social and political thought of the Enlightenment; indeed, it is this distinction, and the contribution it could make, if any, to the study of primitive peoples, which we have been considering in connection with the idea of the Noble Savage. But in the course of the eighteenth century the discrepancy gave rise not merely to ironical denunciation and conceptual distinctions, but also to attempts at explanation, to what Professor Frankel calls a 'sociology of error'.[2] This is achieved by a kind of rewriting, *en philosophe*, of the Providential versions of history produced by Christians attempting the essentially similar task of justifying the ways of God to men—a reminder that the problem of evil was not invented by

[1] There have been a number of studies of the idea of Progress in the eighteenth century. The one on which the account given above relies most heavily is Charles Frankel, *The Faith of Reason* (New York, 1948).

[2] Frankel, *op. cit.* pp. 136–40.

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Cartesian rationalism. Given the initial assumption, the goodness of God or the rationality of man, the problem becomes less to explain why progress has occurred than why so slow and painful a process has been necessary at all. And the *philosophes*' answer, broadly speaking, was that reason, though always present, has often had to operate in circumstances which prevent it reaching its goal, or at least cloud and distort the truths to which it attains. There are distinct stages through which reason must pass on its pilgrimage to the illumination to which its nature destines it. A version of the Comtist law of three stages (theological, metaphysical and positivist, i.e. scientific) is first to be found in Turgot.[1] The process is necessary and inevitable: 'All the ages are linked by a series of causes and effects which bind the present situation of the world to all those which have preceded.'[2] The triumph of Enlightenment is assured, because reason is self-corrective. Even error itself —*O felix culpa*—is a necessary aspect of this self-correcting progress.

Condorcet is in this respect more peevish than Turgot.[3] Vested interests play a part which is merely pernicious; knowledge becomes the possession of a class, which uses it as the instrument of political domination, turning science into mystification. But ultimately no such monopoly can be maintained, and progress resumes its march. Moreover, reason brings not merely truth but goodness, for moral knowledge is no less sure than any other kind. Morality, no less than understanding and control, is a matter of knowing the truth; indeed, it is a branch of understanding. Obviously much of Comtism is incipient here.

[1] *Ibid.* p. 123. [2] *Ibid.* p. 121. [3] *Ibid.* pp. 133–40.

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3. CONJECTURAL HISTORY AND THE COMPARATIVE METHOD

The philosophic historians of the Scottish Enlightenment, most notably Adam Ferguson, Adam Smith and John Millar,[1] are less easy to summarize, and have more affinities with Marx than with Comte.[2] The 'stages' of human history they discuss are not based on the intellectual categories singled out by Turgot, or upon others like them, but are the economic ones: hunting, pastoral, agricultural and commercial.[3] The division of labour, rather than intellectual inquiry, tends to be regarded as the primary cause of social progress. The Scots tended in general to be more appreciative of the unplanned though beneficial character of human institutions. 'Nations stumble upon establishments, which are indeed the result of human action, but not the execution of any human design',[4] as Ferguson put it.

The Scottish Enlightenment, and the social theories it threw out, require a book to themselves.[5] They force themselves, however, upon the attention of anyone concerned

[1] For studies of the philosophy of history of the Scottish Enlightenment, see G. Bryson, *Man and Society. The Scottish Enquiry of the Eighteenth Century* (Princeton, 1945); W. C. Lehmann, *Adam Ferguson and the Beginnings of Modern Sociology* (New York, 1930); and *John Millar of Glasgow, 1735–1801* (C.U.P. 1960).

[2] See R. L. Meek, 'The Scottish Contribution to Marxist Sociology' in J. Saville (ed.), *Democracy and the Labour Movement* (1954). The major works of the school are Adam Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1767); John Millar, *Observations concerning the Distinction of Ranks in Society* (1771) (the revised edition, 1779, was renamed *The Origin of the Distinction of Ranks*); William Robertson, *A History of America* (1777); and of course the works of David Hume and Adam Smith.

[3] See Duncan Forbes, 'Scientific Whiggism—Adam Smith and John Millar', *Cambridge Journal*, VII (1954), 648 ff.

[4] Quoted Meek, *op. cit.* p. 88. Cf. Adam Smith, *Lectures on Justice, Police, Revenue and Arms* (ed. E. Cannan, O.U.P. 1896), p. 168.

[5] On this subject I am heavily in debt to the writings of Mr Duncan Forbes.

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