

The Discontinuities between the Generations in History

Their Effect on the
Transmission of
Political Experience

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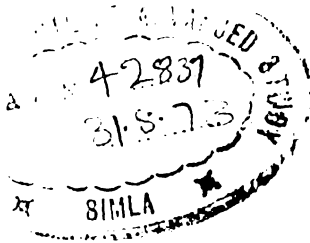
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AMONGST the apocryphal writings of the ancient Jews, the Fourth Book of Ezra, dating from something like sixty years or more after the Crucifixion, is perhaps the most interesting in its comments on the nature of history, and the most touching in its complaints about the sufferings of the Chosen People. Its author, having learned that human minds were made out of the dust of the earth, says it was a pity that the dust had been lying around if it was capable of being used for such a purpose. He painfully enquires how much historical time has still to be unrolled – whether there is as much to come as has already passed. Also he expresses the wish that God, instead of creating the human race in a series of successive generations had put all men to live on the earth contemporaneously – a thing which at least would have shortened the long tale of human misery. The replies given on behalf of the deity to this last reproach were not of very high intellectual calibre and clearly failed to satisfy the complainant.¹ We to-day, in point of fact, might be more inclined to have the opposite grievance, and to feel that, if fewer people had been created but each had been made to live for a couple of centuries or so, the human race might have achieved a greater accumulation of wisdom and experience. If Bismarck could have survived down to 1914 and, after seeing the long-term

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I

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consequences of the seizure of Alsace-Lorraine, had had time for a further period of office, there would have been a good chance of his being a wiser man during this later spell of duty. And in any case those who in 1918 cried out 'hang the Kaiser' were clearly wrong – they ought to have insisted on his keeping his throne. After all he had had his lesson.

I

It would seem that in very ancient days, men emphasised the connectedness of the successive generations, the way they hang together. Many centuries before Old Testament times there existed in Mesopotamia the view that the sins of the fathers might be visited upon the children to the third and fourth generation; but the postponement of the punishment sometimes had the effect of mystifying the victims. Both amongst the Hittites and, centuries later, in the Old Testament, this meant that the bewildered sufferers had to wonder what their predecessors had done wrong; they might even have to resort to the omen to discover what sin they were being punished for.² In one of my latest talks with my father I remember suggesting to him that perhaps sometimes it took two generations for a dream to come true; but when an idea comes to you and it seems rather a refreshing one, you will always discover that it has been presented before, either by Machiavelli or, of course, by Lord Acton. In this case Machiavelli, having the connection between the generations in mind, said that,

though a bad prince coming after an outstandingly good one might manage to survive, a weak ruler, following a predecessor who was also weak, would be unable to hold his kingdom. On the other hand, a strong king who comes after another strong one may go far, says Machiavelli – like Alexander the Great following Philip of Macedon.

If we consider the successive generations as allied to one another, reinforcing one another, we might have to note as perhaps a very special case – a thing not without its difficulties for us – the fact that every boy or every girl that was born alive must once have been born either a little Liberal or a little Conservative. It is more satisfactory, however, to meditate upon the general situation in which fathers find themselves in history. Their children give them a motive for serving the future but not going too far in such a policy, as bachelors and spinsters might do – i.e. not sacrificing an immediate generation for one that is too remote and highly contingent. This latter procedure has a good chance of being unsuccessful in any case, because if one's purposes are too long-term or too far-fetched, an intervening generation, with other purposes of its own, may refuse to complete one's work. Fathers, therefore, envisaging a proximate future and anxious just not to spoil the world too badly for the next generation, may be said to find a neat form of co-operation with Providence – the whole system happily balancing that other excellent establishment, the celibacy of the clergy. And for this

reason a case might be made for restricting the parliamentary vote to fathers, if there were not many other arguments that told against the policy.

Perhaps the most famous and distinguished of all literary passages on the subject of the generations is the one in which Ranke emphasises that they are all on a level with one another, each having its own *raison d'être* and standing as, in a certain sense, an end in itself. He is thinking of generations when he describes each period of history as an embodiment of its own presiding idea – possessing as a result of this its own basic attitude to things. What Ranke chiefly wants to do, however, is to destroy the common assumption that all the people in (say) the year A.D. 1200 were important merely as a link in the chain that leads to us – in other words, were relevant only for what they contributed to the formation of the present day. All the generations of the past were as real in themselves and as valid before heaven as the one now alive, says Ranke. Also, they are as near to eternity as the final one will be, the one that comes at the end of the whole time-series. All, in fact, are immediate to God. This is a view which happens to make possible the establishment of a methodological point that is important to the historian. It is a question of giving to every single generation the perspective that is due to it. Also, it means that we try to see each generation in its own context – even in a certain sense to judge it on its own terms – at any rate not to condemn it by a too rapid cross-reference to twentieth-century standards.

It is the discontinuities between the generations that more definitely concern us, however, and these bring to my mind a committee on which I sat for nearly a week nearly twenty years ago – when Heisenberg, in an off-moment, talked to the party about Einstein's refusal to accept some of the ideas of modern physics. On one day he said that Einstein was like a man who has seen a parachute descend safely for 99 times, but still refuses to risk himself with the hundredth occasion. On another day he told us that a scientist does not actually have to prove his theories – he merely has to wait for the coming of a new generation, which, starting from rather different presuppositions, and viewing things from a different platform, will be more open to the acceptance of new ideas. I imagine that something of this sort must at least be not less true in the case of anything that has to do with the Arts subjects – the debate not always being thoroughly fought out, the argument not carried through, not really clinched, because a geological subsidence has changed the whole situation – a new mentality, a new race of people has come on to the stage. At one period it is quite obvious to all men that the heavenly bodies must be composed of a particularly ethereal kind of matter; but there comes a time when it is equally obvious to everybody – indeed it becomes a question of natural feeling – that the sun, the planets and the stars are made of the sort of material we on earth are familiar with. At one period it is felt to be the natural thing, as well as the proper

thing, for the clergy to be amenable only to ecclesiastical law; but in another period things are inverted, and, without any consciousness of running to paradox, ordinary people will refuse to believe that the clergy should not be amenable to the law of the land, like everybody else. These things are confirmed by examples very much in the memory of many of us who have had fifty years or so of adult life in the twentieth century. For example, during the last fifty years, we have greatly increased our knowledge of the crisis of July 1914. On the other hand we have lost what I might call the 'feel' that men then had for diplomacy – the sense that this kind of step by a foreign minister was to be regarded as within the code, or here was a piece of prevarication that went too far.

But behind these observed (or observable) changes that take place – behind the avowed differences between Einstein and Heisenberg – there exist more subtle and delicate differences, some of them in the realm perhaps of presuppositions – things not always avowed, indeed things which men do not always know to quarrel about, such ideas and assumptions being so much a part of the air that one breathes. They are things that the men of 1600 shall we say – but the men of 1900 similarly – do not have to explain to one another, and the result is that they do not always get into the historian's evidence. Therefore, they are apt to be a serious problem to the historian. In fact they give him an additional function or demand from him a further interpretative rôle.

Just before the middle of the nineteenth century, the most masterly writing on George III's reign was being produced by John Wilson Croker, who really knew by experience the kind of political life that was involved. He had been so much part of the *ancien régime* that he did not have to reconstruct it, or discover the psychology of it, by the assembly of evidence and the use of imagination or hypothesis. After his time, however, the cleavage between the generations became a little more serious. It was as though the living link had gone and at the next stage in the story men knew no better than to read the activities of 1760 in the light of the politics of 1860, multiplying the anachronisms and bringing the Whig interpretation to its climax. At a later stage again, it took a lot of work, a lot of insight, on the part of Namier and others, to discover those dim unavowed things that the men of 1760 had not even needed to talk to one another about, – indeed to catch on to the sort of game it was that politicians were playing in those days. And I think that the real contribution of Namier lay in this kind of thing, rather than in counting heads or examining multitudes of minor characters. The break in the generations adds greatly to the difficulty of noting the more microscopic features of historical change. In seventeenth-century England the development of historical-mindedness was greatly promoted by two men, one of whom pointed out that behind the palpable changes that took place in the past there was a vast multiplicity of smaller

changes which somehow came to be slipped in between the parting generation and the coming one, and nobody seemed to notice them, 'each generation seeing only what it was the actor in'. The other drew attention to the fact that historians often went wrong because they overlooked the gradual way words changed their meaning through the centuries.³

II

There is a very real sense in which every generation – indeed, every individual – engaged in the task of gathering up experience of any sort, has to go back to the beginning, starting the development from virtually nothing. It is not a simple case of taking up the torch from one's predecessors and carrying it so much further – sometimes it appears rather as though each generation is merely trying desperately to keep its head above water for its own period – saying at the tail-end of this period 'Après moi le déluge', without feeling that it has any superfluity of wisdom to pass on to another age. Time itself seems to play tricks with us and aggravate the generation gaps; for, in the case of two brothers brought up in very much the same way, we have the one who becomes a nonconformist minister because his father was a nonconformist minister, while his brother becomes a militant atheist because his father was a nonconformist minister. There is a further fact that makes for separateness – and we in universities are very familiar with it – namely, the way an undergraduate is educated

first and foremost, educated (one might say) in the most fundamental things, by other undergraduates, by people in his own age-group. Things like this ought to soften the lines of the picture supposing we are in danger of having hard views on the continuity of history.

Another fact – and one which has a certain grimness in itself – presents a considerable hindrance to any continuity of political experience throughout the ages. A great disaster, actually falling upon our world, our locality, in our lifetime is bound to have an impact upon us far greater than a tragedy bigger still that has only been reported to us by our parents or described for us in a history book. Three famous writers, St Augustine, Orosius and Otto of Freising, seem to have been greatly struck by this point, and particularly by the weakness or ineffectiveness in this respect of ordinary historical writing. They set out to write history in such a way as to make men realise the immensity of human suffering throughout the ages. Orosius had one or two devices for bringing the story home to his readers, but he was still not satisfied and complained that a literary account of colossal human misery would not give the reader as much pain as a bite from a little fly. Perhaps this helps to explain what so many of us will have noticed, namely that contemporaries tend to judge a revolution by its atrocities (which are near enough at hand to be felt) while a later generation so easily overlooks the atrocities, and sometimes is too impatient to

glance at them, preferring rather to judge a revolution by its ideals. Machiavelli, in one of the most appalling of his maxims, seizes upon the same point – he really directs our minds to the deadening effect of the passage of time on our impressions or our memory of human tragedy. He holds that if you were to rob your defeated enemy of his goods, his lands, his kingdom, then the man or his friends would never let you have peaceful possession of these things; and, if you were to maim him, he or they would work for revenge. The only safe thing, therefore, is to kill him; for, says Machiavelli, when he is dead his friends and relatives will soon forget him. Apart from its cruelty, the maxim in this case is a poor one – not even plausible as a sample of Machiavellism; but there is a truth in it which is valid in the twentieth century, when, indeed, millions can be killed, and, before very long, the fact loses its force, almost ceases to register. Also, more than once in my lifetime, the word has gone round that after a couple of decades or so the memory of the last war no longer has any impact, or people become nervous lest now, after thirty years, a generation that has no memory of it at all will turn out to be bellicose as a result. Professor G. M. Trevelyan once suggested that the historian, besides describing events or situations, should try to reproduce the moods they engendered or the emotional pressures that accompanied them. But even this is something that could be carried too far; and it is true in any case that we do not want the world to go

on being vengeful for ever about the crimes of the past. Perhaps what we really need to have is just the willingness really to face such things, face them properly as facts, when we are reflecting on political events. The best thing perhaps would be if students of history, at least, could avoid being too much like mere technicians, and could really give something of themselves in order to enter imaginatively into the most imposing of the great experiences of mankind, the Jewish exile perhaps, the downfall of the Roman Empire and, say, the opening-up of the American West.

We might wonder, therefore, whether, envisaging the human race as a whole, we can see any growth of wisdom in the political field (as distinct from the mere spread of it over a greater number of people) – whether, indeed, the benefits of political experience can be transmitted from one generation to another – a thing by no means so simple as the direct communication of items of knowledge. We might ask whether, in those regions where comparison is feasible, we go on making the same mistakes in human relations (or at least in the things that concern the internal and external relations of states) as were made by the earliest civilisations. Have we carried any further the attempt of the ancient Greeks to bring something like a scientific mind to bear on the problem of political action? Or, looking from a different point of view altogether, students might enquire whether some two thousand years of Christianity have made

any significant difference to developing conceptions of statesmanship. Sir Francis Bacon, after casting his eyes over the whole of history came out with the assertion that there had only been three periods, each of only a couple of centuries or so in length (including his own time) that had produced any considerable advance in the natural sciences. There must be some progress of a parallel kind to report in the realm of politics, too; for, after the First World War there arose an interest in the problem of what were called 'new democracies', of which there had been quite a collection of instances in the previous one hundred and thirty years; and it was fairly clearly felt that the weaknesses of 'new democracies' were due to the shortness of their experience. Such faults would include the tendency to take panic too easily; the readiness to believe that one's fellow-citizens were playing traitor; sometimes a hankering to rush into the arms of some Messiah who would save the body politic. Perhaps also there was the determination to destroy existing evils even if it meant destroying a lot of good things too, the wheat amongst the tares; and a habit of not making sufficient allowance in one's calculations for the universal defects of human nature. Twenty years ago I produced an article asking rather tentatively that our international affairs should be treated in a manner a little more scientific, a little less moralistic. Since then, however, there has been progress with a vengeance in this field, and the scientism in respect of political and military action,

particularly as it has developed amongst the academics in the United States, has aspects so inhuman as to be somewhat frightening – doubling the terror which no doubt we all of us feel when we hear of another professor going to the White House or the Cabinet Office.

Following a method somewhat analogous to that used by Sir Francis Bacon, when dealing with the natural sciences, we should have to say that, during the Renaissance, and in the one or two centuries after A.D. 1500, a host of practitioners and theorists greatly concerned themselves with the development of the art of government, and there was an extraordinary rage for the discovery and the discussion of what we might call maxims of politics. All of this would later appear as just a stage in a larger development; and as yet it produced perhaps not the best quality article; it led rather to the sort of thing we call statecraft. Practising politicians – men like Machiavelli and Guicciardini in Florence, for example – were involved in this work; and the basis for the whole endeavour was reflection on contemporary events, the study of ancient classical teaching, the analysis of narrative histories like those of Livy or Tacitus, and an attempt to be rather more methodical in the handling of the data. I am not sure that the climax at this point in the development does not come with the classical scholar, Justus Lipsius, in the decades before 1600.⁴ He had influence in the practical world and few men can have been sought after by as many

monarchs as he. It appears that some of the things that were once thought to be original in Cardinal Richelieu are really attributable to him. At the next stage in the story, the methods were less bookish – less attention was given to history, it was sometimes claimed that ancient examples were no longer relevant – and more attention was paid to actual experience, though sometimes it was a case of taking a fairly long-term view, reflecting, for example, on the way in which Louis XIV of France replaced the Habsburg dynasty as the menace to Europe. At this stage of the work, the method employed seems to be more recognisably ‘Baconian’ – using a mode of analysis which passed in those days as the application of scientific method to Arts subjects. Certainly with a man like Richelieu in the second quarter of the seventeenth century we come far in advance of mere clever political adventurers, mere statecraft; and here, as on occasion elsewhere, we find that, behind good statesmanship, there is a more impressive intellectual structure than is often realised.

In the early modern period there occurred amongst other things a remarkable development of diplomacy – a thing likely to happen in so technical a field and easy enough to observe when it does occur. The progress is in fact curiously late. Machiavelli is astonishingly weak in regard to foreign affairs, and so far as I can see the treatises on the art of government, though they dealt at length with war, have hardly anything to say about diplomacy until the later

decades of the sixteenth century. In spite of some vague analogies in the ancient world, I think it can hardly be doubted that the idea of the balance of power – or at least the really seminal notion of it – is only adumbrated at the Renaissance. We should place its effective appearance rather later now than we did when I was young; and at first it was a simple affair, envisaging only the analogy with a pair of scales. It must have taken nearly two centuries to reach its modern form, where the nations are seen poised against one another like the heavenly bodies in the Newtonian system, all operating on one another in proportion to their mass, the effect diminishing as the distance between the units increases. By taking this pattern as a basis, by meditating in the light of it upon the main events of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the thinkers and practitioners produced a host of new and surprising maxims, formed a fairly highly generalised theory of international relations, and worked out an overall attitude to the problems of foreign affairs. We can see how the idea of the balance of power develops out of the modern world's wrestling with its experiences.

One finds development in other realms which similarly relate not to details but to the outer framework of policy; and they seem again to spring from reflection on actual experience. Also the result does seem to pass down from one generation to another. After the English civil war in the seventeenth century there came in the reign of Charles II an intense

dispute between a large section of Parliament and the King which made some people fear that civil war was on the point of breaking out again. A significant part was played, however, at this stage in the story, by some people who held an intermediate position – not preaching royalism but urging that anti-royalism should stop short of the renewal of civil war. It was felt that the resort to force had clearly brought evils of its own; that it might give the victory to a third party, the army; or alternatively, by producing anarchy, it might set up a new cry for an authoritarian king. Clearly in all this there was a certain amount of reflection on recent experience; and it looks as though this was the moment when the lesson of the experience was being printed on the walls of the brain of the traditional Englishman. For, three or four decades later, a famous French historian, Rapin, set out to expound to his fellow-countrymen the meaning of political parties in England, and he picked on moderation and compromise as the original thing, the achievement of the recent period, and the great characteristic of the Whigs.⁵ There is a curious divergence, in fact, between the English and the French in their retrospective reflections on the experience of revolution – the differences no doubt being readily amenable to historical explanation. The one country had its revolution and executed a king but then handed down to the next century the firm resolution that this must never be allowed to happen again. It consciously adhered to that position for three

centuries; while the French kept for much of the nineteenth century the notion of revolution as a repeatable thing, a permanent system, or at least an instrument always at hand.

III

Clearly, then, continuity can be maintained, and development can occur or political experience can be built up, and this may be particularly the case (or particularly easy to observe) in a fairly technical realm, like that of diplomacy, or in an aristocratic society, amongst a limited governing class, where (so to speak) children hear their fathers talking politics over the breakfast table. At the same time we find that in special circumstances a generation will show a particular anxiety to get through to the future, in order to pass on a message; and in these cases some kind of warning is likely to be in question. Those who lived through the 1930s often came to have that feeling: they held that something must be done to prevent this catastrophe, this success of the Nazis, from ever being repeated.

We might wonder whether anything but direct experience – anything save a disaster men have actually suffered in their own person, or seen close at hand – would normally have the persuasiveness and the cogency to make any difference to political action. And it is at this point that life may come to appear to us too short – history not usually giving people a second encounter with the same kind of

problem in high politics, that is to say, the opportunity of tackling it, on the second occasion, with the benefit of experience. However, when the mistake has been made and misfortune has followed it, the people concerned try to rescue something, and sometimes they will draw the appointed lesson from the whole episode, and will seek to get the message through, if not to their neighbours at least to their successors. And sometimes a note of urgency creeps into their attempt to warn the future, especially as they realise that the future generally does not listen to warnings which come from the past, warnings which, moreover, reach them at second-hand. In the eighteenth century people did go on saying to one another that, above all things, they must prevent any further power from ever achieving an ascendancy like that of Louis XIV. And, making their own retrospective deductions from earlier events, they would remind themselves with surprising frequency that nothing so cruel as the old wars of religion must be allowed to take place again. I think that the note of urgency was often particularly clear, and the desire to convince the future particularly strong, in connection with the curious problem, the extraordinary paradox, of states which had once been free but had frittered away their liberties, or sold themselves to dictators, or lost their energies through lack of public spirit, or just allowed their happiness to slide away. Here was the problem that turned Macchiavelli himself into something more like a conventional moraliser, and

this aspect of his teaching comes by direct descent into the tradition of ordinary English Whiggism. I imagine that it represents the aspect of the past, the sector of human experience, to which, perhaps in the ancient world as well as the modern, historians and political thinkers have devoted the most thought, or at least the most reflection at a reasonably high level.

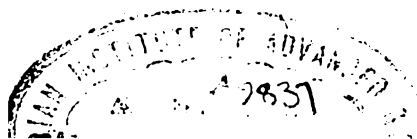
It seems that liberty is greatly prized by those who are struggling for it or who have recently lost it. But those who have inherited it come to depreciate it; for it can be a bother and an inconvenience. Some people are bored with anything of the sort; and at any rate the other man's freedom, everybody else's freedom, can be a nuisance to any of us. More important still, once you possess liberty you acquire the feeling that that particular problem is behind you, and you turn your real longings now to something else, something which is all the more valuable to you because you do not possess it. Having set your heart on this further object, you can convince yourself that liberty is a mere luxury, and then it becomes very easy to surrender to a Messiah who says he will give you the thing that you are now really wanting. It becomes all the more easy in that you are siding with a winner – for the time being, you gain your object and the loss of liberty falls on the other party. In reality, this liberty that is being sacrificed is the freedom to choose your objective at the next stage in the story – it is the thing that brings men closest to a mastery over their

own destiny. But this is not obvious at the first superficial glance. Also, in addition to this, there is a parallel danger of a rather different sort – the possibility that liberty may be lost through mere carelessness, at a time when a king or a statesman is stealing a march on the rest of the country. Hence the reiterate cry – in the English eighteenth century for example – that the maintenance of liberty demands incessant vigilance. Certainly, in English history the insistence on these points had its effect, though we can hardly be sure nowadays about the decades in front of us. Yet after all the warnings, and in spite of all the literature on the subject, a remarkable feature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Europe was the development of post-democratic dictatorships; and it is these latter that have been more formidable than the tyranny of anointed kings.

Sometimes it is not merely the young as against the old, it is the whole body of people living at a given time (with possibly some ineffective exceptions) who reject the very idea of learning something from experience of the past, so that the break in continuity becomes remarkably complete. Possibly an example of this was the tremendous reaction against diplomacy, and particularly against the idea of the balance of power, at the end of the First World War – a unique (and indeed a uniquely unhappy) period in respect of British foreign policy. Essentially this was not a conflict of the young against the old – people of all ages reacted against the tradition, and dissenters,

where they did exist, might belong to any age-group. Neither was it the result of any elaborate argumentation – it was more like a case of becoming allergic to something that had hitherto been tolerated. Indeed it was the result of misunderstanding – the view for example that diplomats were the real sources of the wars that they had merely proved unable to prevent. And, in fact, at the end of the Second World War the link with ancient experience was renewed in a signal manner, development starting all over again from that point. The truth was that the power-situation at the close of the Second World War was too patent to everybody, leaving no room for some of the illusions of 1919. The misapprehensions of 1919 have some significance perhaps because they showed how imperfectly the intellectual tradition, the inherited political experience, had been handed down – some generalities about diplomacy or the balance of power being transmitted, but construed as empty banalities because the inner knowledge had been lacking. In the exchanges that take place in the market place the originalities and the subtleties of one's predecessors can quickly be transmuted into deadly commonplaces.

I am personally not clear about the importance before the twentieth century of the conflicts between those who are old and those who are young at a given date – the importance at any rate of political conflicts. Perhaps it was often the natural thing to take your Liberalism from your father, or, alternatively,



to seek the favour of the men on whom your future career might depend. The young of the most recent decades have distinguished themselves in certain ways, showing a greater compassion, or at least a wider compassion, than the undergraduates of fifty years ago, I think; and, by moves that could be both quiet and original, they have contributed in a way to the healing of nations. I am a little more doubtful about the youth movements of history – I mean the ones in the political realm. I remember the university students in Germany in the early 1930s – the cry that it was time for the young to play their part in politics. I remember the Fascists ten years earlier. Also I have glanced at Mazzini's society of *Young Italy* in the 1830s. I would have inferred from these that the young liked to follow an older leader, but, having committed themselves to him, they might give him remarkable support. In 1740 there was a party of younger people at the court of Versailles, and they drove the very aged French minister Fleury into a war which he did not want and which was hardly happy in its results. Professor Namier, on the other hand, describes how, at the end of 1762, a band of young politicians pushed their leader, the Duke of Newcastle, into a parliamentary conflict with George III and Bute. This was unfortunate for Newcastle at the time but may not have been a tragedy for the Whig cause in the long run. In any case, it was the Duke of Newcastle, then in his sixties, who had forgotten something of what

Whiggism really was (for he had grown so accustomed to being in office and taking the official view of things). In other words, it might have been the younger men who had really grasped the ancient, the essential, tradition of the Whigs. Down to about 1760, the leading ministers in England – even heads of the Treasury as important as Sir Robert Walpole and the Duke of Newcastle – believed that the policy of taxing the American Colonies was too risky a thing to attempt; but, just before the accession of George III, there comes from the civil service, indeed from a Treasury official, the suggestion that Great Britain had been allowing herself to be hoaxed by purely fanciful fears on this point.⁶ From a similar quarter there appears a little later the suggestion that part of the purpose of taxing America was just to show that the thing could be done. The curious thing was that the passage of time had in fact made it much harder, much more risky, to tax the American colonies. Some of the wisdom of the older generation had clearly not come through to the younger.

There was an English statesman in the nineteenth century who wrote indignantly against the aggressiveness of Russia, but then turned aside to say that he knew of course that the British would be doing the same if they were in the same position. He did not allow this thought to delay him very much – he held that, all the same, it was necessary to stop the Russians. Over 250 years ago, a French religious writer Fénelon gave an important clue to the nature

of life on this earth, though I gather that modern research is showing how his ideas had a sort of syndicate, a discussion-group, behind them. He said that if any power were to get into a position in which it could do what it liked with impunity, it would quickly become an aggressor, however good its behaviour had been hitherto. His thesis has been proved as every new aggressor has emerged in modern history – and I myself have been in trouble, once for saying that Russia would be an illustration of it if ever she came to the top of the world, and once, at a later date, for predicting something similar in the case of the United States. It is a good thing that we have Russia as well as America (or America as well as Russia) – better still if we can have three such giants, or four or five, better again, even, to have seven. And this is the basic idea behind the theory of the balance of power. But very much the same things apply in the internal life of society, and once it becomes really apparent that men can steal or kill with impunity, then a lot of people whom the arrangements of society have hitherto kept on the rails, will run to crime – not just out of protest against their own poverty or against some injustice – but rather perhaps because we all have moments when we feel that we want to break windows; or else because men often love power for its own sake; or just because men commit unspeakable offences when they find that they can do this with impunity. There was a time when many people both here and in the United States were

insisting that we should never get through the 1950s without a war between Communists and anti-Communists; and perhaps we owe a debt to somebody for our escape, for the diplomatic conundrums that had to be solved in the 1950s were a good deal harder than any that existed in July 1914. In recent decades America and Russia have had to be armed because of a predicament in which they stand in relation to one another – a predicament which has existed throughout history and has always defeated the intellect of man. Before 1914, however, nations in the same predicament seemed unable to arm without feeling deadly hatred against one another, each perpetually denouncing what it regarded as the potential enemy. Now a more highly sophisticated stage has been reached – the United States can maintain its armaments yet also strive for a *détente* or join Russia in good works – she can hate what happened in Czechoslovakia yet not wish that this should put an end to all efforts at understanding. A quarter of a century ago this more moderate attitude was the kind of thing we thought the Americans would never achieve – they seemed too ready and too determined to regard the potential enemy as anti-Christ. And no doubt, they have not gone as far as we could wish in the new direction even now. We should most of us hope, I think, that this more sophisticated attitude to foreign affairs – this way of cushioning hostility where one cannot eliminate it – will prove transmissible to the future and not be one of the things that our successors

choose to forget. It is one of the subtle things that can be lost between one generation and another.

When something like the English parliamentary or democratic system was exported to other continents, there was always a possibility, at any rate at first, that some of the subtler and more imponderable elements of the tradition would disappear, robbing the institutions of their deeper meaning. The same kind of result can be seen when, even in the home country, new classes of people acquire the real power; and this rise of a new class has the effect of more than doubling the breach between one generation and another. It must have increased, though I do not think that it entirely caused, the outcries against diplomacy, for example in 1919. But, in general, the passage to a new epoch always brings a danger that the best things, the imponderable things, will evaporate out of the system; and this might be serious for democracy, in which it was once so clearly understood that a mood of tolerance, a respect for the other man's personality, a willingness to rely on persuasion and discussion were so essential for success – and you were enjoined not always to push the employment of power to the limit, not always to impose your purpose on the world if it needed an excess of power. In other words, the 'imponderables' were the heart and soul of the whole affair. Lord Acton thought that liberty could only be maintained amongst people who were conscious of living under a higher law; but it is easy to overemphasise power,

to claim more for majorities than is really justifiable, and to think that democracy means getting what you want, the state as simply the organ for acts of sheer will.

In general, one might say that the maxims which particularly suffer, or which most often disappear through a hole in the bag, are the ones which pertain to the maintenance of a civilisation and the preservation of the body politic. The object itself is one that has gone out of favour of late, rather in the way that fashions in dress or matters of artistic taste become transmuted; and perhaps the object is devalued by those who have inherited freedom and democracy without quite having to learn how much these things cost and how long they take to develop – indeed without ever quite realising that society is founded on a volcano, peace itself not a natural condition but a matter for colossal contrivance. One of the surprises of recent decades has been our general realisation of the precariousness of even that technological society which we once imagined to be so formidable. A few men, using its own devices against it, can attack it with impunity and, whereas older societies depend only on consent, the modern type is going to be helpless unless it can have active willing co-operation.

A short time ago, the Wiles Trust History Lectures in Belfast were delivered by Lord Cohen of Birkenhead, who talked on four successive evenings about bloodletting through the ages. A number of pro-

fessors, doctors and historians of medicine were present at the subsequent discussions; and when one of these put the point that practitioners often have to suffer unfair blame for cases in which they have failed to effect a cure, Lord Cohen told them to cheer up, for they often received corresponding praise that they had never deserved, since nature produced the remedy so much more often than anybody ever realised. I am not sure that in all this there is not a proper comment on the whole process of things throughout the ages, where the excessively feverish actions of men sometimes create as many problems as they solve. If I were trying to push my comments on human history to the point of greatest generality, I believe I would say that men in the course of their lives, and readers of history in their studies, tend easily to leave certain things out of account. They do not sufficiently understand or try to bring into operation the healing effects of time; the great progress that comes from the gradual growth of reasonableness among men; and the benefits that accrue from long periods of peace and stability. We may have a mistaken picture of the war of right against wrong in history: for, though good may result from the victory of good men over wicked offenders, a richer good is often achieved – sometimes without the countervailing disadvantages – by something more like a co-operative effort of mankind, a spread of enlightenment, an advance of civilisation. And I think that one of the wonderful things in history is

the way that sometimes the achievement of simply peace, stability and *détente* is enough to start everything in the garden growing.

The world can hardly hope to dispense entirely with revolutions, and, through a general defect in human nature, it may be the intransigence of the conservatives rather than the recklessness of the discontented, that makes a cataclysm necessary. Revolutions are sometimes the only way of dealing with scandals and grievances; though corresponding faults are liable to be found on both sides – even the distresses of the poor can be used to cover or excuse somebody's lust for power, a thing that is a permanent feature of politics. Even England had to have a revolution, and perhaps the best we can say is that at least a well-managed nation need only have one – one revolution in each country should suffice. Everybody might do what the British seem to have done at the beginning of the 1830s – learn the necessary lesson from somebody else's disasters. Revolutions often seem to throw up abler and younger men, while those who work in stable governments may become gravely constricted, the victims of their routines. Also revolutionaries can work with more free-ranging minds – perhaps they are the people who feel that they can afford to take a gamble. More interesting still, the revolutionaries, for well over a century, have studied political method more than the leaders of democracies usually do; and, like a Richelieu or a Frederick the Great or a Napoleon,

they seem to be more ready to learn from history. The modern students of the technique of revolution have produced something like a science of the subject – they have learned more than the conservatives from the experience of the past. One of their advantages has been their study of politics outside the routine, the sort of politics that is conducted under conditions of cataclysm – not merely the tamer, tidier sort that we associate with a Baldwin or a Campbell-Bannerman. Those revolutionaries who simply determine to secure an objective no matter what the cost – no matter how much killing needs to be done – can flourish no doubt with intellects of more ordinary quality. On the other hand, though one would not dare to make an assertion about the matter, it would not be a great surprise to learn that the best practitioner of classical diplomacy in the last fifty years had been a representative of a Communist country.

IV

The cleavage of generations is likely to be most complete, and the break with experience most radical, when the preservation of the existing order of things is no longer even desired, and the young, resenting the great contrast between ideal and reality, become absolutely unforgiving in their attitude to the world they have been born into. They may not know how much their fathers felt the same when they were younger – they too, blaming their predecessors, and carrying the blame as far back as the Reformation (or

was it the Renaissance?) after which the world could never be the same again. It is difficult for people to count their blessings or to be thankful for the distance the world has moved out of the jungle – I suppose the most oddly grateful man I ever met was a famous German historian who revelled in the fairly recent prosperity of his country and said to me: ‘I will tell what is wrong with England. You didn’t have the good fortune to lose a great war.’ At this point one moves perhaps from politics to something almost more like religion, and I wonder whether Christians in these days are taking enough trouble over some ancient ideas of theirs that go straight to some of our modern predicaments. Some people almost hanker at times after apocalyptic conflict and perhaps it must either come to that or we must mitigate our hatred of the unrighteous, remembering that we ourselves are involved in the defects of human nature – indeed, we have some responsibility for one another’s sins. The existing order has its appalling features, and it organises the cupidities of men – in a certain sense it exists to cater for them, though it cannot even do this without regulating them and limiting the evils. A different order of things would not destroy the cupidities but would only set them at a different angle. And the destruction of all order would merely put the weak more than ever at the mercy of the strong.

It is the apocalyptic young who mark the extreme of the generation gap, signifying something almost

like a withdrawal from history. In this connection, for those who want to sample the colossal experiences that the world has passed through, there can be few things more breath-taking than the Jewish revolt and war against the Romans in the years 66 A.D. to 70. The history of this conflict by the famous Josephus contains a very considerable speech that is put into the mouth of Herod Agrippa II and is addressed particularly to the young at a time when they were wanting a war which the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Chief Priests and the reputable leaders of the people wanted to avoid. It is quite an interesting thing to have even perhaps a doctored version of a speech directed against apocalyptic intoxications (especially on the part of the young) in connection with that Jewish-Roman conflict which brought history to one of its tragic moments.⁷ In reality the young should be taking care of that practical world in which they are going to have to pass their lives – the frenzies of apocalypticism are to be reserved rather for the older generation. Yet such things are not even proper for old men, or permissible even for the very aged. These latter had better move quietly in the haunts of men, not screaming at all, but bleating and moaning – and, when they meet the odd person in the highway, just murmuring incessantly ‘Brethren, love one another.’

- 1 R. H. Charles, *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament*, vol. II (1913) Fourth Ezra, v. 43-6; VII, 62.
- 2 A. Malamet, 'Doctrines of Causality in Hittite and Biblical Historiography: A Parallel', *Vetus Testamentum*, v (1955) 1-12.
- 3 H. Butterfield, *Magna Carta in the Historiography of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Reading, 1969), p. 21 on Sir Henry Spelman and pp. 21-2 on Robert Brady.
- 4 G. Oestreich, 'Justus Lipsius als Theoretiker des neuzeitlichen Machtstaates', *Historische Zeitschrift*, vol. 181 (München, 1956), 31-78, especially 38-40 and 46-7.
- 5 *Dissertation sur les Whigs et les Torys* (Hague, 1717), e.g. pp. 84-5; 129-30; 148-50.
- 6 Samuel Martin to the Duke of Newcastle, 26 Feb. 1759: 'very trifling inconveniences having, according to my notions, been allowed the weight of insurmountable difficulties', L. H. Gipsen, 'The British Empire before the American Revolution', vol. x, *The Triumphant Empire* (N.Y. 1961), pp. 257-8.
- 7 *The Jewish War* (Penguin translation, London, 1959), pp. 144-50.

This Rede Lecture was delivered by Professor Butterfield in the University of Cambridge on 16 November 1971.

THE REDE LECTURES

Sir Robert Rede, who became Chief Justice of The Common Pleas in 1506, founded three public lectureships in Cambridge. In 1858 the endowment was reorganized, and one lecture is now delivered annually by a man of eminence in science or literature. Recent lectures have included Lord Snow's *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution*, Sir Charles Darwin's *The Problems of World Population*, John Betjeman's *The English Town in the last 100 years*, Kenneth Jackson's *The Oldest Irish Tradition*, Sir Gavin de Beer's *Genetics and Prehistory*, Dr H. M. Taylor's *Why Should We Study the Anglo-Saxons?*, Kenneth Wheare's *The Universities in the News*, Lord Devlin's *The House of Lords and the Naval Prize Bill, 1911* and Lord Blackett's *The Gap Widens*.

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