

BOOKS

TECHNICS AND TOTALITARIANISM

IT is a pleasure, and in these days a rare pleasure, to read a book with which one is in almost complete agreement. In Mr. Leonard Woolf's* estimates of what is good and bad, what is important and what is unimportant, I have found only one thing to query, and that is his very high estimate of the ancient Greeks in the political and ethical spheres. Intellectually and artistically, I could acquiesce in almost any degree of praise; but in practical affairs they made much the same mistakes as are being made at the present day. Mr. Woolf, for example, praises Aristophanes for being irreverent about the gods, and fails to mention that Aristophanes incited the Athenian populace to hostility towards Socrates on the ground that Socrates rejected popular beliefs which Aristophanes himself regarded as absurd. But antiquity plays only a subsidiary part in Mr. Woolf's book, and his views about the Greeks, right or wrong, do not affect his main argument.

The title of the book, *Principia Politica*, is somewhat misleading. The book is not a general treatise on the theory of politics in the style of Aristotle or Hobbes. It is, one gathers, one of a number of volumes, some published, others not yet written, which, in their entirety, will be worthy of the title. But this volume is concerned almost entirely with a narrower question, namely: Can a technically advanced society be stable under a totalitarian dictatorship? This question is of the most urgent present-day importance, and Mr. Woolf's discussion of it is at once broad and penetrating.

His first chapter, which deals with the last hundred years, points out how very much more intimately government affects the lives of ordinary men and women now than it did at

any earlier time. This is an inevitable result of more elaborate technique and greater density of population. Up to a point it is independent of the form of government. Australia is as democratic as a country can be, but there are in Australia populous industrial centres which have to have every drop of their water supply carried through pipes for four hundred miles. This is not the sort of necessity with which the "rugged individualism" of a hundred years ago can cope. Or take such a simple matter as the rule of the roads. When I was young, everybody in the country, apparently from sheer lawlessness, kept to the right and, when two vehicles met, each had to pull over quickly to the left. This was possible if you only met one vehicle every half-hour, but it is not possible if you meet one every half-minute.

A great increase in the intensity of government has become inevitable. But it is not necessary that this increase should go as far as it does under Fascist or Communist dictatorships. Mr. Woolf contends—and I have often had the same belief—that a dictatorship so much interferes with initiative and free inquiry as to make even technical progress precarious. He thinks, on this ground, that a totalitarian country cannot long remain in the van of technical progress. He says:

"Unfortunately for authoritarianism, it is practically impossible to isolate or sterilise intelligence and knowledge. Men who are clever enough to destroy a whole city or to make motor cars and aeroplanes and wireless sets or to organise a large factory or to make a Five Year Plan will sooner or later begin to think about other things than atom bombs, the parts of machines, the output of a factory, or figures on a sheet of paper. Among those other things, which they will begin to think about are politics, and politically nothing, as I have several times had to insist, is more dangerous than thought."

* *Principia Politica: A Study of Communal Psychology*. By LEONARD WOOLF. The Hogarth Press. 25s.

I hope this is true. It is a view which I have myself held at times, but I have begun to doubt whether it is not perhaps an old-fashioned optimistic delusion. My doubts have been tragically reinforced by the surprising speed with which the Russians have mastered the manufacture of atom bombs and hydrogen bombs. There are also reasons nearer home for thinking that it is easier to canalise intelligence than Mr. Woolf supposes. I have met presidents of technical universities in America who were, so far as I could judge, thoroughly efficient within their own sphere, but remained, in every other sphere, dogmatic barbarians. We have all known, in the so-called "free" societies of the West, men of scientific eminence who accepted the Communist or the Catholic orthodoxy. When the Japanese, in the Meiji era, adopted Western techniques, they did not cease to think of the Mikado as divine. This belief was only destroyed by the atom bomb. In a world so dominated by fear as ours is, the impulse to take refuge in superstition becomes very strong, and, until the atmosphere of fear has been dispelled, I do not see how the liberal way of thinking to which Mr. Woolf and I were accustomed in our youth is to be preserved. Mr. Woolf describes the outlook which was common to himself and his friends when they were undergraduates.

"We had a great deal of that mental curiosity which the Greeks regarded rightly as the first stage on the road to knowledge and even wisdom. There was no subject in heaven or upon earth which we were not eager to discuss with the indefatigable seriousness and thoroughness of youth in pursuit of truth. One result of our pursuit of truth was that none of us any longer believed in God. It was therefore impossible for us to believe, even unconsciously, that the Treasury, Inland Revenue, or Ceylon Civil Service had been established by divine dispensation for the purpose of providing us with an income of £300 rising by increments to £1,000 or £1,200."

This is a very different way of feeling and thinking from that which one is apt to find among the young at the present day, especially on the European continent. There are, I should say, two prevalent philosophies. There is one, which is common among the most intelligent, which is completely cynical. It grasps the fact that a large proportion of the young will probably soon be killed, and it is quite unable

to believe that any idealistic purpose will be served by the slaughter. It thus acquires the mentality of Barras during the reign of terror who, when asked what he had done during that time, replied, "I survived." Those among the young to whom this cynical outlook is too bleak and unsatisfying tend to take refuge, not like Mr. Woolf in his youth in free inquiry, but in some one or other of the nostrums advanced by governments as a reason for acquiescing in suicide. Neither the cynical nor the superstitious group would, if it achieved power, restore the mentality of secure freedom which existed before 1914. But these are only conjectures, and, I hope, too pessimistic.

Mr. Woolf is of the opinion that the Communist régime, like that of Hitler, will be brought to an end by defeat in war. He thinks that the stresses and strains involved in the attempt to preserve isolation must in the end produce an explosion which, he thinks, is much more likely to be international than national, on the ground that successful internal rebellion against a police state is scarcely possible. At the very end of his book he says:

"It is extremely improbable that the world can live very long in a state of latent war, and that makes it all the more likely that a dictatorship in the future, as so often in the past, will fulfill itself in what we now know as a world war. This is the way that dictatorships and the world end, with a whimper but also with a bang."

I do not know to what extent Mr. Woolf regards this conclusion as a cheerful one, but it suggests to me several rather gloomy thoughts. There is, in the first place, the doubt whether the war would end in a victory for either party. It might, like its tiny embryo in Korea, end in a stalemate, leading on both sides to a feverish preparation for the next bout. It might lead to a victory of what is humorously called a "free" world with a complete loss, during the war, of whatever vestiges of former freedom had survived; or—and this is perhaps the most probable hypothesis—it might end in a dissolution of ordered government everywhere with a catastrophic diminution of population and a return to primitive anarchy. The one issue that seems to me utterly improbable is a revival of solid Victorian optimism.

No. If there is to be another world war, the hopes for what may be called "liberal" values are vain. The only hope—so, at least, it seems

to me—is that, somehow, another great war may be avoided, and that gradually the virulence of Communism may grow less.

One of the things that have given me pleasure in reading Mr. Woolf's book is his intellectual robustness. This is a quality that was fairly common when he and I were young, but the general pall of terror has caused it to decay. Most people nowadays seem to think that one brand of pernicious nonsense can only be combatted by another equally pernicious. If you find a man who thinks that two and two are five, you do not attempt to persuade him that two and two are four, because that would be an appeal to cold reason which is never strong enough to combat passion. You attempt instead to persuade him that two and two are six; and you are quite likely to succeed by means of schools and congressional committees, or labour camps and brain-washing,

according to your longitude. Mr. Woolf will have none of this. For him, nonsense is nonsense, even if it is rejected among Communists. He is not satisfied, for example, by the project of replacing the empire of Communism by the empire of Catholicism:

"The church can and does, from time to time make pronouncements on religion, morals, metaphysics, politics, or science, the truth of which cannot—for the Catholic—be questioned. The result is that Catholic doctrine has incorporated nearly all the major fantasies and delusions which have had a wide appeal to the irrational in human beings during the last 2,000 years."

It is refreshing to have this sort of thing said straightforwardly by a man who is not deterred by the thought of losing Italian elections or alienating Franco. I wonder how many such men are left.

Bertrand Russell

MANY THINGS v. ONE BIG THING

MR. BERLIN's new essay* takes its title from a dark saying of the Greek poet Archilochus: "The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing." The essay itself, an enlargement of the piece which caused so much admiring comment when it appeared in 1951 in the *Oxford Slavonic Papers*, discourses on foxes and hedgehogs in terms of Tolstoy and, in particular, of Tolstoy's philosophy of history as expressed in *War and Peace*. But along the way, Mr. Berlin, with his sparkling mind and his subtle, precise, and exquisitely coordinated (sometimes over-coordinated) style, illumines a number of problems of some consequence, not just for Tolstoy, nor just for the 19th century, but for intellectual history and, indeed, for the human dialogue in general.

It is useful perhaps to begin by elucidating the matter of the hedgehog and the fox. This is an opposition, Mr. Berlin contends, which runs through history—the opposition between the hedgehog, massive, obstinate, dedicated, determined to reduce the immense variety of human

experience to a single all-embracing system or a single all-explanatory principle, and the fox, quick, curious, sceptical, revelling in the inexhaustible diversity and pluralism of life and faith. Thus, says Mr. Berlin, Plato, Dante, Hegel, Proust were hedgehogs; Aristotle, Shakespeare, Goethe, Joyce were foxes. Or in this century (here surely is a new parlour game), Lenin, Hitler, and Mr. T. S. Eliot would seem to qualify as hedgehogs, William James, Lord Russell, and Franklin D. Roosevelt as foxes; Harpo Marx perhaps as hedgehog, Groucho as fox.

Mr. Berlin would not insist on this too far; there are too many mixed cases (where does Sir Winston Churchill belong? or Mr. W. H. Auden?); but he finds it a fruitful distinction with which to begin an enquiry into Tolstoy. For, to anticipate Mr. Berlin's conclusion, Tolstoy seems to him by nature a fox, brilliantly equipped to explore and reproduce the infinite and intractable multiplicity of experience; but by faith a hedgehog, irrevocably and hopelessly committed to the search for absolutes. In the consequent tension, Mr. Berlin suggests, lies the key to his philosophy of history.

* *The Hedgehog and the Fox*. ISAIAH BERLIN. Weidenfeld and Nicolson. 8s. 6d.