

ENLIGHTENMENT APPLIED, ENLIGHTENMENT BETRAYED: A STORY OF LIBERTY UNDER PRESSURE

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This lecture is dedicated to Fritz Stern on the occasion of his eightieth birthday. The great historian of the modern world has explored many of the varieties of history, but two themes stand out in his work because they have engaged his passions as well as his mind. One is the painful question of Germans and Jews, or more precisely, the German Question as seen in terms of the Jewish destiny in that country. The other theme is that of enlightened values, their emergence and spread, their early detractors, their decline and almost fall when so many succumbed to the temptations of totalitarianism, their eventual victory but also the continuing threats to their prevalence.

This is by no means just a German story. It is one of many if not all countries, including the standard-bearers of a free world. Thus it is also a story of the United States of America. Since my theme will be that of Enlightenment values under pressure, the American experience will never be far from my argument. The case is, however, more general. Liberty is never safely and irreversibly given. In fact its unchallenged presence is the exception rather than the rule. Humans, I shall argue, are probably not liberal by nature. They miss liberties when they are absent, but they take them for granted when there is no immediate threat. It is this circumstance which makes authoritarianism such a widely tolerated condition that one is tempted to call it normal. The early twenty-first century is certainly a period in which a creeping authoritarianism is threatening to become the dominant characteristic of what can no longer unreservedly be called a free world. In these circumstances, the defense of the liberal values of the Enlightenment becomes a task for an active minority. Fortunately there are some who are prepared to face this task. They keep the flame of liberty alive against the odds. Fritz Stern is one of them, and there is every reason to praise him and encourage those who share his sense of active liberty.

In the early 1960s I wrote a little book about "society and sociology in America" and gave it the title *Enlightenment Applied*. In this book I ex-

plored not just the notion of practical rationality but three features of American society which embody the liberal tradition of the Enlightenment: equality, mobility, and community. By equality I meant Tocqueville's notion of democracy in America, that is to say the assumption and increasingly also the reality of civic equality. Mobility was the answer to Werner Sombart's question "Why Is There no Socialism in the United States?" Its thrust is that people believe that they can achieve by individual effort what elsewhere requires collective action. Community referred to the strange fact that despite high mobility a sense of cohesion was characteristic of the American ideology if not reality. At the time I made much of David Riesman's *Lonely Crowd*; more recently Amitai Etzioni and communitarianism would have provided examples. Underlying such analysis is the difficult question: What are the conditions under which the constitution of liberty thrives? The social scientist in me has always looked for structural conditions. The way in which conflict is handled plays a part; in Germany it was unfortunately not Kant's acceptance of the "unsociable sociability of man" by which civil society thrives, but Hegel's belief in the state as the "reality of the moral ideal" which determined public thinking and policy. Fritz Stern in his numerous approaches to the subject concentrated more on attitudes. His justly famous dissertation on *The Politics of Cultural Despair* sees a deep cultural rejection of modernity as one of the obstacles to liberty and to applied enlightenment. Either way, it is what Immanuel Kant called (with a phrase that is hard to translate) the *selbstverschuldete Unmündigkeit* of people which provides the energy for illiberal forces. Literally, Kant's term means "self-inflicted minority," a deliberate refusal to grow up and come of age.

Some countries developed early the social structures and public attitudes which helped them resist the illiberal temptations of the twentieth century. Neither fascism nor communism gained much of a foothold in Britain, or in the United States, or in a number of smaller countries like Sweden and Switzerland. Others, and notably Germany, fell for the temptation of National Socialism with disastrous consequences for Europe and the world. I was one of those who (in a book on *Society and Democracy in Germany*) set out to explore the features of Germany's "special path" into the modern world. Fritz Stern the historian did not find the debate of Germany's *Sonderweg* particularly useful. In a sense, every country has found its own *Sonderweg* into the modern world. But given the Holocaust—and his own family history—he also sought to identify the unique features of German history. Today I too am convinced that others are equally unique. This is notably true for my country of choice, Britain, which I used as the template for modernization in freedom. Britain resisted the temptations of totalitarianism because it had managed to absorb into its strong tradition of civil society and democratic government

many of the forces of modernity which proved so disruptive in Germany and elsewhere in Europe. Britain in the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s was far from a perfect democracy. It had strong elements of privilege and resembled more Aristotle's polity with its mix of democratic and aristocratic ingredients. But as it engaged in the slow yet stubbornly advancing process of modernization and democratization, it was able to use its change-promoting political institutions while keeping civil society strong. Similar analyses may be possible for other countries which in their various ways kept the liberal tradition alive. But my point in this lecture is a different one. Having resisted the two great totalitarian threats in the twentieth century is a remarkable achievement for countries as for individuals. We all benefit from the fact that in the end a free world prevailed. But history provides no guarantee for the future. It is by no means certain that those who proved immune to communism and fascism will be equally resistant when it comes to new threats to liberty. The task of defending freedom never ends, and today it may be as demanding in some old democracies as it is in countries that have found their way to liberty more recently.

On re-reading my book on America as the home of applied enlightenment, I was struck by the skeptical, even gloomy tone of the chapter on "democracy and social structure in America." It was clearly determined by the Eisenhower years. I spoke of the sobering phenomena of the lost dynamism of the country, the imperfections of civil rights, the dissipation, indeed dissolution, of the sense of community, the forward march of the "unpolitical American." I thought I detected the emergence of "a new form of authoritarian government" and warned of the betrayal of enlightenment by a new version of *selbstverschuldete Unmündigkeit*. American society, I wrote, "needs the liberal imagination more urgently than ever before." This tone was to no small extent the result of several extended North American visits in the late 1950s and early 1960s. One of the most impressive persons I met at that time (thanks to Fritz Stern) was Richard Hofstadter. It pays to re-read his books today. What I called *applied* enlightenment he saw as "anti-intellectualism." He mocked the insistence on "practicality," thus the absence of respect for what his friend and colleague Lionel Trilling called the "liberal imagination." This made the Great Inquisition—McCarthyism—possible, which was directed "against liberals, New Dealers, reformers, internationalists, intellectuals, and finally even against a Republican administration that failed to reverse liberal policies." But Hofstadter the historian also knew that this was at the most one-half of the "American political tradition." In his book under this title he shows how time after time presidents of the United States advocated and brought about change in the name of America's traditional values. Whenever the country got stuck in a phase of authoritarian

rule, someone would remind it of the values of enlightened American rationality, of democracy and opportunity. Hence the Progressive Era, the New Deal, and later the New Frontier and the Great Society. There is no other country with a similar capacity to get out of the rut, though there may be few which from time to time get as deeply into it as the United States of America.

But I am rushing ahead of an analysis which has yet to be offered, the analysis of enlightenment betrayed. There can be little doubt that, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the great democracies are recommending to the rest of the world, indeed imposing on it, a socio-economic and political system which is under threat in their own backyard. Liberty is under pressure in the United States, in Britain, and in other traditionally democratic countries. More than in the 1950s, a creeping authoritarianism has set in which begins to threaten the values which have attracted generations to the United States and still inform the rhetoric of its political leaders.

Two trends in particular need to be mentioned. One is institutional; it is the simultaneous increase in the control of civic life by the executive and public indifference. As the longstanding chairman of the Select Committee on Delegated Powers of Britain's House of Lords, I have watched the frightening increase of the number and range of enabling clauses in government-sponsored legislation. At this moment we are considering an entire bill—the Legislative and Regulatory Reform Bill—which would enable Secretaries of State to bypass parliament over a wide range of matters and govern by orders which cannot be amended in the legislature. (The House of Commons has no committee to check such developments and is liable to pass such bills without protest, indeed virtually without debate.) This is a technical issue, but it is not unrelated to the growing number of acts of legislation that restrict civil liberties, often in the name of the fight against terrorism. To take the British example again: While we do not have a Patriot Act, we are debating—and no doubt enacting—almost simultaneously the prosecution of expressions of racial hatred at the expense of freedom of speech, the introduction of identity cards and a national register to go with it, and measures to extend the period of detention without trial. In fact, almost every measure now put before the Parliament of Westminster aims to restrict civil liberties rather than to extend them.

Perhaps a certain built-in authoritarian tendency of the executive is not altogether surprising. What makes it worrying is the near-total absence of public protest. Totalitarianism is based on the permanent mobilization of all; it may be hard to fight but it is clear to see. Authoritarianism is more insidious. Public acquiescence is an important part of it. People simply lose interest. Indeed, if and when they are asked, they are

just as likely to accept and support restrictions of their liberties in the desire for the security of a quiet life. The present British government owes its 65-seat parliamentary majority to 20 percent of the total electorate (35 percent of those who turned out to vote)—a civic apathy familiar from the American experience but now spreading everywhere. So what are people interested in? This takes us to the second trend of the time that puts liberty under pressure. There is now a widespread and profound quest for security among the citizens of democracies. I have long been a little puzzled by the peroration to one of my favorite books, the first volume of Karl Popper's *Open Society*: "But if we wish to remain human, then there is only one way, the way into the open society. We must go on into the unknown, the uncertain and insecure, using what reason we may have to plan for both security and freedom." Security and freedom: does "security" really belong here? And are the two compatible? But then we remember that this was written in the middle of the Second World War. The security of which Popper spoke was quite elementary; it was the security of civil government which Thomas Hobbes yearned for and which a generation and a civil war later John Locke described. Today, the quest for security has taken on a different complexion. Now it is on the one hand social security which has come to be under pressure in an age of economic globalization. On the other hand it is the security of emotional certainties.

To those of us who have lived through the great temptations of the twentieth century, this "fear of freedom" (to quote but one author of the time, Erich Fromm) is not altogether new. In one of his most brilliant and profound essays, Fritz Stern has dissected "National Socialism as a Temptation"; that is, the way in which this ideology filled a void sensed by many in their lives. The other temptation, that of communism, was if anything an even more effective and certainly longer-lasting ersatz religion. "The God that failed" (as Richard Crossman entitled his collection of confessions by communist renegades) may have been a false deity but it certainly took the place of religion in the minds of those who had lost the religion of their fathers. Manes Sperber, who rediscovered freedom and became one of its staunch defenders, has described the hopes and pains of this process unforgettably in his novels and autobiographical volumes.

What is happening today is not quite the same. There are no organized ideologies on which a new totalitarianism could be based, not even the militant wing of fundamentalist Islam. But there is a spreading mood which can only be described as a new wave of counter-Enlightenment. It takes many different forms. Religious fundamentalism is certainly one of them, and it is not confined to Islam. Much of it is in fact evangelical, though perhaps not in any sense Protestant. As widespread as funda-

mentalism are probably the more diffuse versions of counter-Enlightenment sentiments. There is the disappointment with the ideas and institutions of liberalism. People do not warm to them, and of course they are cool, just as reason itself is at best a quiet passion. Disappointment feeds public apathy. It may also feed a variety of escape mechanisms, ranging from withdrawal into a strictly private world at a time at which there is no compelling need or excuse for it, to more extreme modes of behavior, to drugs and dysfunctional activities of one kind or another. In any case, the heroes of our time are not the men and women of reason but those who raise and represent emotions. Raymond Aron was one of the great Enlightenment figures of the last century, whereas his *petit camarade* Jean-Paul Sartre fell for most fashions of the time; but as was evident when they died, it was Sartre who brought many thousands to their feet in the *cortège* to Montmartre.

Relativism, too, is a version of counter-Enlightenment. Ernest Gellner has brought the three—relativism, fundamentalism and what he calls “Enlightenment Puritanism”—into play in his beautiful Kings College (Cambridge) sermon of 1992 on “The Uniqueness of Truth.” The three are locked in a hopeless struggle in which each can overcome the other, only to be overcome in turn, “a little like the children’s game of scissors, paper, stone: scissors cut paper, paper covers stone, stone blunts scissors.” But Gellner does not leave it there. Relativism, the notion that anything goes, may be fashionable in academia but is also marked by “affectation, insincerity, self-contradiction, hidden condescension.” While its sense of toleration is laudable, it is lacking one key ingredient of enlightened thought: “Our world is indeed a plural one, but it is based on the uniqueness of truth.” Fundamentalism after all? No; Gellner adds for good measure that while truth matters, it is not revealed. It has to be sought, and this is probably an unending quest. Gellner takes the children’s game to its bitter end: “The Fundamentalist and the Enlightenment Puritan share a sense of and respect for the uniqueness of truth; the Enlightenment Puritan and the Relativist share a penchant for tolerance; and the Relativist and the Fundamentalist share a reasonably well furnished, habitable world, as opposed to the arid emptiness of the world of the Enlightenment Puritan.”

Why then be an Enlightenment Puritan? Here the Czech-born Englishman Gellner took refuge in the pragmatism of his adopted country. The enlightened view has worked rather well, and we should count our blessings. This may not be quite enough, and is certainly less than the remarkable philosopher-social scientist did before his early death. He did much to improve (to cite his last book) the *Conditions of Liberty* in the post-communist world. For liberal minds this was a rewarding task whose success became ever more evident. It was a joy to be alive in those

years after the revolution of 1989. While the blossoming economic landscapes which the German Chancellor Kohl promised took and still take a long time in coming, civil society was blossoming in East and South East Europe, and parliamentary democracy looked like it was taking root. Above all, people loved their new freedoms, reading newspapers and watching television, speaking their minds, making choices, and perhaps above all travelling to see the world that was closed to them for so long. For a while, liberty was positively popular. But, alas, only for a while. When the protagonists of the revolution of 1989 met again ten years later, the “normalization” which they had all fought for had begun to happen, and most of them did not like it. Where was the “new politics” of which they had dreamt? Worse still, how could people return to vote for the rulers whom they had got rid of in apparent triumph a decade ago? It was then that I thought for the first time: Apparently, humans are not naturally liberal. Enlightenment, pure or applied, is the exception rather than the rule. It is above all a minority concern, much as it is aimed at all men and women and their freedom. Given normalization, many, indeed the majority, will fall back into a mood of unconcern about public affairs.

The paradox has a tragic element. The battle for freedom is *inter alia* a battle to allow people to live their lives without having to defend their privacy. When public events interfere deeply in our lives, as they did in Fritz Stern’s and mine, things have gone wrong. Self-determined private lives and civil society are the signs of a free world. But privatization in this sense, putting the state and politics in their place, also opens the gates to authoritarian trends. And whereas totalitarianism is intrinsically catastrophic, authoritarianism of the milder sort can last a long time. Only those who live by freedom will actively mind. Most will accept it and adjust without even noticing. Thus the gain of liberty is also the source of new threats to it.

What is the answer? Indeed, is there an answer? The German answer to these questions has some attraction. It was impressively given by the country’s first postwar president, Theodor Heuss, a man of liberal persuasion and historical depth. He insisted that democracies need democrats, and democrats need to be educated as such. Thus, political education is the answer. In the Federal Republic of Germany, a great deal of money and time goes into political education. The same is true in other European countries. Even in the United Kingdom, successive Speakers of the House of Commons have come to promote “citizenship studies” (as it is called). All this is fine, and it should continue. There are no signs, however, of such civic education leading to an increase in the turnout of first and second voters, nor does the study of citizenship have a noticeable impact on resistance to encroachments on civil liberties.

At the risk of surprising an audience steeped in the democratic tradition I have to inform you that my own conclusion from nearly a lifetime of thought and experience is that an active minority is needed to defend the cause of liberty. When the drowsiness of normalization envelops most people's lives, and a nomenklatura class manages to cement its power without having to fear challenge, those of us who realize that liberty is as crucial to life as the air which we breathe have to remain alert and active. It may be that intellectuals have a special role to play at such times, but they have no monopoly of the liberal imagination, even less of the gut sense of liberty. Of the alternatives of Albert Hirschman's *Exit, Voice and Loyalty*, voice should never be underrated, and voice is by no means confined to intellectuals however much they may enjoy talking. Fritz Stern is very concerned about the United States of America today, and I dare say he is not the only one. "I have become ever more concerned," he writes, "that this country's generous liberal spirit, itself ever in need of renewal and correction, has in the last half century been under attack. I opposed the radical detractors of liberalism in the 1960s and since then I have watched pseudo-conservatives and fundamentalists undermine the nation's famous commitment to reason and tolerance." But if the outsider who has long admired and liked the United States is allowed an observation, it would be: Do not despair. The United States of America not only has the active minority which exercises moral vigilance on behalf of the country's liberal tradition, it also has the capacity for change. Change without violence is one of the first virtues of democracy, and American democracy shows no sign of wishing to default on that virtue. Thus liberty is under pressure, it needs the voices of those who care, and in this country more than most others, hope for a revival of the enlightened spirit of liberty is well-founded in its history of institutions. Thus the reversal of the trends which put liberty under pressure may well be just around the corner in this country and, I hope, in others as well.

Lord Dahrendorf's original lecture has been edited for publication.

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