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Isaiah Berlin

IN CONVERSATION WITH STEVEN LUKES

I. From Riga to Oxford

CHILDHOOD AND THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION

SL: *Tell me about your father*

IB: My father was the adopted grandson of a rich man who was a timber merchant who owned forests in Russia. The timber was floated down the river and then sawn in Riga, where there were sawmills, and then exported to the West. My father was the person who went to the West and dealt with various businesses in western countries, and consequently, as well as knowing Russian and German, both of which he knew perfectly, he also learnt English and French.

SL: *Is it true that your family was originally Hasidic?*

IB: Certainly. I am descended, as indeed Yehudi Menuhin is, from the founder of the Chabad Hasidim, now normally known as Lubavich.

The founder was a Rabbi called Shneur Zalman, who was then called Shneerson because Jews had to have family names. He was born some time in the first half of the 18th Century. He died in 1812. He was the creator of that particular branch of the Hasidic movement. There were many branches. He lived in a town called Lubavichi and he had his court there and my family was directly descended from him. My grandparents were pious Hasidim.

SL: *Oh, your grandparents were. . .*

IB: Absolutely, hundred percent. My parents were brought up in it.

SL: *So your father rebelled against it?*

IB: No, drifted from it. Became *evolué*.

SL: *Without it leaving traces?*

IB: No, he took a great interest in it. Sentimentally disposed. My mother too, they were first cousins. They were both descendants. I remember as a child being taken to a little synagogue created by my adoptive great grandfather who was a very rich Hasid in Riga.

SL: *So he was also a Hasid?*

IB: Yes, inevitably, he wouldn't have adopted my grandfather if he hadn't been. They really were a very close-knit body of people. They used to go and see the Rebbe, as he was called, once a year. I can't remember when it was, probably Passover or some such time. Women went in order to ask advice. For example if they wanted children he might in some way try to help them, by praying to God; and men went for advice about business or about whom you should marry your daughters to. He was a guru. He was the Delphic oracle, this man. But of course now it has degenerated.

SL: *But they have a very powerful continuity, the Hasidim.*

IB: I am afraid so.

SL: *And the generations continue. And so for your father to have drifted away was surely then exceptional.*

IB: No, not at all. By his generation, a great many Jews had drifted into secular life. I think by that time the relative emancipation was such in Russia that all my cousins were not Hasidim at all. His brothers and sisters weren't, his cousins weren't. He didn't become a flaming atheist. Some did. One of the cousins became a member of the Cheka. My father's sister was nearly arrested for some kind of revolutionary activity in Warsaw at one stage in the 1905 Revolution and so on. Sir Lewis Namier explained this extremely clearly. He said that East European Judaism was a frozen mass until the rays the Western Enlightenment began to beat on it. Then some of it remained frozen, some evaporated — that meant assimilation and drifting, and some melted into powerful streams: one was socialism and the other Zionism. That's exactly right.

SL: *Well, how does your family fit into that?*

IB: Neither one nor the other. My mother was a Zionist, but my father was not. He was simply half-molten, he remained in a quiet pool.

SL: *An agnostic?*

IB: Well, yes. He went to Synagogue. He thought he believed in God. He hoped there was a future life. He regarded himself as a member of the Jewish community as indeed I do, except I happen not to believe in God. It makes little difference. Now of course, the Hasidim have become a somewhat aggressive movement and a number have become politically very, very reactionary.

SL: *So you lived in Riga. Was it a very cosmopolitan city?*

IB: No, it was mainly German, basically German. There were not many Russians, and of course Letts.

SL: *Give me a sketch of the sociology of Riga at that time.*

IB: At the top were the Baltic barons. They were of German origin, fanatical supporters of the Czarist throne and they held high offices in the Russian government. They were not too popular in that country. At home they tended to speak German. Below them came the prosperous German merchants together with Scandinavians — Danes, Swedes, as well as Scotsmen and Englishmen — a colony of merchants who were basically responsible for exporting Russian goods to the west. I don't suppose that the total inhabitants of Riga could have numbered more than two hundred thousand and perhaps there was a foreign colony of say twenty thousand and say three thousand Russians, sixty thousand Germans and forty thousand Jews and a hundred to a hundred and fifty thousand Letts.

SL: *So at the top of the scale were the Baltic barons and then the rich merchants. And then?*

IB: Then came the Jews. Now the prosperous Jews spoke German, since they couldn't mostly get their children into Russian universities, mainly because there was a strict quota for Jews. It was a very sore point. A good many sent their children, who spoke perfect German, to the University of Berlin or Koenigsberg. Then there came the middle class Russian Jews who talked Russian, and then came the Jews of the self-created Ghetto. Riga was outside the Pale. The Ghetto was not an official ghetto and they were employed by other Jews. You see, Jews could remain outside the Pale of Settlement if they were rich beyond a certain point. If the turn-over of their business was more than so much, if they were merchants of the First Guild so-called, or if they were professionals or artisans — doctors, dentists, metal workers, milkmen and the like. If you were a Jewish dentist you might have thirty assistants, none of whom knew anything about dentistry; you bribed the police and they were allowed to stay.

SL: *So your family was German-speaking?*

IB: German and Russian.

SL: *As a boy, what language did you speak?*

IB: My nurse talked German but my governess — and this was deliberate — talked Russian. My parents talked Russian to me.

SL: *And of course never Yiddish?*

IB: Never Yiddish. They spoke it to their parents but not to each other.

SL: *And your father was selling wood?*

IB: Yes, timber.

SL: *When you were eight the Russian Revolution occurred.*

IB: In 1915 my parents moved to Petrograd to be nearer their forests, lest the German armies cut them off. En route we lived near a village where there were young women in gauze dresses who picked mushrooms and young officers waiting to be sent to the front, and soldiers who sang and played balalaikas. There was an old squire slowly dying in his manor house in a wild park. It was like something in Turgenev, or in Chekhov. It was a rather unique kind of experience for somebody aged six.

SL: *They went to Petrograd, your parents, because they foresaw*

IB: The main office was there.

SL: *I see. And you arrived in Petrograd in 1916.*

IB: Yes.

SL: *And then early in 1917, in February, the first revolution occurred.*

IB: Correct. I saw the crowd fraternising with the revolutionaries. Banners flying saying 'Land and Liberty', 'All Power to the Duma', 'Down with the Czar'.

SL: *And your family was wholly in favour of this?*

IB: Entirely. I didn't know anybody who wasn't. My father had Russian friends who were not Jews, but they were all liberals and in favour, certainly. The whole family, my father's four brothers, my mother's three sisters, were all in favour of the revolution. There was great excitement. The Jewish disabilities were gradually removed.

SL: *Was it a very politically conscious family?*

IB:IB: No. But after some months they heard of Lenin and Trotsky.

SL: *And what did they hear?*

IB: They thought they were terrible people, who were going to deprive everybody of their property, oppress the people, create a reign of terror. That's what they thought. I never met a Russian communist in those days. No member of my family joined the Communist Party. Some were SRs — Social Revolutionaries — I had an uncle who was one of the SR Militia, who afterwards became an Israeli hero because he duly created Palmach, the *frappe de force* of the Israelis. It's a long story. There is a splendid memorial to him. He was a left-wing figure.

SL: *And was he more sympathetic to the Bolsheviks than the rest of the family?*

IB: No. He was called Isaac Landsberg, he was a boxer, a wrestler and a football player. Not very usual in Russian middle-class families, least of all among Jews. He married my aunt. He was also a first cousin of my

father. He joined the Russian army in 1914, then became a member of the SR militia. He came to our flat in Petrograd with a huge Mauser pistol. This so frightened my mother, she put it in a bath of cold water, like a bomb, in case it blew up. In November he then joined the Red Guards. After that he joined the Whites. He was a man with a taste for fighting. When among the Whites, he found himself in a camp on the coast of the Black Sea; the officers were so anti-semitic that he decided that that was not the place for him, so he and his wife took the next boat and went to Palestine.

SL: *What was your family circle like? I mean what was it like in your home? You were educated at home by a governess?*

IB: Yes, I was educated at home and I was never sent to school in Russia. Students came and taught me — private tutors, I practised talking very infantile Hebrew, I read the Bible, I was taken to the Synagogue perhaps four or five times a year.

SL: *Only?*

IB: Yes

SL: *So they weren't religious, your parents.*

IB: They weren't devout, they were like every bourgeoisie, like members of the Church of England or some Catholics in Italy who don't go to Church regularly. It was ordinary middle-class behaviour. They were members of the Jewish community. They had seats in the Synagogue.

SL: *Did you talk to them much about anything, did you discuss things with them?*

IB: I can't remember, probably a great deal, but I spent my time with other little boys that I knew

SL: *So you had many friends?*

IB: Three or four or five — and I read books. Above us lived a Georgian Princess. The next floor of our house was occupied by the Assistant Minister of Finnish Affairs, Ivanov, a Czarist minister. His daughter was my friend. We used to go out for walks, accompanied by our parents, by her governess or by mine, and talked about books. I met her friends, some of whom were girls from the ballet school. Some were very pretty and elegant. I met my friend, Ivanov's daughter, in Brown University in the United States sixty years later and we talked about our childhood.

SL: *Did you do lots of reading at that time?*

IB: I read all the novels of Jules Verne.

SL: *At that age?*

IB: At the age of ten. I read *War and Peace*, I read *Anna Karenina* which I couldn't understand at all, I read an English writer whom Russian children read, who has never been heard of, called Captain Mayne Reade, who wrote adventure stories.

SL: *Was all this under the influence of your governess?*

IB: No, also of other children. She supplied the books. My parents had quite a good library of Russian and German classics. I didn't read German, so when they read Heine I read Pushkin.

SL: *And all of this was by the age of ten?*

IB: Yes, ten and a half. I came to England in 1920.

SL: *But before we get to your coming to England tell me about the second revolution, the November Revolution.*

IB: My family didn't know what had happened. Nobody knew. Suddenly there was a general strike, against the Bolsheviks. Everything

stopped. There was no lift (we lived on the fourth floor), no trams, no trains, no newspapers. There was a liberal newspaper called 'Day'; it was suppressed; it appeared as 'Evening'; suppressed; then as 'Night'; suppressed; then as 'Midnight'; suppressed; then as 'Dead-of-night'. Then it was finally suppressed. That I do remember.

SL: *And what was it that made you realise that this revolution had actually succeeded.*

IB: Simply that it went on. Men came with armbands and rifles.

SL: *Where?*

IB: To our house. They said, 'Look, you may not know it, but there is a Soviet revolution. The head of it is Vladimir Ilyich Lenin. You have to form a house committee for the purpose of running the house. The secretary of the committee is to be the stoker, called Koshkin. Now remember these orders: you must collect together in such and such a room and he will tell you what to do.' When this happened he ordered everyone to clean out the yard. My mother for some reason was on good terms with him so we weren't made to do anything. Pure favouritism. But the Princess and Rimsky-Korsakov's daughter who lived six floors up and his son-in-law Steinberg, the famous cellist, all had to work, stoke the stoves, sweep, remove refuse, and so on.

SL: *And your father?*

IB: My father didn't have to. We were favourites. It was all because we were on very good terms with the stoker. We had a maid who was a strong Czarist. Our money and jewellery were stacked away in the snow on the balcony outside and when militiamen came to search the flat she appeared before them and she said 'Out you go, don't you dare go any further' — she was obviously a peasant; in the final weeks of 1918 no one could gainsay the will of the people; they left; we were never searched.

SL: *So your parents very quickly saw that this wasn't a place in which to stay?*

IB: Yes they did. The streets were plastered with caricatures of the bourgeoisie.

SL: *And caricatures of Jews? Was there any sense of anti-semitism?*

IB: No, not during the early years of the revolution. But my parents wanted Trotsky hanged. They thought he was destroying them and the country.

SL: *They felt more strongly about Trotsky than Lenin?*

IB: Yes.

SL: *Because he was Jewish?*

IB: Maybe, but Trotsky made very violent speeches, while Lenin made dignified, strong but not hysterical speeches.

SL: *Did you see them?*

IB: No.

SL: *Did members of your family?*

IB: No, my aunts and uncles, liberals and social democrats went to meetings during the February revolution but not afterwards.

SL: *How did your departure come about?*

IB: My father supplied timber to the Russian railways and went on doing that under the Soviet regime. We were not arrested, we weren't touched, there were of course occasional searches, but nothing was found. We lived in one little room. There was very little fuel. I was made to stand in queues for food, for perhaps six hours on end, wearing huge felt boots. We went to theatres, to the Opera, I heard Chaliapin singing Boris Godunov. I was not at all unhappy.

SL: *Then you went back to Riga?*

IB: Yes, we were natives and therefore could opt to be citizens of Latvia. My father hated the Soviet regime from the beginning, and he decided the sooner we got out the better. We went back to Riga because it was our only way out. My father always wanted to go to England.

SL: *Why?*

IB: He was an anglo-maniac. Middle class Russian Jews often looked up to England.

SL: *Why?*

IB: They lived in a country where they were heavily discriminated against, where there was a great deal of anti-semitism and where the anti-Jewish laws could only be avoided by bribing the police and so on. Jews were there on sufferance. My friend Dr. Weizmann, later President of Israel, was not permitted to stay a single night either in Moscow or in Petrograd. When he did so he was arrested. That was the situation. England was a liberal country, Jews were not persecuted, they had quite high positions. England and Holland were noble liberal European countries. France not so much because of Dreyfus. That was still remembered. America was where the poorer Jews went. For some reason my father had not the slightest wish to go there.

SL: *So it was always to be England?*

IB: Yes. They went to Riga but they had to leave everything behind. They came with small pieces of luggage.

SCHOOL-BOY IN LONDON

SL: *So your parents arrived in England as poor Jews?*

IB: They arrived penniless. They had relations in Riga with whom they lived, but then my father had had business in England before the war and through some accident quite a large sum of money which was owed to him was never sent across by the bank in London to Russia as in theory it should have been. To his surprise and gratification it turned out that he owned nearly ten thousand pounds in London, a huge sum of money. So he went to London, and set up again as a timber merchant.

SL: *And did you continue to be educated by a governess?*

IB: No. We lived in Surbiton, of all places, because my father's business acquaintances told him, 'but you can't live in London. The English don't like towns, they like living in the country. We live in Surbiton, so come and live near us'. This turned out to be a suburb. I was sent to school in Surbiton, a preparatory school for a year. I was almost eleven.

SL: *And then after that year?*

IB: We moved to London.

SL: *And where did you go to school?*

IB: St. Paul's.

SL: *And you got a scholarship?*

IB: Not at first, but after two years I think I applied again and got one.

SL: *And what did you basically study at school that you remember?*

IB: Classics — Latin and Greek.

SL: *And you flourished?*

IB: Not particularly, but I was quite happy. I was never top of the form, I was never second or third, I was about seventh or eighth in a class of 26 boys. I made out. I learnt Latin and Greek, a little English literature. Some history. Not much.

SL: *And nothing else?*

IB: Oh, well, we had a French master and a German master.

SL: *Your family was not a particularly intellectual or scholarly one?*

IB: No, my father lived very quietly in Kensington. My parents met no White Russian émigrés.

SL: *Why not?*

IB: Because they wanted to live their own lives in England. Because they were *anglomane*, and had little wish to meet Russians in London.

SL: *And they weren't particularly living among Jews either?*

IB: No.

SL: *So they were assimilating?*

IB: They knew Jews, they went to synagogue, the New West-End synagogue, frequented by grand English Jews. Some of them were neighbours and knew us in Kensington, but we were a quiet family. My father came home and read the *Evening Standard*, had dinner, read a book and went to bed.

SL: *You were an only child.*

IB: Yes.

SL: *And then you acquired English friends at St. Paul's.*

IB: Certainly, and at prep-school too. There were plenty of Jews at St. Paul's. But I must tell you, I was put down for Westminster but the man who was coaching me in Classics said 'Your name is Isaiah. I think some of the boys may find it a funny name. You may get teased. Don't you think you could change your name to something more English like James or Charles?' I thought that if it is better to change my name I don't want to go to that kind of school so I opted for St. Paul's, because it had a respectable Jewish population of sixty or seventy boys out of say five or six hundred. Among my friends were both Jews and non-Jews. I had a close friend called Jack Stephenson, James Whitely, the notorious John Davenport, Arthur Calder Marshall, the novelist; Clare Parsons, a poet, then there was Leonard Schapiro. Wolf Halpern who was killed in the Battle of Britain. He was half-Jewish.

STUDENT AND TEACHER AT OXFORD

SL: *And you went straight on to University from St. Paul's?*

IB: Yes. I got a scholarship to Corpus Christi College.

SL: *And you studied?*

IB: Greats — Classics — for three years. I didn't do Mods. One of the dons said 'You are really not very good at Latin or Greek. Better not.' Corpus tended not to take Paulines because they were all regarded as dilettantes. Rotten before they were ripe. Too knowing. We were overworked at St. Paul's — it was a cramming establishment. Then the Paulines came to Oxford exhausted and tended to fall by the wayside. Still, they took me. Corpus was a very conservative college, where the President didn't use a typewriter and had no secretaries and wrote everything in a copper-plate hand. They offered a scholarship in Latin and Greek and modern history combined. For them it was a new departure. I was twice rejected by Balliol. I tried for a Balliol scholarship but I didn't get that and

then my school asked 'Could he be a commoner?' and Balliol said no, not good enough. Corpus gave me this odd scholarship, so I did Greats in three years and then Philosophy, Politics and Economics.

SL: *So you did two first degrees?*

IB: Yes, I got a bad first in Greats and a good first in P.P.E.. I didn't have a politics tutor because that wasn't allowed.

SL: *Which teachers influenced you most?*

IB: Well I don't know if teachers influenced me much but there was Hardie, my philosophy tutor. He was a wonderful tutor, he was scrupulous, extremely minute and an extremely nice man. Sharp brain, very kind and you couldn't get past him: if you produced a sentence that wasn't clear you were stopped and you had to clarify it. That was a very good training.

SL: *And what were you studying with him basically?*

IB: Philosophy, the Ancients and Moderns. Plato, Aristotle and modern philosophy.

SL: *Were you mainly at this point interested in philosophy.*

IB: I became so and that's where I met various philosophers at Oxford. Herbert Hart, Dick Crossman, H. B. Acton, Freddy Ayer who was a year junior to me.

SL: *And you met them all as under-graduates?*

IB: Yes.

SL: *And did you discuss philosophy a lot with them?*

IB: Yes, I did. I lived for two years in College and then moved into Wellington Square where my housemates were a man called Bernard

Spencer, who was quite a good poet, a minor poet, but very genuine. Ernest Copleston, the brother of the Jesuite thinker Father Copleston. He went into the civil service, — and other people .

SL: *And so you describe the teaching you got from Hardie as very challenging?*

IB: Yes, it was fascinating. One got addicted.

SL: *What do you remember particularly addicting you? Was it the study of great systems of thought?*

IB: No, I was made to read Hegelian philosophers. Couldn't understand a word. I read Bradley, I read Bosanquet. Not a word. But then I read G. E. Moore's *Principia Ethica* . I was illuminated. Of course I reject it now, but the lucidity, the strictness, the honesty, that was wonderful.

SL: *So that was a main turning-point?*

IB: Yes. Then I became a kind of realist. I began reading Bertrand Russell and Moore, and I began reading, oh, Oxford philosophers, Joseph and Cook-Wilson, they seemed rigorous and clear and rational.

SL: *Were you reading any European philosophy at that time?*

IB: No, Hegel. Kant of course, and of course Descartes as well as Hobbes, Locke, Berkeley, Hume. No Spinoza, and only a little Leibniz.

SL: *But nothing other in the twentieth century?*

IB: No, but what was there for us to read? Do you mean Bergson? Husserl? Nobody had ever heard of him.

SL: *Croce?*

IB: J.A. Smith and Collingwood were the only ones who read Croce. That was thought out of the way.

SL: *And Collingwood?*

IB: I went to his lectures as an undergraduate and I knew him. He was an interesting man and talked very well. He was highly courteous, his father had been Ruskin's secretary. His mother was a Viennese Jewess. We talked about literature and Roman history. He would say 'How wonderful for Croce, he is not a professor, he doesn't have all these boring pupils. He is a rich man, he can do what he likes. That's how one should live. Here I have all these stupid pupils at Pembroke College'. He was interested in the nature of history, the influence of cultures. He was a boat builder too and a chicken-farmer. Of all this he was very proud. He was a fascinating man, and outside the main tradition, on his own.

SL: *Was he much respected in Oxford?*

IB: He was regarded as being outside the stream. He was respected as an independent thinker on his own.

SL: *Did he influence you, do you think?*

IB: Yes, he influenced me in the direction of philosophy of history, but never as a thinker. He introduced me to Vico. He had translated Croce's book on Vico into English, and he lectured on the philosophy of history. I thought that was extremely interesting, of no use for my exams, but I was interested because I had taken an interest in the variety of cultures. He mentioned a lot of names — vistas opened!.

SL: *So this was the history of ideas?*

IB: Yes.

SL: *From Hardie you got the sense of the importance of argument and from Collingwood an interest in the philosophy of history and the history of ideas.*

IB: That is right.

SL: *Who else interested you among the philosophers of that time?*

IB: I went to hear Professor Price, a philosophical realist. I went to Gilbert Ryle, original, bold and a very dull lecturer.

SL: *Prichard?*

IB: Yes, on ethics, that I admired very much. The premises were naive, but the tautness of the argument, the rigour, the sheer intensity was something I had never met before, until my colleague Austin who had a similar gift.

SL: *Did you know Austin then?*

IB: No, I knew him later at All Souls.

SL: *So you did the undergraduate course in Greats, you then did a one year degree in PPE (philosophy, politics and economics) focussing on philosophy. And then you became a fellow of All Souls pretty quickly?*

IB: In 1932, I think. I first became a lecturer in New College.

SL: *Teaching philosophy?*

IB: Richard Crossman was made a fellow of New College before he ever took his final examinations. Crossman taught half ancient history and half philosophy.

SL: *And you?*

IB: And I took the other half and so I was made a lecturer in philosophy. I had not known what to do with myself, I couldn't think of a career. I took a fairly prominent part in the philosophical societies such as the Jowett Society. Crossman wanted a quiet philosopher who would do all the pedantic stuff, so that he was free to give these magnificent general lectures that excited people. He was a terrific lecturer; but a philosopher he was not.

SL: *So what were you basically teaching?*

IB: For two months I taught theory of knowledge, logic, ethics, political theory. No aesthetics, no philosophy of history. My only departure from the curriculum was the lectures I gave on the French Enlightenment.

SL: *And then you became a fellow of All Souls.*

IB: Yes, in 1932. It was a great surprise.

SL: *And that must have been a great liberation.*

IB: It was a liberation.

SL: *And what did it liberate you to do?*

IB: Well, I went on teaching at New College, otherwise I couldn't have survived financially.

SL: *But at that stage you wanted to be a philosopher, you wanted to do philosophy?*

IB: Yes, I was a professional teacher of philosophy, a regular don in philosophy, nothing else. In 1933 a year later, Mr. Fisher, the Warden of New College asked me to write a book on Karl Marx for the Home University Library. I said 'What is the audience for the book?' He said "squash professionals". I was not the first person he asked to do the book. The first to be invited was Harold Laski, who refused. The second was Frank Pakenham (Lord Longford), who refused. Then one or two more. Finally he came to me, I had never read a line of Marx, but I thought that Marx was likely to be more rather than less important; if I don't write about Marx, I'll never read it. At first it was hideously boring. I tried to read *Das Kapital*, I got stuck in the first chapter so I thought, well, if I have to write about it, maybe I'll find out what it is about. So I read Marx in German and Russian because the edition of Marx's *Gesamtausgabe* was stopped in

Germany in 1933 by Hitler but went on in Moscow. I read far more Marx than will ever be good for me or anybody else.

SL: *Did it start to interest you?*

IB: Of course. I was interested in Marx as a person, and his ideas were interesting. I discovered that two, maybe three ideas in Marx were wholly original, everything else came from someone else. His synthesis was remarkable and amounted to genius. The idea of Marx that was genuinely original was the idea of the influence of technology on culture, that technological change influences culture to a profound degree. Saint-Simon had indeed said it before quite clearly, but not perhaps clearly enough. The other idea was about big business and what it did. I think he probably invented this.

SL: *Tell me more about what you mean by that.*

IB: That there would be a phenomenon of big business, huge centralised control of production and manufacture and exchange, which in his day didn't exist.

SL: *So he projected into the future the way that big business was going to develop?*

IB: Yes, including multinationals.

SL: *In other words he saw that capitalism was going to become an international phenomenon.*

IB: That it was going to become a huge centralised dominant world force; that I think is due to Marx. What we call big business is not a phrase used in the 19th century. The third idea is that of the class war. Class warfare has been exaggerated, but nevertheless exists as a phenomenon. There is such a thing as conflict between classes.

SL: *Of course he said that all other conflict could be reduced to it.*

IB: Patently false, of course. Nevertheless there is value in his enormous emphasis on the fact that a great deal derives from either overt or to some extent semi-conscious class conflict—there is value here if class is not defined as he defined it, as a position in the productive process, but as entire ways of living in which language and the houses that people live in and the kind of language that they use, the permanent relations that they have, all that—that's what we mean by class. When you say upper class and lower class, you don't just mean in relation to the system of production in a narrow sense, you mean all the rest, all elements of a way of life.

SL: *You mean defining class culturally?*

IB: Ways of life. Of course the relation to the productive process is essential, but it's a much wider concept than that. And that Marx never paid attention to. In that sense there is a conflict. But not the sharp conflict he thought about. Because one class melts into another far more frequently than Marx allowed for. Still, an important part of the idea can be attributed to him.

SL: *So you would think that that was an original idea?*

IB: Yes, though you can derive, you can reconstruct it out of other people's ideas. Marx's great originality consists in a marvellous synthesis.

SL: *Well that's a kind of originality.*

IB: Indeed, indeed. I quite agree, he was a thinker of genius. I don't deny that. But it was the synthesis that was important. He never acknowledged a single debt. His theory is a compound of previous ideas. It was a shock to me, not that it was a compound, but his total refusal to acknowledge a debt to anyone. I didn't get to like him as a man, I thought I knew what it would be like to meet him.

SL: *How long did it take you to write the book?*

IB: About three years, I must have started in '33 and finished in 1937. The book was published in 1939.

SL: *And were you completely absorbed in all of this during that time?*

IB: No, I went on teaching philosophy.

SL: *But it must have been completely absorbing to read all of Marx.*

IB: Not very. When I began reading Marx I did become absorbed in his anticipators, in the 18th Century, in the *Philosophes* of the Enlightenment. They were wonderful reading. Helvétius, Holbach, Condorcet, and much of Voltaire — I found Rousseau more difficult.

SL: *So Marx led you backwards..*

IB: Of course I read Plekhanov, who was the best of all commentators on Marx, among his disciples.

SL: *Do you think so?*

IB: Yes. Better than Kautsky, better than Bernstein. A brilliant Russian writer, he wrote books about these 18th Century thinkers, so I went back to them and then I became interested in them and began lecturing on them in the 30's.

SL: *Did this mean that you were basically, in effect, taking a decision to focus on the history of ideas?*

IB: This grew gradually, I didn't determine to do it, but from Marx I went to the French — Saint-Simon, Fourier, Proudhon. Then to the Russian forerunners of the Revolution. That began by pure accident, you might say.

SL: *How did that come about?*

IB: I used to go to the London Library. They had a wonderful Russian collection. The librarian there, Hagberg Wright, was a Russian and Scandinavian scholar, and so the history collection was superb. I saw Alexander Herzen's name on the back of a book. I had a vague idea that there was a bearded social thinker of the nineteenth century of that name. It meant nothing to me. I took out one of the volumes. It was Herzen's autobiography. I never looked back. It still seems to me the best autobiography written in the 18th or 19th century. Even better than Rousseau or Gibbon.

SL: *So your interest in Romanticism and in the idea of cultural specificity, it was something which emerged from reading Herzen?*

IB: Emerged from reading Marx's predecessors plus the Russians. I asked myself: 'How did it all come about? Which was the breaking-point? Why were the French philosophers rejected? Why didn't everybody become a pupil of Bentham? What happened?' Hence — the Germans. Kantians, romantics and so on.

SL: *So you were doing this as the 30's proceeded.*

IB: The late 30's, yes.

SL: *You were at All Souls which, as we both well know, was famous for some of its Fellows' friendliness to the idea of appeasement.*

IB: A handful of them. The idea that appeasement was nurtured in All Souls is untrue. There were about five of them. I knew the appeasers. They were politically powerful, important people, and I can give you their names. But the ex-bursar of All Souls looked through the All Souls 'Kitchen Lists'. The Kitchen Lists record who were eating dinners and lunches at given week-ends. The appeasers almost never came simultaneously, never five at a time. Cliveden — Lady Astor's house — was the real home of appeasement.

SL: *So it wasn't, so to speak, that the cabal occurred at All Souls?*

IB: There was no cabal. There were appeasers. They were a powerful and influential group, all of whom I got to know. There was Lord Halifax. There was Lang (Archbishop of Canterbury). There was Geoffrey Dawson, (Editor of *The Times*). There was Simon, who at that time was Foreign Secretary. There was Lionel Curtis at *The Daily Telegraph*. They brought guests to All Souls, and the guests were of a similar mind. You knew what they were at, and you would learn from knowing them how things were done in government circles.

SL: *You were engaged in this intellectual activity. You had written the book on Marx by 1937, you were exploring the French Enlightenment and its aftermath and you had started to read Herzen and other Russian thinkers. At the same time a political crisis was approaching.*

IB: Yes. My colleagues at All Souls, by and large all the junior colleagues, were anti-appeasement to a man, with the exception of the present Lord Hailsham (Quintin Hogg) who was elected to Parliament in the famous 1938 bye-election at Oxford as a Chamberlinite, but my personal friends and indeed half the college were very anti-appeasement.

SL: *And you were part of this?*

IB: Oh, yes, certainly, but outside the college I don't think many Oxford dons took much interest in politics

SL: *But you did?*

IB: No, not especially, I was anti-appeasement. I was anti-the Abyssinian war, I was anti-Franco. I packed parcels for the Spanish Republic. I was never pro-communist. Never. Some of my contemporaries gravitated to communism, but anyone who had, like me, seen the Russian Revolution at work was not likely to be tempted. I saw some terrible sights in Russia before 1919.

SL: *Such as what?*

IB: Well, I saw a policeman being dragged off to be lynched, I saw corpses in the street. I read stories about perfectly innocent people being condemned to death for selling matches in the streets. These were the sort of people nobody ever heard of, a few of my innocent relations certainly went to jail. I realised that the Headquarters of the Cheka in 1918-19 was a terrifying world, we were frightened of it even as children — a torture chamber, a hell from which few emerged alive.

SL: *But some people would certainly have said that the ideas are one thing but the Bolshevik practice was another.*

IB: They might. The point was that reading Karl Marx was very interesting but I realised that the idea of the dictatorship of the proletariat meant sheer despotism and couldn't be anything else — Marx made me pro-*Communard*, but not for long.

SL: *But you didn't at any point in your work on Marx feel genuinely sympathetic?*

IB: Of course. You have read my book on Marx.

SL: *Yes, I have many times, and of course the book is sympathetic in a way to Marx and you get inside his thought, but were you ever sympathetic to Marxism?*

IB: No, I was sympathetic to the Welfare State, to a mild form of socialism. I voted for the Labour Party, mainly because they were anti-Franco, anti-Mussolini and anti-Hitler, and anti-Chamberlain and Co.

SL: *So you really unquestionably identified yourself with the Left?*

IB: Without doubt.

SL: *Without however being particularly politically active?*

IB: I was always anti-communist.

SL: *And your marxist contemporaries knew this?*

IB: There weren't many marxist contemporaries in Oxford. Some undergraduates were. I didn't know a single don who was. I knew Christopher Hill extremely well, but I never knew that he was a member of the Communist Party. Everybody else did.

SL: *What about G.D.H. Cole, who was of course, not a marxist, though he was a socialist?*

IB: I was on very good terms with him, not in the thirties, but afterwards. There was before the war a leftist body called a Pink Lunch Club. Cole organised it. The following people came to it from 1934 onwards: R.H.S. Crossman, A.L. Rowse, G.F. Hudson, John Austin, J.E. Meade, Roy Harrod, Christopher Hill, Stuart Hampshire, after 1936, people from Ruskin, Patrick Gordon-Walker, Frank Pakenham, A. H. Jones, and people would come to talk to us, like Sydney Webb, or German communist or socialist exiles; they came to talk about current events. But I didn't know any don then to be a communist. Not one.

SL: *What about undergraduates?*

IB: Yes. Philip Toynbee, Norman Brown, for example. I knew them both extremely well, I thought they were both foolish. We were great friends, I am still on excellent terms with Norman Brown.

SL: *Do you see him?*

IB: No, he lives too far away, in California, but I get letters, oh, yes, I am very fond of him. I believe that it was he who converted Christopher Hill to communism. There were also crypto-communists. I knew a man called Bill Davis, who was killed in the war, and one or two others. There were a number of them in an institution called the October Club.

THE WAR YEARS IN WASHINGTON

SL: *Now, when the War broke out, you were at All Souls. Did you then feel that you wanted to take a more active role? How did you come to end up in Washington?*

IB: It's quite simple, I had to fill in a form about war service, but I wasn't given anything, because I was not British born, so the Civil Service said they couldn't take me. Most of my colleagues did various forms of wartime service. I stayed behind, rather gloomily. I was physically unfit for the army. I had, and have, a bad left arm.

SL: *You were sort of left stranded .*

IB: Well, yes. I taught, because the under-graduates weren't taken away in the first year of the war. They were allowed to take final examinations, in case they survived, in which case this would help with their careers. This went on until June 1940. I happened to know Guy Burgess, but I never knew he was a communist. 'What naïveté!' you may say, but it was so. Guy Burgess used to come and see me about once a year. He used to get drunk in my rooms but he never talked about politics. He would talk about Jane Austen, George Eliot, Cambridge gossip, Keynes, E.M. Forster, Victorian worthies, and that was it. Then, in about 1936, I heard that he had joined something called 'Britannia Youth', which was an outfit presided over by the Mayor of Hove, whoever he was, which took schoolboys to the Nazi *Parteitag* in Nürnberg; I decided that he had always been somewhat mad, and never had a moral basis to his life, and became a fascist. By then he didn't try to see me. In 1940, I was sitting quietly in my room in New College, when he suddenly called on me and he said, 'I know what you must think about me, but that was an aberration, a madness. I know that you must despise me and that you don't want to talk to me. You are perfectly right. I hate myself.' It was all nonsense; he was obviously planted by the Party, that's clear, just like Philby, who was decorated by Franco. He said, 'Harold Nicolson (who was his great patron) thinks you ought to go to Moscow as press-attaché. Would you like to go? You know Russian. None of our people talks Russian, they need

somebody like you. Would you go?' 'Well', I said, 'Well, the British Government hasn't given me any other post, I am doing nothing here. I'll go whenever the government sends me.'

SL: *Harold Nicholson was at that time....*

IB: Number two at the Ministry of Information. He asked me to go and see him and said 'good idea that you should go' but I said: 'Look, what about the Nazi-Soviet pact? Do you really think that I must try to get some British propaganda into *Pravda*? Not very feasible'. He said, 'Cripps thinks that because you talk Russian you'd be very useful.' So he talked me into it. Then I was sent to the Foreign Office and I was ordered to go to Moscow with Burgess as my Number Two. It was obviously his (Burgess's) scheme. He was then working in the British intelligence, he was in SIS by that time. We got as far as Washington. At that point he was recalled. He then went to the BBC. I then sent a message asking whether I should come back, I didn't know what to do. They said that it was not intended to employ Mr. Berlin in Moscow or anywhere else and I could do what I liked. I realised that I was in a false position in Washington, I thought I must go back, so I went back to Oxford and began to teach, and nobody bothered me for an entire term. Suddenly I received a letter from the British Ministry of Information saying 'Why are you overstaying your leave?' I said 'What leave? So far as I know I have no post'. Then I learnt from the official at the Ministry of Information that I had been appointed to a job in New York; but they forgot to tell me. This on the basis of my having been in the U.S.A. for six weeks. So I went back and became a British information officer in New York.

SL: *And you remained there until the end of the War?*

IB: No, I was transferred to the Embassy in Washington in 1942 and there I remained until 1945, when I went to Moscow.

SL: *Were you basically reporting on American politics?*

IB: I was a propagandist for the first year and a reporter for the remainder.

SL: *Reporting on the American political scene?*

IB: Yes.

SL: *To the British Government?*

IB: Yes.

SL: *You obviously did this very well, because Churchill liked it.*

IB: Well, so they say.

SL: *Do you still have those despatches?*

IB: Some were published by Herbert Nicholas. They are incredibly boring, unreadable. He published them as a book. They didn't sell very well, published by Weidenfeld in England and Chicago University Press in the States.

SL: *Did this work completely preoccupy you? This must have been very absorbing.*

IB: It was very interesting. I lived in Washington, I talked to American officials, journalists and other people and read the press. Everyone knew what I was doing. It wasn't secret, but let us say if, let us say, someone in the State Department wanted to convey that they were not pleased with something that the British had done, and they didn't want to do it officially because then there would be an exchange of telegrams and a fuss, I was used and reported their views informally. This did not require acknowledgement or an official reaction.

SL: *Did the New Deal make a particular impact on you during the war?*

IB: No.

SL: *But you must have met many New Dealers.*

IB: Well of course, I was in sympathy with them. We believed in the same thing. I was a very keen New Dealer, very pro-Roosevelt. But I never saw him. Never met him. It was a form of pragmatic idealism. It was a kind of adaptation to conditions and did not on the whole curtail human liberty as much as socialism can do. At the same time it had a considerable effect in promoting individual liberty, social justice and just distribution of goods.

SL: *Which thinkers inspired the New Deal, do you think?*

IB: There are no political thinkers that one thinks of immediately who had any influence on Roosevelt and his friends. Only Keynes.

SL: *Perhaps that's not an accident, I mean it wasn't an ideological ...*

IB: Oh, it was. The New Dealers were perfectly prepared to defend the ideas of the New Deal, not just the practices. But they weren't under the influence of a particular thinker. It's what on the whole saved America from socialism. If you think it was saved. It's exactly like Lloyd George. The beginnings of the New Deal were I suppose Lloyd George's policies in England. His reforms had a strong element of the New Deal in them.

SL: *Which were the origins of the British welfare state.*

IB: Well, of course. If you ask what Lloyd George's historical achievement was, it was to save England from the centralising and unifying effect of strongly held socialism.

MOSCOW AND LENINGRAD IN 1945

SL: *Now, when the War came to an end, you went to Moscow.*

IB: I went to Moscow in 1945 for about four months.

SL: *What was that like?*

IB: Marvellous. Very little work. Very amusing and odd Ambassador.

SL: *In what capacity did you go to Moscow?*

IB: First Secretary.

SL: *To do what?*

IB: Ordinary work at the embassy — help out.

SL: *And that is when you met Akhmatova?*

IB: Yes, in November 1945.

SL: *You went to seek her out?*

IB: No, I didn't.

SL: *How did it come about?*

IB: I went to Leningrad with a member of the British Council because I had heard that the books were cheaper to buy, Russian books, in Leningrad, than they were in Moscow. There was a terrible siege, people some of whom perished sold books to survive, or just left them when they were too feeble to be able to do much, so the bookshops were filled with books that belonged to perfectly civilised people. So I went to a bookshop with a friend from the Embassy to look at the shelves, I saw another man also looking, and gradually we got into conversation and he said to me 'I

see you are looking at this book. Do you like Blok?’ and I said, ‘Yes I love Blok’ and he said ‘I must send you what I have written about him’. We got into conversation. He was a critic. We chatted and I asked him what had happened to the writers during the blockade. He spoke of survivors among the writers. I asked him about Akhmatova. I had vaguely heard of her name from my friend Maurice Bowra.

SL: *Oh, you had only heard of her name?*

IB: I had never seen anything she had written. Nobody, I believe, in England knew that she was alive. Maurice Bowra had translated her. My friend said ‘she is living round the corner. Would you like to meet her?’ It was as if someone had said Christina Rossetti was living round the corner. Well I have described it all in my book *Personal Impressions*. Anyway, I called on her and we spent a remarkable night and talked.

SL: *Did you become close to her?*

IB: We talked for twelve hours about everything. It was the most marvellous conversation I ever had with anyone.

SL: *But you seem to have made quite an impact on her.*

IB: Well, that could be.

SL: *Well, that’s what she said, wasn’t it?*

IB: No, not quite that. But she dedicated poems to me.

SL: *Did you meet many others? Did you make contact with other Russian writers?*

IB: Pasternak, he lived in Moscow.

SL: *So you must have been sorry to leave Moscow.*

IB: Well, ... yes. I was. I knew I had to. I used to say to myself, supposing I found myself with a Soviet passport, because I had once been a Soviet citizen, in 1917, because my father was. Supposing I found myself with a Soviet passport, what would I do? I would have blown my brains out. It was the most frightful regime I have ever been under. There is no doubt about that. I had a continuous sense of horror. I met no party member.

SL: *It was a particularly horrible time to be there?*

IB: No. Nobody knew who was friend and who was foe. They lived in a fool's paradise. I saw quite a lot of very remarkable people. It didn't do them any good.

SL: *Did you know you were being closely watched?*

IB: Oh, yes, because that was done openly, not to watch my movements, but *ad terrorem*. I remember that when I went by an underground train, the chauffeur of the embassy was in the same carriage. He was employed by the Soviet secret police. We all knew that.

RETURN TO OXFORD

SL: *You returned to Britain immediately?*

IB: In January 1946. Then I went to America to complete my duties there, and I came back in April.

SL: *Back to the scholarly life, back to New College. To do what?*

IB: Teach philosophy at New College.

SL: *But all this experience of Washington and then Moscow, did all that change your idea of what you were about in the academic world?*

IB: Yes, it made me more interested in the history of ideas, particularly the Russians, so I announced that I wished to abandon philosophy and write about the history of ideas.

SL: *Now, how did that decision come about? Why did you make it?*

IB: Because I found that I wanted to read Bakunin, Belinsky and Herzen. I wanted to know why they thought what they thought, more than I wanted to solve philosophical problems. Philosophical problems did not keep me awake at night, and I thought, well, here I am — a second-class philosopher.

SL: *Did you think that?*

IB: Oh, yes. I was.

SL: *Really?*

IB: Yes.

SL: *And you knew that? You were sure of it?*

IB: Yes, quite certain, I was a perfectly decent tutor, but, I mean, I wasn't the equal of Austin or Ryle or people at that level.

SL: *In that domain.*

IB: In that domain.

SL: *Was it a kind of sudden decision?*

IB: No, I'll tell you how it happened. When I was in Washington in 1944, I went on a visit to Harvard, Cambridge, Mass. I knew people there, and I met a famous old logician called Harry Sheffer. He made important discoveries in logic. Felix Frankfurter gave me a letter to him. I had lunch with him at the Faculty Club at Harvard. He said to me, 'You know, it's a

funny thing; philosophy can't make progress in the sense in which other subjects can. In Psychology there can be discoveries, so too in logic, or mathematics, or the history of philosophy, but you can't talk about a man who is *learned* in ethics or scholarly in epistemology. It doesn't make sense. They are marvellous subjects, but they are not cumulative'. He was right, and then he said 'If I had known what Carnap would have made of the sort of things I did, I would never have begun'. Later that same year, 1944, I travelled in an aeroplane to England. It was night and it was unpressurised and I had to take oxygen so I couldn't sleep and I couldn't read because there was no light, so for seven or eight hours I had to think: that is always painful. I decided in the course of it that Sheffer was right. I realised that I wanted to know more at the end of my life than at the beginning. This clearly couldn't be done by pursuing philosophy, so I made up my mind during the flight. Then I announced to my astonished colleagues that I wished to stop doing philosophy and they said 'After the war we shall be pretty short-handed, for God's sake continue for a bit! For three or four years!'

SL: *But when you said you were going to stop doing philosophy, what were you going to do instead?*

IB: History of ideas.

SL: *Did you give it that name?*

IB: Yes

SL: *So how did you then embark on it?*

IB: Nothing until 1949. I wrote an article on political ideas in the twentieth century and then I wrote a piece on Tolstoy — *The Hedgehog and the Fox*. I didn't have any time for anything else, I was a full-time tutor.

SL: *And you were actually teaching philosophy.*

IB: Yes, full time.

SL: *But pursuing history of ideas in your spare time.*

IB: Privately so to speak, but then All Souls was kind enough to take me back in 1950 and so I decided to work on the history of ideas, particularly Russian ideas. Then I produced a piece on Historical Determinism — it was called ‘Historical Inevitability’.

SL: *I suppose working on the history of ideas is a peculiar European kind of activity, perhaps even particularly an Italian one rather than an English or British one.*

IB: Scarcely anyone in England did it.

SL: *Do you refer to these traditional European ways of doing the subject?*

IB: Of course I did, and I read excellent German and Italians at that time. I read some excellent books on the history of the 18th century ideas, books about the revolt against scientism, and on romanticism.

SL: *Did your interest in Vico develop at that time, too?*

IB: Yes, very profoundly, I remember that I began reading him in an English translation.

SL: *What was it about Vico that interested you in particular?*

IB: Vico interested me not because of his cyclical view of history, which was a common-place view, which I think begins with Plato and Polybius and is found in Machiavelli, and is I think one of the weakest and least original parts of Vico, but because he was the first man, in my opinion, who grasped the idea of culture as such. I don’t think anybody before him conceived of it, had a conception of it. He doesn’t call it that, but that’s what it comes to. And when he discusses the past of the human race he distinguishes various cultures in it which he thinks one can analyse and understand by studying their religious rites, their poetry, their ways of life,

their metaphors, their use of language. That for him is the key to the understanding of how human beings viewed themselves.

SL: *An almost anthropological view of culture?*

IB: Exactly. How people viewed themselves in their relation to the world. He is a father of anthropology in that precise sense.

SL: *And Montesquieu, wouldn't you say?*

IB: No. Far less. Montesquieu thinks that cultures differ from each other, that what is good for my aunt in Bukhara is no good for my aunt in Birmingham. That's somewhat different. He is much more rigid and much more universalistic. Montesquieu believes in absolute justice that doesn't differ from culture to culture. He thinks that art has absolutely rigid criteria, you'll find out in his journals, and there is no question of the relativity of taste.

SL: *And so you would say that Vico is a relativist?*

IB: No, I wouldn't. Well, perhaps in a sense he was.

SL: *In what sense?*

IB: In a sense that each culture pursued its own values, and that one culture was in no position to criticise the values of another, although there were links between them.

SL: *But in what sense was he not a relativist?*

IB: He was not a relativist because he thought that these values were not simply different values for different cultures but sprang from some kind of evolution of a common human nature which evolved in this particular way.

SL: *So there was an overall theory of progress?*

IB: No. There was not. Momigliano in his review of my book on the subject thinks that there is a theory of progress in Vico and if you look at the last pages of the *New Science* you may think that there is some hint of that, but broadly speaking no. The point is that each culture has its own beginnings, its own growth, its own development, its own climax, and its own decline. You can't say that there is a continuous progress between them. What there is is a linkage which makes them understand one another. If like Spengler you think that each culture is a self-contained entity surrounded by impenetrable Mackintosh cloth which you cannot penetrate, then the problem is how we ever understand cultures of the past at all. Vico says that it is exactly not so. And the idea of a succession of cultures, or even of difference, of a particular kind of pluralism, of the variety of human conditions, is much more clearly spelt out in Vico. In the 18th Century there was a thinker called Galiani who was a member of the Neapolitan delegation in Paris who does rather contemptuously say that Montesquieu is a man who managed to progress where a previous thinker stumbled and had gone about rather erratically. That's a criticism of Vico, in praise of Montesquieu. Now there is a question of whether Montesquieu read Vico. That's a permanent problem. Nobody knows. In his library there is no trace of Vico's writings. Croce was quite clear that Montesquieu borrowed from Vico. But there is no evidence of it. He didn't refer to Vico. But when he went to Venice, I think that a Count or an Abbé there talked to him about Vico or said something to him, but there is no evidence of actual perusal.

SL: *Was your interest even then, as you described, before, focussed on the 18th century and the revolt against it?*

IB: Well, it was only because I decided that it was, *is* interesting to look at rationalist ideas and the opposition to them — a great revolt.

SL: *So it was really the Enlightenment and its critics that was your focus?*

IB: That was how I got going, plus the Russians.

SL: *But not only did you get going, you continued to return to it.*

IB: Of course, plus the Russians, who were fruits of rationalism and its opponents. Some of them lived ideas. Nobody else takes ideas quite so seriously. I was interested in this and also of course I read the language, because I wanted to know what were the sources of the Russian revolution. I became absorbed with this.

SL: *So the thinkers you were focussing on at that stage were Vico, Herder, Tolstoy.*

IB: And of course the Encyclopaedists, Fichte, Schelling up to a point, Maine de Biran, de Maistre—I wrote my first piece on de Maistre but it was never published. When I read de Maistre I thought he was a brilliant enemy of the Enlightenment.

SL: *I have just read that first piece on de Maistre and indeed I remember your giving it as a lecture in Oxford. It's a very powerful piece and you were obviously very attracted by de Maistre in a way. He obviously got under your skin.*

IB: Well let me explain. I am bored by reading people who are allies, people of roughly the same views, because by now these things seem largely to be a collection of platitudes because we all accept them, we all believe them. What is interesting is to read the enemy, because the enemy penetrates the defences, the weak points, because what interests me is what is wrong with the ideas in which I believe—why it may be right to modify or even abandon them.

SL: *Do you think that's a unifying thread which unites the various thinkers that you have been interested in?*

IB: Yes. I am interested in Hamann, de Maistre, Sorel. These are hostile thinkers, I am against them, but they said things that make one think. So it's no good reading

SL: *Voltaire?*

IB: Well, he wasn't an original thinker anyway.

SL: *John Stuart Mill?*

IB: I took Mill almost for granted.

SL: *But you wrote about him and you gave a rather existentialist reading of him.*

IB: Well, I didn't think he was the utilitarian he thought he was. I didn't enjoy Mill. Save for the essay on Liberty. I didn't read Bentham properly, I read—who were the important names?—Carlyle, Emerson; who else was there in England?

SL: *T. H. Green.*

IB: I was not deeply impressed by him, nor by Hobhouse, admirable as they are. You see, it's the enemy who interests me, brilliant opponents who so to speak put their swords, their rapiers into one and find the weak spot.

SL: *Do you think that description applies to Marx?*

IB: Yes, up to a point it does. The point is that his particular criticisms of the liberals he wrote about did not seem to me to be particularly effective. His positive ideas were of great importance but the idea that liberty is a bourgeois concept and all that sort of thing, or that it was a capitalist concept—no. But I did read Lasalle and I was impressed by his analysis of profit and marginal utility. I want to retract what I said about J. S. Mill. I admire him immensely. He is a major, great British positive thinker.

SL: *You mentioned Hamann before and I recall that he seemed to play a very central role in your lectures on Romanticism.*

IB: Well of course, because he was a violent opponent of the Enlightenment, the first one who really hated the whole thing from beginning to end.

SL: *Now you were doing this in the early 50s and then you were elevated and became the Professor of social and political theory at Oxford in 1957. Why?*

IB: Why did I become a professor? I can tell you. Because I thought if I didn't I'd waste my time. As a research fellow I didn't have enough discipline to make me work properly.

SL: *So you did it for self-disciplinary reasons?*

IB: Exactly.

SL: *But you said earlier that you had decided you were not going to do philosophy, you were going to do the history of ideas. But your famous inaugural lecture, 'Two Concepts of Liberty' — which has been a kind of land-mark and been a very influential text — is a work of philosophy in a way, isn't it?*

IB: Certainly. It really has to do with the fact that I was maddened by all the marxist cheating which went on, all the things that were said about "true liberty", Stalinist and communist patter about 'true freedom'. Popper is right — this talk cost innocent lives.

SL: *What's interesting about the lecture is that in a way it's a piece of conceptual analysis, but behind it very clearly there lies a very powerful political motivation.*

IB: Oh, certainly.

SL: *And a political message?*

IB: It can't be denied that it was anti-marxist, quite deliberately.

SL: *It's not a piece of neutral conceptual analysis.*

IB: Oh no, nor meant to be, certainly not. I still stand by it.

SL: *Do you think that any of the criticisms — and it has received many — really cut deep?*

IB: Yes. I ought to have made more of the horrors of negative liberty and what that led to.

SL: *But you don't really think they are comparable with the horrors of positive liberty, do you?*

IB: Well, there is perversion in each case. Negative liberty is basic; positive liberty is also basic. They are both perfectly good forms of liberty which we all pursue. I am not at all against positive liberty, properly conceived. But they are not the same, and even clash.

SL: *But the text doesn't quite say that, does it?*

IB: No, that is not properly explained. The question of negative liberty is how many doors are open? The question of positive liberty is who governs me? Do I govern myself or am I the victim? Very different questions.

SL: *But as I recall the argument starts off like that, but in the end positive liberty becomes the villain.*

IB: Because positive liberty was politically perverted far more. Negative liberty led to laissez-faire. The sufferings of children in coal mines or poverty, but positive liberty became total despotism, the crushing of all ideas, the crushing of life and thought. But I agree I ought to have made it clearer that positive liberty is as noble and basic an ideal as negative.

SL: *As a professor you say you made it a chair in the history of ideas, and indeed you did, and I remember that well, but as we said before it was not a particularly British idea, was it? It was an innovation in Britain.*

IB: Yes, certainly, by no means British. I was perfectly British until then. I taught philosophy until 1950. After that I broke away. I was professor of social and political theory

SL: *But teaching the history of ideas.*

IB: Of political ideas, yes.

SL: *Did you feel that you met resistance in Oxford?*

IB: Only on the part of marxists.

SL: *But many of the marxists, people we both know, were students of yours but only disagreed with you at the level of argument.*

IB: Oh, yes, and I was on very good terms with them and we argued peacefully.

SL: *But would you say that you went on being a philosopher really?*

IB: Impossible to tell. I think once a philosopher, always a philosopher, and I am against political theorists who have never done philosophy and whose views therefore are sometimes crude. This was, for example, true of E. H. Carr, and that was because he was only a student of history, he wasn't really able to cope with concepts.

SL: *But, subsequently, in the British tradition the practice of the history of ideas has become rather important — I am thinking for example of the Cambridge school, and in particular Quentin Skinner.*

IB: This is not quite history of ideas in my sense.

SL: *Why not?*

IB: Quentin Skinner rightly says you that can only fully understand ideas if you understand the political circumstances in which they are produced, whom they were directed against, whom they were in favour of, what was a consequence of what political and social development. That's all quite right. But the essence of the ideas themselves does not emerge from Quentin Skinner's historical accounts. If he were right we would not be able to understand Plato or Aristotle. We don't know what Athens looked or felt like. We don't know save in very vague terms, whether it was like a city in the Caucasus or Beirut. We don't know what kind of society Aristotle lived in when he taught Alexander the Great, what daily life in it was like. We don't know what his morals were: the historians, dramatists, orators, don't provide evidence enough. Yet the ideas themselves have lasted. They have moved and excited people for more than two thousand years. If Skinner's requirements are not met, how can this be? It can't be that the understanding of ideas depends solely upon an adequate understanding of context. Knowledge of the context of course helps, the more the merrier. What Quentin Skinner does is of course valuable. It can be very illuminating. But what I grasp about Machiavelli, even if it is incomplete, seems to me to be more important than whether Machiavelli did or did not write a 'Mirror for Princes' which resembled other mirrors or did not.

SL: *You then went on being professor until ..*

IB: 1966.

SL: *And were you glad to give it up?*

IB: Yes.

SL: *You had done enough lecturing?*

IB: Yes, enough lecturing and enough teaching of graduate students. I did not feel I was basically a political philosopher, I thought that my Chair should be held by someone more committed to contemporary issues.

SL: *But you went on pursuing the same lines of thought. You went on writing about thinkers who interested you. You went on developing these themes.*

IB: Certainly, and in particular the question of the relationship between socialism, liberalism and value pluralism.

SL: *Well let me ask you about liberalism. The liberalism that you espouse invites comparison with that of other contemporary liberals in Europe. I think on the one hand of Raymond Aron, who was roughly the same generation as you.*

IB: A bit older.

SL: *And in Italy Norberto Bobbio.*

IB: I have a very high opinion of Bobbio.

SL: *And Aron?*

IB: Well I thought that Aron was a very brilliant publicist. His analyses of the French and English situation were always remarkable. His book on *Peace and War* was interesting, also his book on Clausewitz. I didn't think that his early works on the German philosophy of history or on sociology were interesting.

SL: *Though it's interesting that he had an interest in Max Weber who should, it seems to me, have interested you.*

IB: I never read much Weber, one of my great deficiencies, which I could remedy but never have. I have never ceased to lament not reading enough Max Weber.

SL: *I think, if I may say so, that it is because you always had rather a prejudice against sociology.*

IB: Maybe against the scientific claims of 'sociology'.

SL: *Yes, but that's why you never read the great sociologists.*

IB: True. Well I always thought — you know my views on contemporary sociology.

SL: *I do, but surely Durkheim and Weber ...*

IB: I admire them very much. It's not them I am against — or Karl Marx, who was certainly a sociologist. All I object to is people who study nothing but sociologists. Marx, Weber, Durkheim began with law, history, philosophy.

SL: *But now what about Bobbio? You say that you admire him very much.*

IB: Well I haven't read him extensively enough, but he also distinguishes between positive and negative liberty, and is extremely good on the opposition to natural law, and I think he provides a very firm foundation for Italian liberal and socialist thought.

SL: *And also, interestingly, like you very firmly a liberal — no doubt about that — but also clearly a man of the left.*

IB: I know. That, I believe, is because of the Roman Church. In any country under the ascendancy of the Roman Church, there arises an intelligentsia which invariably turns to the left. Why did Croce study Karl Marx? Why was Gaetano Salvemini intensely anti-clerical? They moved to the left by reaction. The Church of England doesn't create that kind of reaction. Take France, Italy, Spain, Russia: there you find a pre-revolutionary, left-inclined intelligentsia, critical of Czar and Church, even though there were a few leftist priests.

SL: *And you think that still remains true?*

IB: Now I am not sure, because communism has largely collapsed in the Soviet Union, and nobody knows where it is going. I have always been in favour of the New Deal, of the Welfare State, and that I remain. I am against undiluted laissez-faire, against reducing the role of the state to a minimum. I have never preached that. Constant was a considerable influence on me. So was Popper's book, *The Open Society and its Enemies*. It is to some extent mistaken in its analysis of Plato, Aristotle, Hegel, but collectively it's a powerful and important anti-totalitarian and anti-authoritarian and, indeed, anti-conservative work.

SL: *So it was an influence on you.*

IB: Yes.

SL: *There were a number of books at that time and of that type, for example the book by Talmon on the Origins of Totalitarian Democracy, and also Hayek.*

IB: I was not influenced by Hayek. As for Talmon's thesis — I had thought of that independently, and I had already delivered my lecture on liberty by then. But it is an interesting book.

SL: *Why do you say you are in favour of the New Deal?*

IB: I thought that the New Deal was the most successful, admirable experiment promoting both justice and prosperity in a society without introducing the rather restrictive aspects of socialism. As such it was an arrangement rather like Attlee's. It was a form of welfare state. That's what the New Deal was. And it was promoted by extremely able and morally sympathetic characters.

SL: *And do you think that it is generalisable?*

IB: Of course. As a form of government and as a form of society.

SL: *And if you identify a political position today, or rather a political possibility today, ...*

IB: I'd say it is exactly the same. I see no reason why not. I mean the welfare state in England was admirable and the New Deal in America under Roosevelt was very good; it unfortunately had to be modified as a result of the requirements of war but it came back to some degree under Truman and on the whole it left a permanent impact on American society. The real opposition to the policies of Eisenhower, Nixon and Reagan and the others derives from memories of and faith in the values of the New Deal.

SL: *Liberalism in the American sense.*

IB: New Dealism.

SL: *And in Europe, would you equate that with social democracy?*

IB: No, we have never had it.

SL: *I see, so you think that the New Deal is something quite distinctive which Europe has not had?*

IB: I do think that. Well, the nearest thing to it, as I say, was the welfare state under Attlee and corresponding forms of government in New Zealand, Scandinavia and so on. There are a lot of affinities.

II. The Plural Society and its Enemies

PLURALISM, RELATIVISM AND LIBERALISM

SL: *We've been talking about liberalism. Let's now turn to value pluralism. One thread that runs through your new book, and you stress it particularly in the Agnelli lecture, is the theme of pluralism.*

IB: True.

SL: *But you also say that pluralism is not relativism. What is it exactly that distinguishes pluralism from relativism?*

IB: Well if you say “exactly”, I may not be able to satisfy you. Can we talk about values? We are not making common sense statements about the external world of a factual, empirical nature. What are they? Let me begin with my difficulty. My difficulty is that people say, for example, that Hume is a relativist, or that others are. In contrast to what? In contrast presumably to knowing that certain values are absolute quite independently of what you may think or want. That’s presumably what Kant says, and what the Bible says and what most religions say: that there are certain values known *a priori* to be valid — so that the personal opinion of individuals makes no difference to their objective status. That’s something I don’t really understand — of course I understand the meaning of the words when I read them, but I don’t know what it would be like to recognise certain beliefs as being true independently of what anyone might possibly think. I can see that kind of realism about the external world. I can perfectly understand, though some people wouldn’t, the claim that the table is made of wood whether I think so or not. But to say that, for example, murder is wrong whether I think so or not seems to me to be, curiously enough, puzzling. Because when I say right or wrong, I mean in the light of values that I, in my personal life, regard as ends in themselves, everything else being a means towards them, for the sake of which I am prepared to act, and which in some way form, with other values, the constellation of values which shapes my way of life. All that I understand. My way of life, our way of life perhaps, more widely. I have never understood what it would be like for Hume’s so-called relativist values (but I don’t think he is a relativist for a moment, but that’s another matter), for Hume’s allegedly relativist values to be seen as not relative but objective and absolute. What would it be like to perceive this? I’ve no idea. Relativism is another matter.

SL: *Well, tell me what you think pluralism is.*

IB: Pluralism is as near to objective values as I can get. To begin with, I wish to make a point, which I have made rather too often, that some values

are incompatible with each other. Both values of entire cultures or values of groups of individuals or values within a human being himself. For example, to give the most obvious example, absolute freedom is incompatible with absolute equality. If you want absolute political equality you must restrain the liberties of people from disturbing it, for example by dominating others. I think that spontaneity, which I regard as a virtue, is incompatible with being good at planning, as justice is with mercy, and so on. I would even go so far as to say that knowledge is sometimes incompatible with happiness. Plato and others would deny that totally. So would Marx. If I know that I have cancer, I don't believe that I am made happier by the knowledge. Some people would say that it gives me more freedom because I would then know what to do; but I would not necessarily know this. Cancer is often fatal, in which case I am no doubt made miserable by the awareness of having it. And so on. Values don't all collide. A good many values are perfectly compatible, but enough values aren't, both between cultures and within cultures, within groups and within persons. This being so, choices have to be made. If you choose one value, you must sacrifice another. Sacrifices can be agonising, but unless you refrain from choosing, (which would make you inhuman, because making choices is intrinsic to being a human being), unless you cancel that, you have to choose and therefore you have to sacrifice something, namely the values you don't realise. Now the values that I sacrifice, as opposed to the values which I choose, are the values which might be equally ultimate for me. By 'ultimate' I mean values which I regard as ends in themselves, and not a means to other ends — what utilitarianism was to Mill or knowledge to Plato. Even though I may sacrifice a given value, I can perfectly well understand what it would be like if I had sacrificed a rival one. In either case, the values I am guided by are what determine my general moral universe. Values are not isolated. They are, save for fanatics, connected with other values which between them form a constellation, a way of life. That's as near to objectivity as I can get. That's what my life is lived in the light of. If I am told that these ends are universally valid, whether I believe in them or understand them or not, I don't follow. In a sense I am an existentialist — that's to say I commit myself, or find that I am in fact committed, to constellations of certain values. This is how I live. Others may live differently. But I am what I am.

SL: *Well that does raise the issue I want to ask you about, namely the question of choice. I mean there are other writers than yourself whom I could think of—for example Max Weber, or Nietzsche or Carl Schmitt, who have observed this clash between values but have drawn conclusions that are rather different from yours—notably I think of Carl Schmitt. . .*

IB: ... and also Weber?

SL: *... who draws a very harsh conclusion from this, really, that the choice can't be given any kind of rational formulation. It's just a question in the end of who is my friend and who is my enemy.*

IB: For Schmitt and Nietzsche too do you think ?

SL: *Yes.*

IB: What about Weber?

SL: *Weber has a somewhat more complex position subject to different interpretations.*

IB: Let me tell you that I first have to admit to you something very shaming. When I first formulated this idea, which is a long time ago, I'd never read a page of Weber. I had no idea that he said these things. People often ask me, but surely Weber was the first person to say this. I answer that I am sure he is, but I had no idea of it.

SL: *No, but it came from Nietzsche, as far as Weber was concerned.*

IB: I know, but I said these things entirely on my own, without Nietzsche and without Weber.

SL: *But you drew liberal conclusions from it.*

IB: But what about Weber, what does he say? About these cultures which collide?

SL: *Well, Weber certainly thought you had to take sides, but he didn't draw the kind of humane generous liberal conclusions which you seek to draw.*

IB: But?

SL: *Well, Weber became a rather ardent nationalist.*

IB: All right, but how did he defend it?

SL: *In the end he said you had to take a side.*

IB: Like Carl Schmitt. You plump.

SL: *Yes, in the end.*

IB: Of course, in the end. You take sides. Well I don't disagree with that either. I believe that too.

SL: *But you say, and you say it in the end in the Agnelli lecture if I remember, you say that you have this clash, this diversity of ultimate ends, this incompatibility between ultimate values, and you even say some are incommensurable.*

IB: Some are.

SL: *Yes, some are. And then you say that nevertheless they can be traded off.*

IB: I have been attacked for saying that, e.g. by Mr. Perry Anderson, and Marxists. Well I can explain it. But let me go on to something else first.

SL: *All right.*

IB: And that's the following. I think the number of ends that human beings can pursue is not infinite. In theory it may be, but in practice human

beings would not be human if that were so. The number of human values is finite.

SL: *So they are limited by mutual intelligibility.*

IB: The number of ends which people can pursue and remain as what we regard as fully formed human beings is, let us say, ninety-two, or sixty-seven, or forty-one, but not an indefinite number. Now, if people pursue values, even a culture pursues values different from mine, or from what Germans call my *Kulturkreis* or cultural circle, I can understand it, because these are values which are compatible with being a fully developed human being. But some values are not, they are outside the rim. The limits of intelligibility of values for me means that I can communicate with people who pursue them and understand how in their position, supposing that I lived where and when and how they lived, I might have pursued these values myself, or again I might not, I may reject these values now, and perhaps I would have rejected them then, in favour of some rival values, but at least I understand what it would have been like to devote my life to the pursuit of these other values — to me, let us say, unsympathetic ends.

SL: *So the range is limited by mutual intelligibility.*

IB: It is to me. Let me give you an example of non-intelligibility, because otherwise the concept of intelligibility becomes too vague. Supposing a man comes along and he pushes pins into people, and I say to him: 'why do you do this?' The man says: 'because I enjoy it.' I say: 'are you enjoying giving pain to people?' 'no, not particularly.' That would be an intelligible aim. Sadism I understand. Then I ask him: 'but why do you do it?' And he says: 'because I rather like it.' 'But you realise that it causes them great pain'; and he says, 'yes I do.' 'But then, they might do it to you.' 'No they wouldn't because I am stronger than they are, and I would stop them.' So far so good. But then I say: 'but why do you do it?' And he answers: 'but I like doing it. I like pushing pins into resilient surfaces.' 'If I give you a tennis ball, would that be just as good?' 'Of course, just as good', he replies, 'as human skin'. At this point I stop understanding him. To talk to a man for whom inflicting pain is something of no importance,

doesn't make any difference, is totally puzzling. I repeat: 'you are inflicting pain'; and he says: 'so what? Why do you mention it?' This 'so what' means that we do not live in the same world. I call him mad. People in his kind of mental condition are locked up in asylums, not prisons.

SL: *On this point, do you think that the limits of intelligibility—which we can count as intelligible—are pre-set? Or do you think that the practice of studying other cultures could increase the range of what can be intelligible?*

IB: Of course, it could and does.

SL: *But nevertheless there are limits there somehow.*

IB: The whole value of discovering the past and studying other cultures is to understand more, so that you understand yourself better.

SL: *It is not only that you understand more, but what can be intelligible increases.*

IB: Yes. You may understand something which at a previous time you didn't understand. Something may be explained to you by a man of genius and you suddenly understand something which had been opaque, or even meaningless.

SL: *So that in principle the scope of values that could in principle clash with each other can be an expanding scope?*

IB: It can be, but nevertheless I believe it to be finite, because I think that in the end there is something called human nature. It's modifiable, it takes different forms in different cultures but unless there were a human nature, the very notion of human beings would become unintelligible.

SL: *That's a point about the scope of the values that clash, but let's return to the clash itself and the conclusion that you draw from it. There are really two points here at issue. First there is the point about how you*

can on the one hand say that they are incompatible and indeed incommensurable, and yet on the other hand speak about putting them into some kind of balance and equilibrium and indeed trade-off, that question. Perhaps you could talk about that first. Then secondly there is the question of why this should lead to positive liberal conclusions. Let's talk about the first question first.

IB: All right, well now, trade-offs. A commercial term. Perhaps I should use the term 'compromise'. The point is this. If you have a collision of values— let's take something morally painful: you may have to decide that there can be no trade-offs. Take a man under Nazi occupation in France during the last war; his choice is between joining the resistance or the high likelihood of being forced to see his wife, child, parents tortured by the Nazis if and when they discover this. Then there is no question of trade-offs: you can't establish a delicate balance between the probability of torture and the obligation of resisting an absolutely evil regime.

SL: *Well this is the kind of case that Sartre was concerned with.*

IB: Yes of course. It is an agonising choice. There are many possibilities of agonising choices.

SL: *Moral dilemmas. There can be no question of trade-off when there are moral dilemmas?*

IB: If they are acute moral dilemmas, there can no question of trade-off. Let me tell you a story that someone once told me. During the last war there was a British officer in the Intelligence service, and in 1945 he went to see a resistance group in France which had captured a Frenchman who had worked for the Gestapo, a very young man, an agent for the Gestapo. They captured him, and the British officer wanted to interrogate him and find out what he knew. The resistance men told him that he could interrogate the prisoner if he liked but that they were going to shoot him the next morning; he could not escape this. The British officer met the young man and asked him questions. The man said, 'If you can save my life I'll talk. But if you can't save my life, then why should I?' Now, what

should the officer have done? As an intelligence officer, obliged to extract information which might help to save the lives of innocent victims of the Nazis, he was bound to lie, to say 'I can save your life, if you tell me what I want to know.' Alternatively, he could have fudged things and said: 'Well, I'll talk to them, I'll try and persuade them not to shoot you', knowing that he would not be able to persuade them: we'll assume that he knew that as well as anything can be known in this world. As an officer involved in the war, he was bound to lie; you may say that people are bound to lie in wars for the cause that is theirs. At the same time, the thought that the very last thing the man would realise before he was shot would be that he had been lied to by oneself would surely deter one. One wouldn't be a decent human being if one wasn't deterred — one would be a monster. In this situation, what should one do? Again: what does a Jew in the situation described by Miss Arendt do? You are a leader of some Jews in Lithuania. A Nazi official comes to you from the Gestapo and he says, 'You are in charge of the Jews here, they trust you, you manage their lives, you are the head man of the Jewish community, appointed by us. Give us their names and addresses, we wish to know this. Of course we could discover this without you, but it would take us longer, and that would be rather a nuisance for us. If you do this for us, we'll let you go, and you can take seventy-two other people with you. If you don't do it, you know what will happen, to you as well as to all the others.' You might say to yourself: 'how dare I, who am I to choose seventy-two people out of all these people to be saved?' Miss Arendt in effect said that you had no right to sup with the devil: you should allow yourself to be shot, and that's that. I disagree. In my view there are four possible choices. One is that you say, 'I am not playing your game' — in that case you are probably soon executed. The second choice is to commit suicide rather than talk to the Gestapo — at least you'll kill yourself — perfectly worthy, at least your conscience is clear — but perhaps not quite clear, because you might have saved seventy-two people. The third choice is to say, all right, I'll give you the names — and then you tell all the Jews that they must do everything they can to flee; and you know that once your act is discovered you are virtually certain to be killed, that the possibility of escaping is very small. The fourth choice is to accept: you get away, with seventy-two others. There was a man who did this. He was ultimately assassinated in Israel by a relative of

one of those he left behind. What is the morally correct answer to this? There can be no question of any trade-off between any of these possibilities. In so extreme a situation, no act by the victims can (*pace* Miss Arendt) be condemned. Whatever is done must be regarded as fully justified. It is inexpressible arrogance on the part of those who have never been placed in so appalling a situation to pass judgement on the decisions and actions of those who have. Praise and blame are out of place — normal moral categories do not apply. All four choices — heroic martyrdom, and the saving of innocent lives at the expense of those of others, can only be applauded.

SL: *So that's the case in acute moral dilemmas. But now, what about cases of public policy?*

IB: There trade-offs do come in. Let me give you an example. Either you can build a church or a cinema. There are no resources for both. There is a great demand for each. A hundred people long for a church, but three hundred people crave a cinema. You can decide on utilitarian grounds, which seems to me perfectly sensible: if we build a cinema, we shall make more people happy. But why be utilitarian? That depends on the situation — one must weigh the intensity of the desires against the number of voters. Quality has to be balanced against quantity. There is no rule according to which this can be done — one must just decide.

SL: *But let's change the example slightly: suppose it's a choice between the opera house and the sports ground?*

IB: Then I can say that opera houses are intrinsically more valuable than sports grounds. Why? Because art is an end in itself and to be pursued as an end in itself, not as a means for something outside itself. That is what *ad maiorem dei gloriam* meant. The purpose of art is not just pleasure; the purpose of art is art, of creation is to create, just as the purpose of love is love. And the purpose of football is perhaps football to those who are dedicated to it, but mainly to give pleasure to the spectators and to foster competition in skills among the players and to excite. You have to choose. You plump. How much money do we have? Not enough for both. You may judge that this community is so barbarous that it needs culture more than

it needs football grounds, or you can say that this community is civilised, and the rich can pay for an opera house themselves. That's not a trade-off, that's a decision. A trade-off means it might have a very small football ground and a tiny opera house.

SL: *But then the idea of trade-off seems to apply in the easy cases.*

IB: A trade-off applies only when neither choice is morally binding, where it is simply a question of choosing something which on the whole prevents intolerable alternatives from arising, which on the whole diminishes agony or misery.

SL: *So there is a kind of meta-principle of a utilitarian sort?*

IB: Well, if you call it utilitarian. It means the choice of whatever doesn't frustrate too many people's ultimate ends. I am not a utilitarian. The idea that you must give religious people a church in which to pray is not utilitarian. It isn't because it will make them happier, it's because they believe and have a right to practise their faith. Rights can conflict. The ends of the Jews and the Arabs collide. It's a better case of incompatibility of ends.

SL: *Good. I wanted to come to cultural conflict.*

IB: In my view, both sides have claims to Palestine. The Arabs have a claim because people have a claim to a land in which they have lived long enough and in which they are the natives. They have a right to create and continue a form of life on the soil in which most of their ancestors have lived, in which their language is spoken and their customs and values prevail. So far so good. The Jews have survived against all odds as a minority everywhere. There is not a single Jew living, baptised or not, who does not feel a certain degree of social uneasiness, of not quite belonging to the world dominated by the majority of the population. It's not, in my view, tolerable morally that a people should be a minority everywhere. Everyone has a right to live in some society in which they needn't constantly worry about what they look like to others, and so be psychologically

distorted, conditioned to some degree of (Sartrean) *mauvaise foi*. That gives the Jews a right to a country of their own. In practice Palestine was the only country to which they could collectively go, mostly at some sacrifice to themselves. That alone gives them a claim to live in a state of their own, in Palestine. Maybe not the whole of it, only some of it. The Arabs reject this claim. They say the country is theirs. The Jews wholly reject, at least some do, the Arabs' claim. They say that their claim is blessed by God, by His Bible — that their dreadful martyrdom, ending in the Holocaust, gives them this right. If you have a collision between two morally acceptable claims, you have a tragic situation, and Hegel is right in saying that the essence of tragedy is the clash between right and right — as in this case. In this case, to avoid total rejection of a right, you have to have trade-off. You ask: 'what will cause the least misery to all these people taken together?' You are entitled to reply to each: 'You can't have the whole of Palestine.' Arabs have Jordan — that was cut off in order to make a home for the Arabs. That is already a trade-off. Jews can only live west of the Jordan. Then you add that Arabs continue to live West of the Jordan too — by right of conquest; that it is painful to leave these people under foreign rule. It is. And therefore you believe that it is possible for the Jewish state to develop normally within frontiers that do not involve an occupation of the West Bank, they should make that sacrifice, since it doesn't jeopardise the state's survival. If they are right in supposing that it does endanger their security, then they must keep a slice of the West Bank, and leave the rest, and accept a frontier which does not satisfy either party but does not condemn either of them to a fate which, on the whole, can, by a disinterested observer, be considered politically, socially or economically intolerable. There is no reason to think that this cannot be found.

SL: *I see that, but one problem there is that the principle of minimising misery isn't one which the parties themselves regard as the main thing.*

IB: That doesn't matter. The parties themselves may have a fanatical vision. And fanatics can never be satisfied.

SL: *Well what does a liberal do about fanaticism?*

IB: He tries to control it. He tries to not allow fanatics to have any part of what they want as fanatics. Take rights. We were talking about misery; rights are different from utilitarianism. For human beings rights entail that there are certain things that are very important for people's lives as human beings. Never mind whether they enjoy them or not. It's not a question of misery. To take away these rights may make them miserable but the point is not that, the point is that it dehumanises them. The point is that it diminishes them. It cuts off something that as human beings they find that it's terrible to live without. In which case also you can have trade-offs. You can't deprive human beings of certain basic rights as human beings. You can deprive a Frenchman of certain rights as a Frenchman.

SL: *But then that's exactly what I was going to ask. A nationalist, not necessarily a Frenchman, may well count as absolutely essential to his vital interests ...*

IB: He is wrong.

SL: *But how do you decide then what the bases for rights are?*

IB: How do you decide anything? How do the objectivists decide? How does Kant decide? You see, if it's written in fiery letters in the heavens, then you know. If it's written in a sacred book which tells you, then it's off your conscience. It's entirely done in accordance with some dictate from Above. If there is an Above.

SL: *But does that mean that the liberalism you espouse is one which allows you, I mean the liberal, to decide what the bases for people's rights are independently of their own judgement?*

IB: No. I have to take their own judgements as part of the rights to which they have a claim. People have a right to strive for whatever they regard as necessary for them even if it isn't.

SL: *But in that case nationalism ...*

IB: I must take nationalist feelings into consideration. I won't squash them.

SL: *But you won't count certain claims, certain extreme nationalist claims as being legitimate ...*

IB: I'll only count the fact that they are going to be made unhappy by finding these, to me, mistaken claims unfulfilled. I can't ignore that. A nation saying that without Alsace France is not France, it has happened, I can't ignore the fact that Frenchmen may commit suicide if Alsace isn't theirs. I can't ignore it, but it doesn't make me necessarily give Alsace to the French.

SL: *I see, so it's a kind of pragmatic constraint.*

IB: Well that's all trade-offs are. What is a trade-off? Trade-off means that neither value can be satisfied fully.

SL: *Is a trade-off a compromise?*

IB: Yes. Trade-off means you say so much of this, so much of that, and the consequence of that is that you gain more than you lose. Both sides gain.

SL: *Tell me, how do you distinguish this position, your position, from Rawls's position? Rawls after all thinks that it's possible to have a just framework where different moralities can all be fitted together into a just framework and it's not just a question of a compromise.*

IB: I respect Rawls deeply but the question is who formulates the rules of justice. Who formulates them? How do we discover them?

SL: *Well there are two answers in Rawls. There's the picture of the original position, but this is meant to be a representation of the idea that people can be brought rationally to agree upon these principles from within different perspectives.*

IB: You mean because they ask themselves: if I know nothing about where I am or will find myself, am I prepared....?

SL: *Yes, and you can ask this from different viewpoints, from different perspectives; and thus there could be an overlapping consensus. The original position is one answer, the overlapping consensus is the other, and they are both basically intended to be the same answer.*

IB: Well I don't know if I accept that. Of course if that could be done, then I'd be happy, but I don't think it can. Why it can't be done is that if justice is an ultimate value it is not compatible with mercy. It just isn't. There are cases where the law says that justice demands the execution or punishment or elimination of persons or societies or groups, but if you are merciful you say I can't bring myself to do this, and you say but some people will suffer, but mercy is also very important. Believers talk about God being wholly just and most merciful. Justice and mercy are quite often not compatible . Which do you choose? You should be as just as you can be without being too merciless. You are as merciful as you can be without being too unjust. That's one point. The other is the irrational impulses of men, to which I pay attention but Rawls doesn't. I think that you cannot establish political government purely on the basis of what is rational, though some people obviously think you can. But I think that there are too many irrational drives in men which even universal psychoanalysis may not eliminate, which are nevertheless part of basic human nature as I conceive it. If people didn't have deep irrational elements in them there would be no religion, no art, no love. None of these things are justifiable by purely rational means. Love is not justified because it's rational, because it makes somebody happy. The justification of love is that it is what it is. What is the purpose of art? What is the *rational* purpose of art? Art. What is the purpose of beauty? Beauty. Therefore, I have to say that some of the elements in human lives which derive from emotional cravings have to enter into the total picture of the painful choices or the trade-offs. The main point of the trade-offs is that fanaticism cannot be allowed because it tramples on too many rights, and too much happiness, and therefore trade-off means that bigots cannot ever be allowed to have their own way.

SL: *Do you think, as I think Rawls does, that fanaticism can be tamed?*

IB: By education?

SL: *Yes, and of course many liberals have thought this, as you well know.*

IB: I know.

SL: *Do you think that somehow — and I guess this is part of the idea of the overlapping consensus — from apparently extremely opposed positions that are not reconcilable, you can extract something that people from different points of view can agree upon?*

IB: If that happens, that's fine.

SL: *How optimistic are you about that as a process, I mean for example in Israel?*

IB: Well, we have been subjected in this century to so much murderous fanaticism, by virtually everyone, that it is rather difficult to be optimistic. It sounds superficial to say: well, human beings are human, enough argument, enough kindness, enough decency, then surely but at the same time you can't rule it out. It would be utterly wrong and irrational to say that it is not so. Two things can be done. One is, I suppose, that persuasion, and empirical enlightenment, can occur.

SL: *What do you mean by that?*

IB: I'll tell you. Take the Nazis. People thought they were mad. I do not think that. Evil, yes. But literally mad? Supposing that you believe that there are creatures describable as subhuman, *Untermenschen*, and they have certain attributes, and in virtue of these attributes they bore into your culture like termites, and destroy everything that you value and respect and love, particularly the Germanic qualities of the German people. Then it will follow that these people must somehow be eliminated from your

system, either by emigration —being pushed out or, if that's not feasible, by murder. But that depends on an empirically false conception of what it is to be sub-human, a monstrous and refutable idea. Then you decide who is sub-human, and that the Jews are sub-human, and in virtue of that they must be eliminated. What is it that Jews do, or are mistakenly thought to do or be, that makes the life of the majority of Germans intolerable? And even supposing it is an obstacle to German-ness, have they a right to expel them? Can a liberal society expel mavericks because they are tiresome? So in that sense I think that knowledge, sheer empirical knowledge, as it were, of the facts as the Enlightenment conceived of this, does modify, can modify bigotry — not always, but it can. If you do get bigots to whom this means nothing, who are completely fanatical, then who can tell — maybe persuasion, an attempt to show how much they are trampling on others, how much misery they are causing, may shake some of them. There are cases of converted bigots, after all, there are cases of Nazis who were sorry they were Nazis because they were wrong. But in general I admit I don't hold out high hopes of curing bigots. But they can be forcibly restrained, or should be.

SL: *To go back to the case of Israel, do you think there have been many signs of empirical enlightenment?*

IB: Too little. I don't think that the Palestinians think that the Jews are inhuman nor do I think that Jews think that Arabs are. But it's quite natural that each side should think that they cannot lead free lives in an integrated society if the others are there in quantity, and therefore this is not, in general, a case of sheer bigotry. Some Jews are bigoted, some Arabs are. It is bigoted to say that the Lord said that you shall have every inch of the soil of Judea and Samaria and no foreigners may be allowed to touch the sacred soil. That's bigoted. Knowledge, Rawlsian fairness, won't remedy that.

SL: *The very situation itself doesn't encourage empirical enlightenment.*

IB: No, because it's difficult, when you have two peoples of different origins and very different cultures, for them to live together in peace and amity. It doesn't happen in other countries either. We used to think in the nineteenth century that multicultural societies were desirable because variety was a good thing, that people who are quite different can live in peace with each other. Then there came the ferment of the French Canadians, the Flemings in Belgium, Basques in Spain, Corsicans, Bretons, Tamils, Irishmen, Jews, and Arabs, Georgians and Armenians, Nagorno-Karabakh — Indians and Pakistanis. So much for variety in unity.

SL: *It's striking that when one goes into conflict situations like this, whether in South Africa or in Israel, among believers of one sort or another, liberalism tends to be a dirty word, it tends to be used as a word to mean those who are trying to impose an ideology on us.*

IB: Because it *dilutes* what means most to us. The essence of what we live for. We are Germans, we live for being Germans and liberalism means that the French are just as good. Impossible.

SL: *Well how do you answer that question?*

IB: Answer what?

SL: *That objection that's made by the very agents in the drama we are discussing. When a nationalist says this kind of thing to a liberal what does a liberal reply?*

IB: You mean where the enemies are liberals?

SL: *Yes.*

IB: Why? Because they destroy, undermine the values which we believe in?

SL: *Yes, liberals often make claims, but I don't imagine you have done this particularly, many liberals these days make claims to being in some way neutral or impartial.*

IB: Between values?

SL: *Yes. As between contending moral values.*

IB: Well you *can* be, unless you are forced to foreswear one or the other. To *other* people's values you can take a perfectly calm stand outside and let them fight it out; and wash your hands.

SL: *So you don't think that liberals are committed to neutrality?*

IB: Certainly not. Anything but. Liberals are committed to creating a society in which as many people as possible can live free lives, lives in which they fulfill as many of their potentialities as they can provided that they don't abort those of others. That is exactly what John Stuart Mill said.

SL: *Of course some of their potentialities are pretty harmful and disagreeable.*

IB: Well then I think you have to have trade-offs. You ask me what I do with bigots. I don't hang them and I don't shoot them except in cases of necessity. If there is a war or revolution perhaps I do, but in ordinary circumstances of peaceful existence if bigots become a danger, for example as with the fascists and the communists, I have to ask myself the old, old question: "How many of these people can a liberal society carry? How dangerous are they? How much do they endanger the free society of mutual toleration in which I live?" If I see too many, then I have to take steps against them. I may have to deprive them of votes, to protect toleration, to prevent oppression, or expel them or control them in some possibly rather severe fashion. That may happen. If there are too many fascists, we must take steps. And to prevent a communist Putsch, too.

SL: *But why toleration?*

IB: Because all human ends are ends. My difficulty is that the notion of rational ends is something I have never understood. Means, yes, are another matter. Take 'rationality' as a concept. What is rationality?

Rationality is the capacity to generalise, which beasts don't have: as Locke said, "Brutes abstract not." Rationality is a capacity for following logical arguments, for being consistent, for knowing what means lead to what ends (which is empirical knowledge), for needing to give reasons for what you do, which means giving reasons in terms ultimately of the ends you pursue, which we then examine to consider whether they really are ends which you think you are justified in pursuing, given how many other ends may be excluded. All that is rational, but a rational end which everybody else talks about — a rational purpose which is a well-known philosophical concept (it has existed since Plato's day) is to me not intelligible. I think ends are ends. People pursue what they pursue. Not an infinite variety, as I said before, but a finite number.

SL: *But you nevertheless think that some ends are humanly intelligible and others are not?*

IB: Well if they are not humanly intelligible they are not ends.

SL: *But among those which are humanly intelligible would you include sadistic ends, ends that actually involve the infliction of suffering?*

IB: Yes, and then of course I have to say that psychologists tell me that sadistic ends are not truly what people aim for, because the desire to inflict pain arises because you have had certain traumas in your childhood, or something of that sort, and does not do for you what you truly seek. But however that may be, I think that sadism tramples on too many people's rights and that it deprives people of free and satisfying lives; and therefore I would like to diminish or eliminate it.

SL: *But satisfying lives can be lives which satisfy sadistic ends.*

IB: Oh, certainly. Then I have to take a view of the group as a whole, and ask how many people trample on how many other people. If there are very few trampers and they do not trample too freely — I accept it as an inevitable social defect.

SL: *It seems to me that what lies behind this is a kind of Kantian respect not only for persons but for their ends.*

IB: Certainly. I regard ends in themselves — a Kantian notion — but he thought that you could discover what they were by a magic eye of some kind called Reason. I can't believe this. I think that people may have ends which horrify me, against which reason is helpless.

SL: *But those also you think should be respected .*

IB: No I don't.

SL: *Why not?*

IB: If they cause too much suffering, or cause too much deprivation of other people's rights, then they must be controlled, maybe eliminated, above all if I can do it by peaceful means, by persuasion. But if this fails, coercion may be justified.

SL: *Do you think that the phenomenon of cultural pluralism —by which I mean the co-existence of diverse forms of life in contemporary society—is becoming more complex: that is to say that moral diversity and moral complexity are becoming more problematic and that liberalism is now facing a larger problem than it did before?*

IB: Yes. But the situation is not hopeless. Western cultures have a great deal in common. One can exaggerate the absence of common ground. A great many people believe, roughly speaking, the same sort of thing. More people in more countries at more times accept more common values than is often believed.

SL: *So you think the diversity of morals has been greatly exaggerated?*

IB: In the West—yes. The beliefs of other parts of the world were not much thought of in the West. What the Chinese believed or Indians or

Japanese or, I don't know, Hottentots believed did not seriously preoccupy Westerners. Some of their values may be wholly opposed to those of the West, but not all, not all by any means. Now the world is one. Therefore the conflict may be compounded, may be growing greater.

SL: *So it's become internal to our own society.*

IB: Not necessarily. It's become internal to us only in the sense that we have become aware of a necessity of having a common world, of coming to some agreement.

SL: *But don't you think both things are true, that we have an external and an internal problem. I mean that there is a sense of a common world now, but also, secondly, that with the process of migration and the general movement of peoples, our own societies themselves have to face new problems.*

IB: The problems are not greater than they were before.

SL: *Don't you think they are?*

IB: The immigrants to the West tend to have values not dissimilar to those of the peoples which they join .

SL: *So they get more easily assimilated?*

IB: What immigrants are you thinking of? The East Europeans who emigrated to America in the 1890s certainly had much in common with the WASPs. The WASPs despised them socially, but they were all against murder, they were all fond of their children. They all sought life, liberty, the pursuit of a not very dissimilar happiness.

SL: *But the Asians and the Africans who have come West, are they ready for assimilation?*

IB: Maybe not. It may be that these other kinds of Immigrants have only become a problem now. It wasn't a problem in your sense in the 19th century because then most immigrants weren't that different. Poor Italian peasants from Sicily weren't that different from Bostonians.

SL: *But don't you think it's different now?*

IB: Yes, because cultures which have grown up with no contact with one another have now collided.

SL: *That's what I am trying to get at.*

IB: That is a serious problem. One hopes for assimilation. Not total. Because we like variety but we need sufficient assimilation not to create injustice, cruelty and misery.

SL: *So that's interesting; you think that the liberalism that you espouse is committed to assimilation.*

IB: Some assimilation of strangers yes, of real strangers. Not the assimilation of people who have lived together for a long time, and may have different views .

SL: *Do you think that liberalism is, in this sense, essentially European, then? Or Western?*

IB: It was certainly invented in Europe.

SL: *Historically, of course. But, I mean, now — is it an essentially Western principle?*

IB: Yes. I suspect that there may not be much liberalism in Korea. I doubt if there is much liberalism even in Latin America. I think liberalism is essentially the belief of people who have lived on the same soil for a long time in comparative peace with each other. An English invention. The English have not been invaded for a very very long time. That's why they

can afford to praise these virtues. I see that if you were exposed to constant pogroms you might be a little more suspicious of the possibility of liberalism.

SL: *What do you think of its prospects in Eastern Europe?*

IB: Oh, I can't prophesy, in spite of my first name. I think that there will be trouble, particularly now. The Soviet Union is filled with real racial and cultural conflict which was suppressed before both under Czarist and communist regimes. I don't believe in total self-determination. I believe that self-determination has its limits if it inflicts too much trampling on human rights, and it can.

SL: *It certainly can. Do you think that any of these national movements in the Soviet Union now offer any prospect for liberal outcomes, or outcomes that are relatively friendly to liberty?*

IB: Who can tell? In the Baltic states maybe. The Baltic states are much more like the West than some other parts of the Soviet Union. Not, of course, that a good many people in the Baltic states didn't cooperate with the Nazis in exterminating Jews. No doubt about that, and therefore you can't say they are particularly liberal. But, as a result of what has happened to them, I should think that they might with comparative ease go back to the status which they had between 1919 and 1939 which was reasonably liberal until the middle 30s when dictatorships took over Latvia, and, I am told, to a minor extent, Lithuania too. Estonia liquidated its own Fascist party. They were very virtuous. I think they are a liberal people. They have a liberal past to which they can return. But some countries don't

SL: *For example Romania.*

IB: Oh indeed. Liberalism in Rumania has never been very great, or in Russia itself. The only time when Russia was liberal was between February and November 1917, and not at any other time. There is a view that Russia was an autocracy in which liberalism was always very feeble,

and therefore the idea that it would pass from Czarism to some kind of Western-style constitutional liberalism was always very remote. I don't agree. Russian history shows one that the number of perfectly good liberals in the Western sense in the 80s and the 90s of the 19th century was much higher than people allow: doctors, lawyers, agricultural experts, engineers, writers, professors, schoolmasters tended to have a great deal of respect for and understanding of Western values. Therefore the idea that Russia had inevitably to pass from one despotism to another (as Maistre once predicted) is false. If Lenin had been debilitated by some accident in April 1917, there would have been no Bolshevik revolution. There might have been a civil war between Left and Right, and the Right might have won, in which case maybe Russia would not have been a liberal country, but it would have been less despotic than it turned out, something like Alexander's Yugoslavia; or the Left might have won in which case we might have had a rather untidy liberal state; but what happened needn't have happened.

SL: *I agree with you.*

IB: There were no objective factors which made it even probable.
E.H. Carr is completely wrong.

THE LEFT TODAY

SL: *You did say something interesting when you said that if the Left had won you might have had a liberal state. Do you think that liberalism is essentially, or was then historically and is and has subsequently been associated with, the Left?*

IB: In a sense, yes; it would have opposed centralized state power; but of course the Left in our day can also be very highly fanatical; that's the very great difficulty about using the word 'Left'; today Stalinists in Russia are regarded as Right, while people who supported Sakharov are regarded as Left. In that sense liberalism is Left of centre, certainly.

SL: *Well then there is a great deal of confusion about this these days.*

IB: Yes. But if we go back to the old use of 'left' and 'right' as in the 19th century, then I would say yes, liberalism is associated with the left because they were on the whole suspicious of and opposed to too much power on the part of authority, which leaned on tradition, on irrational values, on force. That is what qualified the Right, and therefore opposition to that in favour of toleration of human values was necessarily associated with the Left. The Bolsheviks went far beyond anything called Left-wing before them.

SL: *And why do you think we can't use these words any more?*

IB: Well simply because of the Soviet Union. It has ruined the terminology. Let me ask you a question.

SL: *Do.*

IB: In your opinion, what is it that has deprived the world of respected left-wing leaders of any kind? Let me explain what I mean. What might be called 'the Left' could be said to have begun in Paris or in France in the early 18th century. Voltaire was really the founder of what might be called the opposition to Church, the King's arbitrary authority, in favour of toleration, reason, science — and live and let live. Voltaire hated the Bible because it was intolerant. He was anti-Christian because it was irrational and intolerant. He had respect for an imaginary China, but not the barbarians in between.

SL: *He didn't much like the Jews.*

IB: He certainly didn't. Partly because he was an anti-semite anyway, most people were, and partly because the Jews were responsible for horrible Christianity. He was a leader, of a liberal kind. He was followed by the Encyclopaedists who were the natural opposition to what might be called authoritarian government. They were followed by the French Revolution which became authoritarian under the Terror but didn't last

very long. Then we have Napoleon — who was not irrational — in some ways progressive — and then we have the Restoration. Then in Paris, after years of underground activity, conspiracies of all kinds, you get the radical movements of the 1830s and 40s. It was a haven for revolutionaries. Who was not there? Bakunin, Marx, Louis Blanc, Blanqui, Herzen, Proudhon, Heine, George Sand, Leroux, all quarreling with each other. Then we have 1848. Then — I'm only talking about France and indeed Paris — under Napoleon III, Victor Hugo and Michelet go into exile rather than put up with the tyrant. Then in 1871 there is the Commune; after the Commune, at least two or three socialist parties. Marxists and Allemanists — Possibilistes and others. Then the Dreyfus case, the great rise of anti-clericalism and anti-authoritarianism. Then the First World War fought on the whole against an authoritarian state by people who thought of themselves as liberals. Then you have the French Communist Party which is powerful and goes on being so until about 1970. Add also *Les Evenements* in 1968. After that what? Give me a few Left wing names.

SL: *Foucault.*

IB: No, no — not what I mean. Suppose I'm a young man and I am for the poor against the rich. I hate capitalism, I want social equality and justice. I want the kind of ideals that the Left for two centuries either had or professed to have. Who is my leader? It's no good saying Foucault. He had no political programme. For 22 years there has been nobody.

Sl: *In Paris, there was Althusser and various marxists for a while, but basically you are quite right. The supply ran out.*

IB: What happened was that the Soviet Union undermined the whole affair.

SL: *Well I was going to give the answer you have just supplied.*

IB: Exactly.

SL: *I think there was a dissolution avant la lettre, before the actual collapse of 1989.*

IB: Where is there an active Left-wing now? In Latin America maybe, because they are oppressed and the left is anti-oppression; maybe in Korea for all I know. Fifty years ago when I was young there were Left-wing leaders in England — Laski, Cole, Tawney, John Strachey, Victor Gollancz. Where are they now? *Où sont les neiges d'antan?* It's the first time this has happened for 250 years. I admired Tawney, Cole, even, mistakenly, the Webbs, Shaw, Wells, never Laski. But what has happened? Where are the Sartreans?

SL: *It's perfectly true, but there have been cycles, there have been waves.*

IB: But they have never not had leaders. The leaders may have been in exile.

SL: *Why did you ask me about leaders?*

IB: People look up to people whose ideas would attract, that's what I mean by leaders.

SL: *You meant originators of ideas?*

IB: Or holders of ideas, that's quite enough, provided that they express them with such eloquence and force that people follow them.

SL: *But you see what I am asking you: this suggests that it's the individual leader who is the key.*

IB: Yes, of course. I mean when a young man is asked 'what attracts you?', he says, 'well, the sort of thing which x,y and z preach with such force and so convincingly.' They could say that for 250 years.

SL: *So in this respect the individual makes a significant difference to historical movement and historical change.*

IB: I've always said that, in any case. At critical moments, what the individual may do can make a critical difference to the course of history; I certainly believe that. I do not believe in a sociological theory of history at all. Of course there are impersonal forces which shape us. Who am I to deny it? But at critical moments the individual can make a very great deal of difference.

SL: *But when you ask me about the Left and the future of the Left, when you ask me about leaders, you are talking about ideas, individuals who have ideas that make a difference.*

IB: Yes, yes of course. Socialism was created by socialist leaders.

SL: *But it wasn't Lenin's ideas that made all the difference?*

IB: Yes, it certainly was. He proposed them with extreme fanaticism even though they weren't his own. You may say that he borrowed them from Marx or Chernychevsky or whoever, but they certainly were ideas and he wrote them down and his followers slavishly followed and obeyed them.

SL: *Were Stalin's ideas important?*

IB: Well, he wrote some books, although whether he wrote them himself is not so clear. I suppose there were some Stalinist ideas, but they were of no great importance. They were meant, on the whole, officially as a development of Lenin.

SL: *Now you asked me to name a Left-wing thinker of our day. And I rather provocatively said Foucault.*

IB: Well I suppose Foucault is a Left-wing thinker but the very idea that language itself can exercise a despotic function and that it is a product

of class differentiation and class struggles doesn't seem to me to be very plausible. But he certainly believed it.

SL: *But you were asking me in a sense about thinkers who are leaders to whom the young looked up.*

IB: Could look up.

SL: *All right, but suppose instead of Foucault I had said Vaclav Havel.*

IB: Well, Vaclav Havel is a noble character, but his ideas are not all that different from those of Masaryk.

SL: *I could perhaps have said Masaryk?*

IB: Well, he is dead. As for Havel, he is an honourable liberal man of action.

SL: *But you said before it's not the origination but rather the holding of the ideas that matters.*

IB: I agree.

SL: *And Havel does represent a set of ideas. . .*

IB: He does, yes, but I don't want to talk about Havel, whom I have never met and whom I greatly admire.

SL: *Me too.*

IB: But I don't think that there is a set of ideas that can be attributed to him in a way that they could be attributed to the late Professor Laski. I mean, what does Havel preach? He is a sort of left-wing liberal.

SL: *Yes, and of a very moralistic sort.*

IB: Certainly. That's very commonplace. But there is no Havel doctrine or Havel practice which can be identified in sharp terms.

SL: *Well there isn't a theory of institutional design.*

IB: Not even a theory.

SL: *But there is a political morality.*

IB: But he is not a concrete example of an identifiable political direction which one can summarise in any way. But he is a highly sympathetic left-wing liberal thinker and man of action.

SL: *But Havel after all is a very significant political actor.*

IB: Of course. So is Lech Walesa.

SL: *Would you say of them that they represent something that could be described as the Left in that part of Europe?*

IB: Yes.

SL: *But of course some people say that the distinction between Left and Right no longer makes sense in that part of Europe.*

IB: This is nonsense. We all know the difference between Havel and Mrs. Thatcher. Sakharov, when I asked him if he belonged to a party, said 'yes'. I said, 'what party?' He said 'the Communist party.' 'What kind of Communist party?' '1917.' I said, 'what does that mean?' 'That means factories to the workers, land to the peasants.' Then I asked him 'who are the people you most admire in the West?' He and his wife both said 'No difficulty about that — Reagan and Mrs. Thatcher'. I understand perfectly what they meant. They saw through communism, through Russia, through the Soviet Union, through the Evil Empire. He was against Gorbachev, Sakharov, for what he saw as a betrayal of democracy. He didn't believe in one man one vote. What they thought was that Reagan and Thatcher represented a force against everything they hated.

SL: *But, to return to your question to me, it is true that there has been a massive dissolution, a massive collapse of the Left in our part of Europe.*

IB: The trouble is, I think, that the Left committed itself, in varying degrees, to the Soviet Union. They thought that maybe it has committed errors, crimes, monstrosities, but it's the best we have. It is in some sense going in the right direction.

SL: *But not everyone on the Left said this.*

IB: Of course not, but I mean people who were quite decent tried to persuade themselves that it was a model of socialism; although mistakes were made and cruelties occurred, in the end it was better than capitalism.

SL: *And of course that was especially true in Paris where your story started.*

IB: Of course.

SL: *But I don't believe this is the end of the story.*

IB: Nothing is ever the end of any story, but what I am asking you is whither now? I am asking you what next?

SL: *Well I think what we have now are lots of fragments. I think like you that it's become more difficult to use the term 'Left'. I think that the Left-Right distinction is difficult to use now partly because the various causes the Left has espoused have got fragmented one from another. You have the environment, you have the women's movement, the peace movement, the anti-racist movement and other social movements. In the past they were united by some kind of overall programme, some general striving for or project of equality.*

IB: That still exists. What about feminists and ecologists?

SL: *They don't see themselves necessarily as part of the same movement. That's the point.*

IB: Well, they are. They are probably all against inequality, they are probably against needless coercion. . .

SL: *But my answer to your question is that I think that the Left until quite recently could believe in an overall project, a project in which different campaigns, let's say for more women's equality or for relieving class oppression, could be seen as part of a larger story in which there was an overall project which everybody felt committed to. I don't think that any longer people can believe in this.*

IB: No, but maybe if you look at them you can find quite a lot of common ground, general oppositional movements of a non-authoritarian kind.

SL: *Yes, they may well have things in common which still entitles you to say, perhaps, that they are all part of the Left.*

IB: But they don't feel it themselves?

SL: *Exactly.*

IB: Well someone could arise who would unite them. He is yet to arise.

SL: *I don't think it is a question of a person, I think it's a question of whether there is an adequate idea.*

IB: Well, again, you could say that they are all at least against gross inequalities, against capitalism.

SL: *No, but you see it's not that the left was always marxist, always opposed to a particular set of enemies.*

IB: In the 19th century marxism was a rigorous system which covered every aspect of life and thought. But, it was still only a sect.

SL: *But in the 19th century you had the Liberal story.*

IB: But you also had a Socialist story.

SL: *Yes, you had both. Both of them involved a kind of overall story.*

IB: Marxism only became a focus when the Soviet Union was created.

SL: *I absolutely agree, but nevertheless what is common to both the 19th and the 20th centuries until recently is the very idea of an overall story. The idea that history was moving in a certain direction.*

IB: Oh yes certainly, that history is a drama.

SL: *But not just that — that the overcoming of inequality was a process in which once you have overcome one instance of inequality you then move onto the next.*

IB: It was a determinist story of a drama with many acts.

SL: *Yes.*

IB: Which in the end would lead to paradise.

SL: *Well you mightn't add that last bit.*

IB: But that's what progress is.

SL: *Well you might be sceptical about paradise. Let's take an English example. You might be someone like T.H. Marshall or even Richard Titmus or even Tawney. You mightn't be very utopian, you might not have a very grand vision of the future; nevertheless you might still believe as T.H. Marshall did, that first of all you got civil rights, then you moved onto social rights and economic rights: that it was a gradual progressive story.*

IB: Towards what?

SL: *Towards something like the welfare state.*

IB: Well all right, that's a paradise — of sorts — but not the end of the story surely.

SL: *Yes.*

IB: But the point is that you believed that paradise was inevitable, or that it could be constructed.

SL: *Yes, one or the other, whereas my attempt to answer your question is to say that I think that now people — even those whom we might still want to say are on the left — have lost that belief.*

IB: I am sorry to hear it, if what you say is true. You asked me what I believe in. I believe in the Welfare State. That is exactly what I do believe in, I believe in the New Deal. That is roughly what my beliefs are. If you tell me that that's obsolete...

SL: *No, I didn't say that.*

IB: But you said that many people think like that.

SL: *But part of the problem is we have reached it. That's to say — of course in this country it has been dismantled to some extent over the last few years — but nevertheless the Welfare state is a destination that has been reached, so then the question is where next?*

IB: Where indeed? Well the answer to this of course is that you then eliminate other forms of misery and inequality.

SL: *But then you still have feminists, you have ecologists, you have anti-racists, and different movements and groups having various inequalities as their targets, but they don't see themselves as part of an overall project.*

IB: The inegalitarians do.

SL: *Yes, they do; and they can identify the Left without difficulty.*

IB: Well then let me tell you — this has always happened. First you have a movement in favour of something, and then the children get what the parents want, then the grandchildren get bored with it, because they have it, and then the other side, which never was in favour, seems more exciting because they are against it, and when they get what they want they will get bored with it too, and so we progress, or perhaps not progress; so we move.

SL: *But let me ask you one last question: why do you think it is that it is the neo-conservative right that's on the ideological offensive now?*

IB: Because the other side is bored, because the other side has lost momentum. They have always existed, the Right, but they have felt rather discouraged, couldn't do all that much. The collapse of the Soviet Union has encouraged them too. They can now crow with satisfaction, saying "you poor fools!" And to that extent, the reactionaries whom you and I are against are, alas, right. Their day will end—and then?