THE AUTHORITY OF THE FREE SOCIETY

By Michael Polanyi

EVERY conception, however simple and obvious it may appear to be, is likely to fail with the expanding range of our experience, at some point or other. Before the circumnavigation of the earth, it was thought impossible that men should exist at the Antipodes where they would fall off the earth. But when Magellan sailed across those regions unscathed, this supposition had to be abandoned, though probably many people continued to find the true facts inconceivable and contrary to common sense. The adjustments which the revolutions of the twentieth century demand in political thinking may appear similarly repugnant to common sense, but are none the less equally indispensable. The grounds on which the free society is to-day generally supposed to rest are not its true grounds. The traditional formulations of freedom have become thoroughly and dangerously inadequate and our conception of liberty must be radically readjusted if we are to stop the process of its decline.

The Continental Cycle of Thought

In my argument I shall take a bird's-eye glance at the process by which freedom of thought was undermined—or rather undermined itself—in the intellectual milieu of Central and Eastern Europe, where the revolutions of the twentieth century took their origin.

Recall for a moment the Italy of the year 1500, which was then leading the world in art and literature. The disintegration of the papal authority, through the corruption of its holders, seemed to be rapidly leading to a general release of all intellectual pursuits from the control of ecclesiastic authority. Had the whole of Europe been at the time of the same mind as Italy, Renaissance Humanism might have established freedom of thought, simply by default of opposition everywhere. Europe may have returned to—or if you like relapsed into—a liberalism resembling that of pre-Christian antiquity.

Instead, however, there occurred in Germany, Switzerland and Spain a profound religious revival, accompanied by a schism of the Christian churches, which was to dominate public life for almost two centuries. The Catholic Church sharply reaffirmed its authority over the whole

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mental sphere. The thoughts of men were moved and politics shaped by the struggle between Protestantism and Catholicism, to which all contemporary issues contributed by alliance to one side or the other.

By the year 1900—to which I am leading up now—the wars between Catholics and Protestants had long ceased; yet the formulation of liberal thought still remained largely determined by the reaction of past generations against the period of religious wars. We may trace to this, in the first place, the fundamental difference between Anglo-American and continental political thought. Though both revolted against religious intolerance by a doctrine of freedom, which was formulated in both places in rather similar terms, yet the actual meaning of the two formulæ was very different, the continental interpretation being far more radical than the British.

The argument for freedom of thought, as first expounded in the course of the seventeenth century in England, is twofold. In its first part it goes back to Milton's *Areopagitica* and to the principles of the new empirical science, founded by Galileo and his contemporaries. This argument demands freedom from authority, in order that the truth may be discovered. Let everyone state his beliefs and let people listen and form their own opinion; the ideas which will prevail in a fair and open battle of wits will be as close an approximation to the truth as we can humanly achieve. This is the anti-authoritarian formula of liberty. Closely related to this is the argument for freedom and tolerance based on philosophic doubt. While its origins go back a long way, right to the sceptics of antiquity, it was first formulated as a political doctrine by Locke. It says simply that we can never be so sure of the truth as to warrant the imposition of our views on others. These two pleas for freedom of thought were put forward and were accepted by England at a time when religious beliefs were strong throughout the nation. The new tolerance aimed pre-eminently at the reconciliation of different denominations in the service of God. Atheists were refused tolerance by Locke, as socially unreliable.

On the Continent, the twofold doctrine of free thought—anti-authoritarianism and philosophic doubt—gained ascendancy somewhat later than in England and then moved on, as I said, to a more extreme position. This position was first effectively formulated in the eighteenth century by the philosophy of Enlightenment, which was primarily an attack on religious authority and particularly on the Catholic Church. It professed a radical scepticism. The books of Voltaire and of the French Encyclopædists expounding this doctrine were widely read in France, while abroad their ideas spread into Germany and far into Eastern Europe. Frederick the Great and Catherine of Russia were among their correspondents and disciples. The type of Voltairian aristocrat, represented by the old Prince Bolkonski in *War and Peace*, was to be found at Court and in feudal residences over many parts of continental Europe at the close of the eighteenth century. The depth

to which the philosophers had influenced political thought in their own country was to be revealed by the French Revolution.

Accordingly, the mood of French Enlightenment, though often angry, was always supremely confident. Its followers promised to mankind relief from all social ills. One of the central figures of the movement, the Baron d'Holbach, declared this in his *Systeme de la Nature* (1770) as follows:—

> 'Man is miserable, simply because he is ignorant. His mind is so infected with prejudices, that one might think him for ever condemned to err. . . . It is error that has evoked the religious fears, which shrivel up men with fright, or make them butcher each other for chimeras. The hatred, persecutions, massacres and tragedies of which, under the pretexts of the interests of Heaven, the earth has been the repeated theatre, are one and all the outcome of error.'

This explanation of human miseries and the remedy which it promised for them continued to carry conviction to the intelligentsia of Europe long after the French Revolution. It remained an axiom among progressive people on the Continent that to achieve light and liberty you had first to break the power of the clergy and eliminate the influence of religious dogma. Battle after battle was fought in this campaign. Perhaps the fiercest engagement was that about the affair Dreyfus at the close of the century, in which clericalism was finally defeated in France, and further weakened throughout Europe. It was about this time that W. E. H. Lecky wrote in his *History of Rationalism in Europe* (1893): 'All over Europe the priesthood are now associated with a policy of toryism, of reaction or of obstruction. All over Europe the organs that represent dogmatic interests are in permanent opposition to the progressive tendencies around them, and are rapidly sinking into contempt.'

I well remember this triumphant sentiment. We looked back on earlier times as on a period of darkness, and with Lucretius we cried in horror: 'Tantum religio potuit suadere malorum'; what evils religion had inspired! So we rejoiced at the superior knowledge of our age and its assured liberties. The promises of peace and freedom given to the world by French Enlightenment had indeed been wonderfully fulfilled towards the end of the nineteenth century. You could travel all over Europe and America without a passport and settle down wherever you pleased. With the exception of Russia, you could print throughout Europe anything without previous censorship and could sharply oppose any government or creed, with impunity. In Germany—much criticised at the time for being authoritarian—biting caricatures of the Emperor were published freely. Even in Russia, whose régime was most oppressive, Marx's *Kapital* appeared in translation immediately after its first publication and received favourable reviews throughout the Press. In the whole of Europe not more than a few hundred people were forced into political exile. Throughout the planet all men of European race were living in free intellectual and personal communication. It is hardly surprising that the universal establishment of peace and tolerance through

the victory of modern Enlightenment was confidently expected at the turn of the century by a large majority of educated people on the Continent of Europe.

Thus we entered on the twentieth century as on an age of infinite promise. Hardly anyone realised at the time that we were walking into a minefield—even though the mines had all been prepared and carefully laid in open daylight by well-known thinkers of our own age. This curious blindness was due to the traditional formulation of intellectual liberty which we had accepted. The ideas which prepared the revolutions of the twentieth century were all anti-authoritarian and sceptical. So we watched their formulation with great satisfaction, confidently expecting that their acceptance would bring a further extension of civic and intellectual freedom.

We know to-day that this expectation proved false. We have all learned how to trace the collapse of freedom in the twentieth century to the writings of certain philosophers, particularly of Marx, Nietzsche and their common ancestors, Fichte and Hegel. But the story has yet to be told how we welcomed as liberators the philosophies which were to destroy liberty.

The profoundly sceptical conclusions reached by the great British empiricists were wisely set aside by the British people themselves, both in deciding their personal conduct and in building up their political institutions. On the Continent they were followed up to their ultimate practical conclusions. Universal standards of human behaviour having fallen into philosophic disrepute, various substitutes were suggested in place of them. These fell into several classes.

The first kind of substitute standard was derived from the contemplation of individuality. The case for uniqueness of the individual is set out as follows in the opening words of Rousseau's *Confessions*. He talks about himself: 'Myself alone... There is no one who resembles me... We shall see whether Nature was right in breaking the mould into which she had cast me.' Individuality challenged here the world to judge it, if it can, by universal standards. Creative genius claimed to be the renewer of all values and therefore to be incommensurable. This claim was to be extended to whole nations; according to it each nation had its unique set of values which could not be validly criticised in the light of universal reason. A nation's only obligation was, like that of the unique individual, to realise its own powers. In following the call of its destiny a nation must allow no other nation to stand in its way.

If you apply this claim for the supremacy of uniqueness—which we may call Romanticism—to single persons, you arrive at a general hostility to society, as exemplified in the anti-conventional and almost extra-territorial attitude of the continental *bohème*. If applied to nations, it results on the contrary in the conception of a unique national destiny which claims the absolute allegiance of all its citizens. The national leader combines the advantages of both. He can stand entranced in the

admiration of his own uniqueness, while identifying his personal ambitions with the destiny of the nation lying at his feet.

Romanticism was a literary movement and a change of heart, rather than a philosophy. Its counterpart in systematic thought was constructed by the Hegelian dialectic. Hegel took charge of Universal Reason, emaciated to a ghost after its treatment by Kant, and clad it with the warm flesh of history. Declared incompetent to judge historic action, reason was given the comfortable position of being immanent in history. An ideal situation: 'Heads you lose, tails I win.' Identified with the stronger battalions, reason became invincible; but unfortunately also redundant.

The next step was therefore quite naturally the complete disestablishment of reason. Marx and Engels decided to turn the Hegelian dialectic right way up. No longer should the tail pretend to wag the dog. The bigger battalions should be recognised as makers of history in their own right, with reason as a mere apologist to justify their conquests.

The story of this last development is well known. Marx re-interpreted history as the outcome of class conflicts, which arise from the need of adjusting 'the relations of production' to 'the forces of production.' Expressed in ordinary language this says that as new technical equipment becomes available from time to time, it is necessary to change the order of property in favour of a new class, which is invariably achieved by overthrowing the hitherto favoured class. Socialism, it was said, brings these violent changes to a close by establishing the classless society. The first formulation of this doctrine in the Communist Manifesto already places the 'eternal truths, such as Freedom, Justice, etc.'—which it mentions in these terms—into a very doubtful position. Since these ideas are supposed to have always been used only to soothe the conscience of the rulers and bemuse the suspicions of the exploited, there is no clear place left for them in the classless society. To-day it has become apparent that there is indeed nothing in the realm of ideas, from law and religion to poetry and science, from the rules of football to the composition of music, that cannot be readily interpreted by Marxists as the ideology of a class. The Eastern radio services tell us this every day.

Meanwhile the legacy of Romantic nationalism, developing on parallel lines, was gradually also transposed into materialistic terms. Wagner and the Valhalla no doubt affected Nazi imagery; Mussolini gloried in recalling imperial Rome. But the really effective idea of Hitler and Mussolini was their classification of nations into have's and have not's, on the model of Marxian class war. The actions of nations were in this view not determined, nor capable of being judged by right or wrong. Those in possession preached peace and the sacredness of international law, since the law sanctioned their holdings. But this code was, of course, unacceptable to virile nations left empty handed. They would rise and overthrow the degenerate pluto-democracies who had become the dupes of their pacific ideology, originally intended only to bemuse the underdogs. And so the text of Fascist and National-Socialist foreign policy

ran on, exactly on the lines of a Marxism applied to class war between nations. Indeed, already by the opening of the twentieth century, influential German writers had fully re-fashioned the nationalism of Fichte and Hegel on the lines of a power-political interpretation of history. Romanticism had been brutalised and brutality romanticised, until the product was as tough as Marx's own historic materialism.

Moreover, the climate of opinion was rapidly changing throughout the world in favour of an interpretation of man and society closely germane to these ideas. Towards the turn of the century, psychologists were beginning to reject introspection as a means of studying the mind and to re-phrase psychological observations in non-mental terms. The movement was soon taken much further by J. B. Watson's behaviourist manifesto of 1913, which called in question the very existence of consciousness in man. At the same time Freudian psycho-analysis established widely its claim to reduce the moral, and indeed the whole rational, sphere of man to the manifestation of his libido, modified by repression and sublimation. Sociology and the writings of modern historians, both deeply influenced by Marxism, were similarly engaged in eliminating all references to good and evil from the study of human affairs. All these modes of thought were sympathetic to that fundamental conception of man and society from which the Russian and Fascist revolutions took their origin.

We can see now that the modern philosophies which guided the revolutions of the twentieth century were indeed anti-authoritarian and sceptical in the extreme. They set men free from obligations towards truth and justice, reducing reason to its own caricature: to a mere rationalisation of conclusions, predetermined by our desires and eventually to be secured, or already held, by force. Such was the final measure of liberation: man was to be recognised henceforth as maker and master, and no longer servant, of what before had been his ideals.

But this liberation destroyed the very foundations of liberty. If thought and reason are nothing by themselves, then it is meaningless to demand that thought be set free. The boundless hopes which the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century attached to the overthrow of authority and to the pursuit of scepticism, were hopes attached to the release of reason. They did not fall back on reason as a mere stop-gap when they tore up the earlier foundations of our civilisation. They firmly believed—to use Jefferson's majestic vocabulary—in 'truths that are self-evident,' which would guard 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness,' under governments 'deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.' They relied on these truths, which they trusted to be inscribed on the hearts of men, for establishing peace and freedom among men everywhere. The assumption of universal standards of reason was implicit in the hopes of Enlightenment and the philosophies which denied the existence of such standards, denied therefore the foundations of all these hopes.

The Downfall of Liberty

If this argument sounds abstract, may the course of events, which was determined by its logic, speak for itself.

Let me approach the scene from the West. Towards the close of the Four Years War, we heard from across the Atlantic the voice of Wilson appealing for a new Europe in terms of pure eighteenth-century ideas. 'What we seek' he summed up in his declaration of July 4th, 1918: 'is the reign of law, based upon the consent of the governed and sustained by the organised opinion of mankind.'. When, a few months later, Wilson landed in Europe, a tide of boundless hope swept through its lands. They were the old hopes of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, only much brighter than ever before. But these hopes spreading from the Atlantic seaboard, were contemptuously rejected by the disciples of the new philosophies in Central and Eastern Europe. To Lenin, Wilson's language was a huge joke; from Mussolini it may have evoked a sneer and from Hitler perhaps an explosion of anger. Yet these were the men destined to rise high in Europe. The political theories which they and their small circle of followers were mooting at the time were soon to become dominant. Twenty-two years after the landing of Wilson in Brest, Stalin, Mussolini and Hitler held sway virtually over the whole Continent. Those forces which in the years 1918–9 many had passed off as a momentary outbreak of political passion, had grown into a comprehensive system of totalitarian governments, firmly established in Europe and threatening to conquer the whole world.

The sweeping success of Wilson's opponents was due to the greater appeal which their ideas made on a considerable section of the central and eastern nations. Their final rise to power was achieved by violence, but not before they had gained sufficient support in every stratum of the population so that they could use violence effectively. The decisive factor which defeated Wilson's doctrines was the superior convincing power of opposing philosophies.

But historic events are not wholly determined by the clash of ideas. We must distinguish between people who merely believe in certain ideas and those who are also prepared to act on them. If ideas cause revolutions, they can only do so through those who act on them. Such people form an important group which should be given a special name. And in the present connection I think that the term 'nihilist' might be used to cover all people prepared to act—or at any rate to go a long way towards acting—on the belief that man is governed purely by material interests.

There is an interesting ambiguity in the connotations of the word 'nihilism,' which at first may seem confusing, but actually turns out to be illuminating. Remember Rauschnigg's interpretation of the National-Socialist upheaval in his book *Germany's Revolution of Nihilism*. As against this, reports from Central Europe often speak of widespread nihilism, meaning a lack of public spirit, the apathy of people who believe in nothing. This curious duality of nihilism, which makes it a by-word both for complete self-centredness and violent revolutionary action, can

be traced to its earliest origins. The word was popularised by Turgenjev in his *Fathers and Sons*, written in 1862. His prototype of nihilism, the student Bazarov, is an extreme individualist without any interest in politics. Nor does the next similar figure of Russian literature, Dostojewski's Raskolnikow in *Crime and Punishment* (1866) show any political leanings. What Raskolnikow is trying to find out is why he should not murder an old woman, if he wanted her money. Both Bazarov and Raskolnikow are experimenting with a life of total disbelief. But already a few years later we see the nihilist transformed into a political conspirator. The terrorist organisation of the Narodniki—or Populists—had come into being. Dostojewski portrayed the new type in his later novel, *The Possessed.* The nihilist now appears as an ice-cold businesslike conspirator, closely prefiguring the ideal Bolshevik as I have seen him represented on the Moscow stage in the didactic plays of the early Stalin period. Nor is the similarity accidental. For the whole code of conspiratorial action—the cells, the secrecy, the discipline and ruthlessness—known as the Communist method to-day, was taken over by Lenin from the 'Populists.' Proof of which can be found in articles published by him in 1901.

English people find it difficult to understand nihilism, for most of the doctrines professed by nihilists have been current in this country for some time without turning those who held them into nihilists. Great, solid Bentham would not have disagreed with any of the views expounded by Turgenjev's prototype of nihilism, the student Bazarov. But while Bentham and other sceptically minded Englishmen may use such philosophies merely as a mistaken explanation of their own conduct, which in actual fact is determined by their upbringing and traditional beliefs—the nihilist Bazarov and his kind take such philosophies literally and try to live by their light. They do so, because they are Eastern or Central European intellectuals of an audaciously speculative bent and unhampered by any great civic tradition.

The nihilist who tries to live without any beliefs, obligations or restrictions, stands at the first, the private stage of nihilism. He is represented in Russia by the earlier type of intellectual described by Turgenjev and the younger Dostojewski. In Germany we find nihilists of this kind growing up in large numbers under the influence of Nietzsche and Stirner; and later, between 1910 and 1930, we see emerging in direct line of their succession the great German Youth Movement, with its radical contempt for all existing social ties.

But the solitary nihilist is unstable. Starved of social responsibility, he is liable to be drawn into politics, provided he can find a movement based on nihilistic assumptions. Thus, when he turns to public affairs, he adopts a creed of political violence. The cafés of Munich, Berlin, Vienna, Prague and Budapest, where writers, painters, lawyers, doctors had spent so many hours of amusing speculation and gossip, thus became in 1918 the recruiting grounds for the 'armed bohemians,' whom Heiden in his book on Hitler describes as the agents of the European Revolution.

Just as the Bloomsbury of the unbridled 'twenties unexpectedly turned out masses of disciplined Marxists around 1930.

The conversion of the nihilist from extreme individualism to the service of a fierce and narrow political creed, is the turning-point of the European revolution. The downfall of liberty in Europe consisted in a series of such individual conversions.

Their mechanism deserves closest attention. Take firstly conversion to Marxism. Historic materialism had all the attractions of a second Enlightenment—taking off and carrying on from the first anti-religious Enlightenment—and offering the same intense mental satisfaction. Those who accepted its guidance felt suddenly initiated to the real forces actuating men and operating in history; to a reality that had hitherto been hidden to them and still remained hidden to the unenlightened, by a veil of deceit and self-deceit. Marx and the whole materialistic movement of which he formed part, had turned the world right way up before their eyes, revealing to them the true springs of human behaviour.

Marxism offered them also a theory of history; of a future bearing unbounded promise to humanity. It predicted that historic necessity would destroy an antiquated form of society and replace it by a new one, in which the existing miseries and injustices would be eliminated. Though this prospect was put forward as a purely scientific observation, it endowed those who accepted it with a feeling of overwhelming moral superiority. They acquired a sense of righteousness, which in a paradoxical manner was fiercely intensified by the mechanical framework in which it was set. Their nihilism had prevented them from demanding justice in the name of justice, or humanity in the name of humanity; these words were banned from their vocabulary and their minds closed to these concepts. But silenced and repressed, their moral aspirations found an outlet in the scientific prediction of a perfect society. Here was set out a scientific Utopia relying for its fulfilment only on violence. Nihilists could accept and would eagerly embrace such a prophecy, which required from its disciples no other belief than that in the force of bodily appetites and yet satisfied at the same time their most extravagant moral hopes. Their sense of righteousness was thus reinforced by a calculated brutality, born of scientific self-assurance. There emerged the modern fanatic, bristling with deadly scepticism.

The power of Marxism over the mind is based here on a process exactly inverse of Freudian sublimation. The moral needs of man which are denied expression in terms of human ideals are injected into a mechanistic conception of politics, to which they impart the force of a blind moral passion. With some qualification the same is true of the power of National Socialism over the mind of German youth. By offering them an interpretation of history in the materialistic terms of international class war, Hitler mobilised their sense of civic obligation which would not respond to humane ideals. It was a mistake to regard the Nazi as an untaught savage. His bestiality was carefully groomed by speculations closely reflecting Marxian influence. His contempt for

humanitarian ideals had a century of materialistic schooling behind it. The Nazi disbelieves in public morality in the way we disbelieve in witchcraft. It is not that he has never heard of it, but that he thinks he has valid grounds to assert that such a thing cannot exist. If you tell him the contrary, he will think you peculiarly old-fashioned, or simply dishonest.

Such were the modern theories of man and society which defeated Wilson's appeal to universal ideas. It is this new and fiercer Enlightenment that has continued ever since to strike relentlessly at every humane and rational principle rooted in the soil of Europe.

The downfall of liberty which followed the success of these attacks everywhere demonstrates in hard facts what I had said before: that freedom of thought is rendered pointless and must disappear, where reason is deprived of its status as a force in its own right. When the judge in court can no longer appeal to law and justice; when neither a witness, nor the newspapers, nor even a scientist reporting on his experiments, can speak the truth as he knows it; when in public life there is no moral principle commanding respect; when the revelations of religion and of art are denied any substance; then there are no grounds left on which any individual may justly make a stand against the rulers of the day. Such is the simple logic of totalitarianism. A nihilistic regime will have to undertake the day-to-day direction of all the activities which are otherwise guided by the intellectual and moral principles, declared by it empty and void. Principles must be replaced by the decrees of an all-embracing Party Line.

This is why modern totalitarianism, based on a purely materialistic conception of man, is of necessity more oppressive than an authoritarianism enforcing a spiritual creed, however rigid. Take the medieval church even at its worst. The authority of certain texts which it imposed remained fixed over long periods of time and their interpretation was laid down in systems of theology and philosophy, gradually developing over more than a millennium from St. Paul to Aquinas. A good Catholic was not required to change his convictions and reverse his beliefs at frequent intervals, in deference to the secret decisions of a handful of high officials. Moreover, since the authority of the Church was spiritual, it recognised other independent principles outside its own. Though it imposed numerous regulations on individual conduct, there were many parts of life left untouched and governed by other authorities—rivals to the Church—like kings, noblemen, guilds, civic corporations. And the power of all these was transcended by the growing force of law; while a good deal of speculative and artistic initiative was allowed to pulsate freely through this many-sided system.

The unprecedented oppressiveness of modern totalitarianism has become widely recognised on the Continent to-day and has gone some way towards allaying the feud between the fighters of liberty and the upholders of religion, which had been going on there since the first spread of Enlightenment. Anti-clericalism is not dead, but many who

recognise transcendent obligations and are resolved to preserve a society built on the belief that such obligations are real, have now discovered that they stand much closer to believers in the Bible and in the Christian revelation, than to the nihilist regimes, based on radical disbelief. History will perhaps record the Italian elections of April 1948 as the turning-point. The defeat inflicted there on the Communists by a large Catholic majority was hailed with immense relief by defenders of liberty throughout the world; by many who had been brought up under Voltaire's motto 'Ecrasez l'infame!' and had in earlier days pinned all their hopes for progress on that battle-cry.

It would seem to me that on the day when the modern sceptic first placed his trust in the Catholic Church to rescue his liberties against the Frankenstein monster of his own creation, a vast cycle of human thought has come full swing. The sphere of doubt has been circumnavigated. The critical enterprise which gave rise to the Renaissance and the Reformation, and started the rise of modern science, philosophy and art, has matured to its conclusion and has reached its final limits. We have begun to live in a new intellectual period, which I would call the post-critical age of Western civilisation. An age in which the free society founded by Western civilisation, increasingly comes to realise that like any other society it lives by its own positive beliefs, and that it must enforce these by its whole authority.

British Counsels

It is difficult to see this in Britain and America, where political life has remained up to this day determined by moral and civic traditions, no matter what philosophers may have said and people repeated after them, about the nature of man, his standards and his obligations. Nihilism has never been fully grasped here. When British people are faced with an outbreak of fanaticism and a collapse of freedom on the Continent, they are inclined therefore to regard this simply as a reversal to the past and to repeat what Milton and Locke said in face of religious oppression once ravaging the Continent. They prescribe yet another dose of anti-authoritarianism and philosophic doubt. This has certainly been the response of the most influential school of thought here, which continues to-day the tradition of British empiricism, among the representatives of which the best known and the most eminent is Bertrand Russell.

Already in his Conway Lecture of 1922[1] Russell affirmed and elaborated in some detail the equivalence of clericalism and Bolshevism as two opposite dogmatic teachings, which should both be equally resisted by philosophic doubt. A more recent article pursuing the same thought[2]

[1] Re-published in 1941 in the *Thinkers' Library*, in the volume entitled 'Let the People Think,' pp. 22–42.

[2] *Universities Quarterly* 1 (1946) p. 38. Russell writes here: 'Arians and Catholics, Crusaders and Muslims, Protestants and adherents of the Pope, Communists and Fascists, have filled large parts of the last 1,600 years with futile strife when a little philosophy would have shown both sides in all these disputes that neither had any good reason to believe itself in the right. Dogmatism . . . in the present age—cast as in former times, is the greatest of the mental obstacles to human happiness.'

makes very clear Russell's advice on the matter: 'Our beliefs (he writes) spring from a great variety of causes: what we were told in youth by parents and school-teachers, what powerful organisations tell us in order to make us act as they wish, what either embodies or allays our fears, what ministers to our self-esteem, and so on. Any one of these causes may happen to lead us to true beliefs, but is more likely to lead us in the opposite direction. Intellectual sobriety, therefore, will lead us to scrutinise our beliefs closely, with a view to discovering which of them there is any reason to believe true. If we are wise we shall apply solvent criticism especially to the beliefs that we find it most painful to doubt....'

Such anti-authoritarianism seems to me entirely misapplied with reference to modern tyrannies. Suppose we were to use its test to the four leading statesmen of the decisive year 1940 and give marks to Stalin, Hitler, Churchill and Roosevelt according to the extent to which they repudiated the teachings of their homes and schools, and resisted the influence of national organisations which wanted to mould them to conformity with their traditions. Stalin would clearly come out with spectacular distinction and Hitler would still get a very good first; while Churchill and Roosevelt could hardly pass the test at all. The same would hold of the groups who brought Leninism and Hitlerism into power, when comparing them with the supporters of Churchill and Roosevelt. At this very moment, the outstanding characteristic of the members of the Communist parties of the West lies in the same direction; they can certainly claim to be far less willing than their opponents to accept the teachings of their homes, their schools and the traditions of the national body to which they were born. And this applies equally to Sir Oswald Mosley and to men like Gregor Strasser, who is at present trying to revive German Fascism.

The rationalist position has been summed up in more precise terms by Russell as follows. Some things—he says—though not self-evident, must be accepted without proof as the premises of all proof. We should thus accept the facts of sense-experience and the principles of mathematics and logic, including the inductive logic of science, because 'these are things we can hardly bring ourselves to doubt, and as to which there is a general measure of agreement among mankind.' 'But in matters as to which men disagree or as to which our convictions are wavering, we should look for proofs, and if proofs cannot be found, we should be content to confess ignorance.' [8]

However, such rules are unacceptable, as their observance would paralyse all public action, both good and bad. In public affairs you have constantly to make up your mind on matters as to which men may violently disagree and do so without asking for proofs of scientific rigour. The most important things we must believe in cannot be proved at all.

Scepticism was a potent weapon against religious fanaticism in the eighteenth century. At that time it implied a belief in the beneficient power of unfettered reason, and was therefore also a weapon of liberation.

[8] Bertrand Russell, 'The Faith of a Rationalist,' *The Listener*, 29th May, 1947.

To-day scepticism favours the materialistic outlook which leads to nihilism. Modern fanaticism which is rooted in nihilism can only be strengthened, not shaken by further doses of fundamental doubt.

The Beliefs of a Free Society

In this paper I have been concerned with the theory of the free society, that is with the interpretation it should give of itself. I have recalled how freedom of thought was first established by the rejection of authority and the application of philosophic doubt, and have proceeded to argue that these principles are no longer the adequate foundations for freedom but tend on the contrary to strengthen the suppressors of freedom today. I have concluded that the free society must now acknowledge certain positive beliefs and uphold these by its own authority.

Our true beliefs are hidden away today behind the current scientific or critical modes of thought, which claim to subsist without believing any unproven things beyond sense-data, mathematics and the like. I doubt that anyone's beliefs can be limited to this kind of pre-suppositions and I deny altogether that any human society could be built on so little belief; least of all a free society which relies on a minimum of violence, and can therefore be held together only by a far-reaching community of beliefs. I consider it a false and misleading pretence, forced upon us by our critical tradition, to say that we hold so few unproven beliefs. We need a post-critical philosophy which will expose this intellectual hypocrisy and confess frankly to the whole range of unproven beliefs to which we in fact adhere. It will re-establish our right to proclaim, without loss of intellectual self-respect, beliefs which are admittedly not inescapable.

Let me illustrate the point by my own belief in the existence of a common sense of justice between the citizens of this country, which enables them—and will continue to enable them—to solve their conflicts peacefully by persuasion. This belief is contrary to the class-war theory, which denies both its premises and conclusions. Both of these conflicting beliefs may be compatible with the facts. Indeed, the first may be less plausible on the face of experience than the second. Yet I shall choose to believe the first, from loyalty to the free society, which will be strengthened by my holding of this belief, while it would be weakened in the opposite case. It is conceivable that I may prove wrong in the sense that eventually factions and mutual suspicions will prevail and freedom will be overthrown in Britain. Yet my belief will remain the truer one. For it is better to have proved wrong while upholding the free society, than to prove right in having helped to destroy it.

Such a belief may be called uncritical. But the holding of a belief is an *action* which, though it must be decided upon in due consideration of the facts, cannot be determined by the facts alone. An action can ultimately be judged only by conscience.

The admission that I hold a belief to be true because the holding of it is the foundation of a good society, resembles closely the Marxian theory that beliefs are commanded by social necessity. But it differs from it

fundamentally in that it regards society not as a productive machinery but as a moral community. The forming of such a community is a moral aim in itself, the upholding of which necessarily affects and largely implies our moral beliefs.

No society can continue to exist unless it upholds its common beliefs and transmits them from one generation to the next; least of all a free society, which is held together more than any other by a community of beliefs. As members of such a society, we feel entitled to implant its constitutive beliefs in the growing child; for as we believe these teachings to be true, we do not consider this imparting a violation of the child's conscience.

To sum up. The truths that the fathers of freedom could blandly assume to be self-evident will henceforth have to be formulated in explicit professions of beliefs. By recognising itself to be but one teaching among many, freedom has lost its early innocence and self-assurance. It must now realise and assert that it is the only true teaching among many that are false.

(This is the twelfth contribution to the current series designed to combat the present fragmentation of knowledge.)