ISAIAH BERLIN ONLINE

A Philosopher Looks at the Future

A Conversation with Henry Brandon

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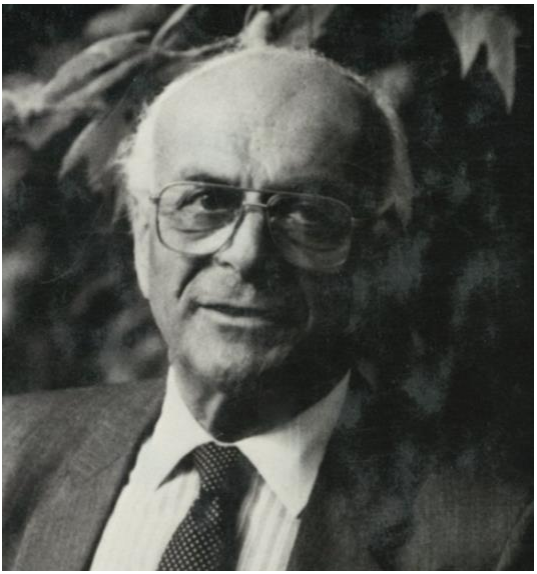
From *Conversations with Henry Brandon* (London, 1966: Deutsch), 11–39; repr. in condensed form (without IB's authorisation) as 'My Hopes and Fears', *Sunday Times*, 6 November 1966, 41–2. The text in *Conversations* is poorly edited, and has been revised here by Henry Hardy. The original page-breaks are marked thus: **[11]**. Henry Brandon (1916–93) né Brandeis was Washington correspondent for the London *Sunday Times* 1949–83. The interview was probably conducted in London or Oxford.



Henry Brandon

[11] *It was in the late 1950s, during a holiday at Sir Isaiah Berlin's beloved Portofino, that I asked him for the first time whether he would agree to a tape-recorded conversation with me. He was utterly horrified by the idea and I still remember his sardonic reply: 'And what are you going to ask me – what is truth?' That ended my quest for many years. But it became more and more a commonplace remark for people to say – even though they may have met Sir*

Isaiah only in passing – 'if only he had a Boswell with a tape-recorder!' For he is one of those brilliant men who enjoys talking but dislikes writing. And so the wisdom of his social and political comments, his devastating wit in describing and analysing people (his Who's Who of the living, though, would have to remain a very private edition, for friends only) is regrettably not preserved on paper.

His own books, from his biography of Marx to his philosophic essays about history, are small and slim, packed with ideas, but they are no bedside reading. There are probably far more written words by Isaiah in the files of the Foreign Office from his wartime days at the British Embassy in Washington than between hard covers. His despatches used to be bestsellers on the diplomatic cable circuit and, if for no other reason than that they will soon become public property, I welcome the British Government's decision to allow access to diplomatic documents after thirty years instead of after fifty years. Those Washington days left an indelible impression on Berlin. For the political philosopher they represented the **[12]** *rare and exciting experience of seeing a revolution happen before his own eyes, of being almost one of the 'gang'. His references to the Roosevelt period in our conversation, not surprisingly therefore, are some of the most passionate.*

One of the most fascinating contrasts about Berlin is that he is both a practical as well as an abstract thinker, that he is as much at home in the contemporary political and social world as in the esoteric one of history, philosophy and literature. Many people find him difficult to follow. Sentence tumbles over sentence from his lips not only when he lectures, but also in private conversation. His Mellon Lectures, delivered in Washington in the spring of 1965, attracted overflow audiences not so much because people expected to understand what he was saying, but because they were riveted by the pyrotechnical display of his intellect. And, speaking of his intellect, when, a few years ago, on the eve of his being knighted, I asked the about-to-become Sir Isaiah teasingly why he thought he had been given the accolade, he replied without the slightest hesitation: 'Because they thought I am the least dangerous intellectual in Oxford.'

April 1966

BRANDON What is really happening to humanist traditions in this increasingly technological world?

BERLIN It depends on what you mean by 'humanist tradition'. The humanist tradition is concerned with the general capacities of men – the powers of the intellect, the imagination, creative ability. Why should the increase in technology in itself create any particular crisis for this?

BRANDON Isn't the professional gaining over the amateur, technology over craft, science over humane studies?

BERLIN There is a specific crisis in this country in that respect, which is perhaps less acute in other countries where there does not exist so powerful a pro-amateur tradition in the governing class. It is of course also true that specialisation is increasing, that it's impossible for any one man to understand the general principles that govern even half the sciences that **[13]** flourish at present. But I don't know that this is in itself a form of crisis in our culture. There always have existed specialists in human affairs who were not interested in general ideas. At all periods you will find some human beings who are wholly absorbed in specific techniques or particular goals: craftsmen, technicians, specialists of one kind or another, even at a pre-industrial stage of civilisation, and on the other hand men who, whatever their calling, are also, and unprofessionally, interested in what might be called general ideas – in other words, intellectuals; and I mean by an intellectual anybody who wants ideas to be as interesting and as valuable as possible. And I see no reason for thinking that the proportion of such persons in our civilisation is going down. It seems to me that the circulation and number of ideas is if anything increasing rather than decreasing. I may be wrong. It may come from living in academic circles. Not that academics are necessarily intellectuals. Only those with unusual breadth of outlook.

BRANDON You don't think there is a general shift, say amongst students, towards scientific subjects and away from the humanities?

BERLIN Not enough in England, according to our experts. But even if there were a shift towards technical subjects and away from the arts this doesn't preclude discussion of general ideas and interest in large general issues.

I don't believe there are two cultures, or three cultures, or anything of that kind. Even in this realm of the so-called humanities there have always been plenty of people not in the least interested in ideas of any depth or generality. Grammarians and logicians, lawyers and social scientists can be as barbarian or as civilised as biochemists and engineers. There are physicists and chemists and mathematicians who are interested not merely in music (this is notorious) but in ideas in general, with some exceedingly original, cultivated and interesting people among them; just as there are some extremely narrow, dull, philistine, self-absorbed and otherwise closed minds in the so-called realm of humanities.

The chasm between scientists and humanists seems to me largely a figment: and the problem allegedly created by this **[14]** chasm merely a dramatisation of a platitude – that more people ought to know about what scientists think and do. There is one – and there has never been more than one – genuine human culture in any given region at a given time, and I don't know that I've noticed any signs of change in this. When I talk to scientists – whether distinguished men whose careers are in mid-course, or nearing an end perhaps, or alternatively young science students – I don't experience this sense of talking to specialised barbarians of genius, or robots, or persons totally absorbed in some totally, to me, impenetrable sphere without any windows into so-called literary culture. I envy them their connection with the major advances of our age. But I find plenty of common interest. This may be a purely subjective experience, but I wish to testify to it.

BRANDON That's encouraging. Talking about robots – the computer is now stepping on the toes of various intellectual activities …

BERLIN And a very good thing too. I don't know if you are surprised to hear me say this?

BRANDON Yes.

BERLIN Anything which a robot can do a robot should do. It's absurd to suppose that robots will actually do the work of human beings in the ultimate sense of the word. Phrases like 'mechanical brain' or 'electronic brain' have confused people into supposing that it really is a brain in the sense of being capable of independent acts of imagination, invention, decision, which is plainly absurd. Nobody supposes this. The programming, as we all know, has to be done by human beings capable of their own spontaneous thought, and these machines are pure labour-saving devices which simply do more rapidly, on a far larger scale, what would have taken human beings far longer to do. This in itself cannot do anyone any actual harm. So that I'm not frightened of these monsters. What is perhaps rather frightening is that if these machines proliferate, there may be a temptation to plan everyone's future to a degree which could – although it need not, but planners can be very bossy – close too many alternatives, and constrict **[15]** human beings within certain programmes which will make them secure, contented, amiable, but may make them infantile, and kill originality, oddity and a range of choices which might otherwise have been valuable: like the Indians in Paraguay under benevolent Jesuit rule. There is some danger of that – the sort of thing Tocqueville dreaded – but I don't think that's to do with robots or no robots. All planned civilisations, probably from the Assyrians onwards, have had this danger in them. The old conflict between individual liberty and rational organisation is, I think, endemic in any society and isn't really altered in principle

by the importation of machines, no matter how complex or ingenious. And in any case, even in the most beautifully and wisely and humanely planned society – in a Fabian utopia – genius will break through.

BRANDON Don't you think that computers can take decisions over a large field of decision-making than is normally left to the human beings, and that there enters some sort of a mechanisation of decision-making which takes things out of the empirical human mind?

BERLIN I cannot see this. In any field in which all you want is the most demonstrably *rational* decision – the one most likely, given the data, to lead to the goal desired – where non-rational factors are irrelevant, the machine will simply save you from miscalculation. Of course, where imponderable and impalpable and subjective factors play a part – in our real, that is personal, lives – the machine cannot replace us. Samuel Butler's nightmare remains only a nightmare. The computer will calculate, remember, integrate the data, preserve from error, determine the path most likely to succeed, that is, do everything except perform an act of personal judgement. It can organise what has been fed into it according to rules laid down, ultimately, by a human thinker.

Now you may ask: is it better for a general commanding an army, for the manager of a factory, for the head of a huge technical organisation to leave purely technical decisions to subordinates who may not be aware of nearly enough of the relevant facts – to conscientious, imaginative and, let us say, highly responsible and well-trained subordinates, **[16]** nevertheless placed at some degree of distance from the centre? Is it better to leave them to the more or less free, spontaneous decision of such persons, or is it better to entrust them to a machine? I am not clear that either alternative is obviously more beneficial for carrying out the purpose of the organisation. To leave it to men is to provide better for peculiar and unique human claims: at the

price of more muddle and human friction and sheer stupidity or inefficiency or even ill will. To leave it to a mechanised system is to concentrate responsibility higher up in fewer hands, and ignore individual human quirks, but increase productivity, security, perhaps justice. Unless human beings in control are involved somewhere, you can conjure up a kind of Charlie Chaplin horror, in which the programmed machine ruthlessly goes on executing its orders and crushing into dust all kinds of human victims who resist because their situation has altered in a way which has not been predicted or which cannot be computerised – human feelings have not been quantified yet – while the machine grinds on, ruthlessly carrying out its orders no matter what the new situation. That of course could happen, but it could also happen with sufficiently stupid and obedient tools, human tools: as we know from every war.

BRANDON You really think that the human being in the end will always retain its supremacy over the machine?

BERLIN What does one mean by this? By creating any kind of piece of machinery, by creating a bus, or by creating a train, you increase the possibility of being crushed to death by it and you alter your life and everyone else's to fit in with your inventions, to protect yourself against them. In this sense Frankenstein's monster is a true myth of our day: this is, I think, what is – rather confusedly – meant by saying that mechanical material means have outrun our morals, our imaginations etc. This is perfectly true. There's no doubt that the weapons which human beings create alter their lives in unpredicted fashions and place human beings in predicaments which retrospectively seem to them difficult or tragic or in need of radical reform. This is true of any kind of attempt to **[17]** control either nature or the evolution of society. The question is whether this mechanisation of our present age has introduced some kind of radical change. It seems to me that human beings are necessarily frightened of all this. They tend to fall into polytheism, they tend somehow to see

these machines as if they were huge impersonal forces bearing down upon them in some inexorable fashion, which they cannot control and by which they must in some sense be conditioned – the nightmare of the creator overpowered by his creature. There's something in this – it is a constantly recurring image. One knows many men who think this.

Anybody who starts any operation cannot always predict the consequences, and when the consequences occur they sometimes make havoc of the original plan, or alternatively create new possibilities which are also unpredicted. It's rather like the argument which is used against any radical reform: 'Who can tell where this will end?' Is a genie being let out of the bottle? But of course he *can* control some consequences, and we don't always leap in the dark. These risks are part of daily life. I see no difference of kind – however big of degree – between inventing the wheel and harnessing atomic energy. If we choose, we can control them. To say that they control us is a kind of defeatist mythology. Men's freedom may not be great, but it is sufficient to control his own artefacts: and to invent antidotes for their bad by-products. To believe the opposite seems to me irrationalist gloom. There's something obscurantist about fearing or preaching against the perfection of human techniques, when in fact we know perfectly well that these human techniques are ultimately under the control of human beings, provided they have the intelligence and the will, and the imagination, to know what they are doing, why they are doing it, and what to do in order to prevent undesirable consequences. In that sense, it seems to me, both the value and the prospects of humanism are neither lower nor higher than they ever were before in the course of human history.

BRANDON I'm reassured. Partly, of course, the development of the hydrogen bomb created this fear of technology. This is the monster, and people wonder how many more **[18]** such monsters will be developed. In many ways Einstein, who started this, is an ideal combination of the technologue and the humanist, isn't he?

BERLIN I don't think he was exactly either. He was a man of genius. He was one of the few mathematicians and physicists who really understood philosophical issues; that is, he knew the difference between words about words and words about things, which is perhaps the most important thing to understand; but I don't know whether Einstein's humanism is relevant to this. He was horrified, of course, by the ultimate consequences of his own discoveries in the form of instruments of destruction. So are we all. And I don't want to deny for one moment the most terrible truism of our time – that we have artificially created far greater dangers to the survival of our species than ever existed before. At the same time I don't want to get away from the idea that we have our own lives in our hands to a greater degree than is fashionable to believe. Our fears of the future are rather like the kind of fears which people entertained at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution: these mechanical monsters would maim people, destroy them, crush their traditional forms of life, render them into some kind of dehumanised mass of robots, and so forth. And they did. The fears were not groundless. Some of the terrible consequences of the Industrial Revolution are still with us. But for that we are ourselves largely to blame. The horrors occurred because people did not mind them enough: where and when they did, whether by conscience from above or pressure and revolutions from below, the horrors were mitigated. It is not a creditable story, but only because we are responsible for it; and if we are responsible we can prevent it. There is something terribly feeble about trying to throw upon the shoulders of the inventions themselves the responsibility which belongs to their inventors and users.

BRANDON And you think that human beings are capable in the end of controlling them?

BERLIN I don't see why not. The opposite remains to be demonstrated. I should like to have **[19]** evidence to the effect

that human beings are in some way caught in some inevitable grip of a force which they themselves have released, but which they themselves have neither the intellect nor the power to control. This may be so, but it seems to me at the present a pessimistic conclusion without sufficient evidence.

BRANDON Perhaps in the world of today empiricism on one side and ideology on the other are vying with each other more than ever before. How do you view this struggle?

BERLIN There is no such thing as pure empiricism and no such thing as pure ideology. These are ideal extremes: most people oscillate somewhere in between. As the late Lord Halifax, under whom I served in Washington, was fond of saying, 'It is all a matter of emphasis.' Empiricism is a hand-to-mouth method; the assessment of every issue, as it comes, against the concrete circumstances prevailing at the moment; a sceptical 'Show me' attitude free from obsession by large ideological patterns. It is the traditional outlook associated with good practical British common sense. It's all very well talking like this, but in fact such empiricists are usually in the grip of some view of life, some doctrine about what human beings are like, some set of ideas – social, moral, religious; deeply ingrained, hardly felt. If you try to reveal the ideas in terms of which these tough men of affairs think, they yield patterns all right – and rather low-grade patterns as a rule – ones which are subject to just as much error and just as much stupidity and just as much fanaticism, sometimes, as the explicit ideologies of those who believe themselves to have got hold of some infallible metaphysical or theological system.

When Conservatives say the beauty of conservative doctrine is that it isn't a doctrine, they are deluding themselves. The view that all change is dangerous, and that therefore one should proceed slowly; that tradition shapes our ends and is flouted at our spiritual and practical peril; that only those operations succeed which take into account the submerged portions of life – the half conscious, the unintended, the mysterious bonds that

bind men to each other, which can be felt, experienced, but not formulated, the kind which **[20]** conservatives talk about; all those imponderables and inexpressibles, all those nuances of the complex web spun by history, which fanatical theorists tend to ignore – that too is a doctrine, very much a doctrine, a perennial philosophy which has been involved in great human successes, and great cruelties and failures; the great counter-revolutionary doctrine that has made a lot of difference to human lives, for better and for worse.

You won't want me to give you a lecture on the ups and downs of empiricism and conservatism and their queer interplay. I'll just say that there are just as many progressives and reactionaries among the empiricists as there are progressives and reactionaries among the theorists. Certainly if you take the United States in our own century as a land in which the American way of life was believed in on empirical grounds – it has been tested and proved splendid – even these practical matter-of-fact men – no visionaries – made a dogmatic assumption (in the 1930s and 1940s; I don't want to go beyond that because I'm not clear about what happened after that), that the kind of life which satisfied a large number of Americans was a very proper kind of life for man as such, and that other nations didn't enjoy it only because of ignorance or perversity on their part; ignorance or failure to think straight could and should be remedied. This theoretical assumption rested on as great a fallacy as any 'ideology' or doctrine which practical men mock at; and Americans came to learn this to their heavy cost.

One of the best examples of this attitude – not at all uncommon in America today, I suppose – is President Wilson's evident belief that political problems were akin to technological ones. All problems for him were capable of rational (scientific) examination and rational solution, and if these solutions were not accepted democratically by those for whose benefit they were offered, then there was a certain case for enforcing them. I should have thought that this ultimately eighteenth-century position erred just as much about what men are like, and what

they need, and what they want, as the opposite assumption, which was made by many British governments in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, namely that no serious problems are finally soluble, that the whole notion of rational final solution **[21]** was absurd; that it was like trying to put an end to rheumatism or something of that kind, which no sane physician could expect to cure; although when it gets too bad, ad hoc measures of alleviation are in order. Neither of these dogmatic doctrines appear to me to rest upon any assumptions that could ultimately be justified on any scientific or non-scientific basis. They simply show the general biases of the people who hold them. That is why I don't want to divide doctrines of the world into healthy empiricism and doctrinaire fanaticism, or muddle-headed conservative mystique on one side and bold, clear, rational, humane, radical measures on the other. Both these seem to me to be exaggerations, propaganda terms, and as R. H. Tawney once said, 'When propaganda comes in through the door, truth jumps out through the window: and she breaks her neck; and she is seldom missed.' He was quite right.

BRANDON You have talked about conservatism, about the American attitude towards happiness. How about Marxism?

BERLIN Well there's a great deal of truth in Marxism, as everybody by now realises. Just to reject Marxism as a sort of brainchild of a poor muddled old ideologue oppressed by miseries and driven crazy by his own failure to achieve success in the world is absurd. Marx was a man of genius who seems to some a pillar of fire, to others a mere cloud of darkness: there is some of both in the doctrines.

He did certainly exaggerate, but what great thinker has not? One-sidedness is a vice of great virtues. No great doctrine of originality or power in human affairs appears to me ever to have got into the common consciousness of men unless it was to some extent overstated. Plato was a tremendous exaggerator. So were the greatest religious teachers. So are most pioneers. Perhaps

Aristotle was not, but if so, he formed one of the few exceptions. Hobbes exaggerated fearfully. Locke didn't exaggerate much, in his political philosophy (he certainly did as a philosopher proper), but then neither was he exactly a first-rate political genius: his views are really a kind of potpourri of some of the reputable platitudes of the time. Rousseau exaggerated terribly; so did both Kant and Hegel. Anyone you like to take who made a great and **[22]** lasting impact, or at least an impact by means of bold and original ideas, not just in the sphere of political or social doctrine, exaggerated. Darwin exaggerated. Nietzsche exaggerated. Tolstoy, Gandhi, Lenin exaggerated. Einstein probably exaggerated (I don't know enough about the subject to be able to say). Certainly Freud exaggerated. And if they hadn't exaggerated I don't think they would have broken through the crust of complacent acceptance of existing conventions, which they needed to do in order to put something original and disturbing before the public. And the same is true of Marxism.

But by now there are certain originally resisted truths which Marxism put on the map, which we now accept as part of the ordinary understanding of the world. For example, the notion that – well, to put it at its very simplest – classes exist and class consciousness exists and has a decisive effect on men: that, although violently exaggerated, is now something which no rational man denies. The notion of *reification*, to use a technical term – the idea that human beings tend to regard institutions which they themselves have in the past created as something objective and inexorable, the product of objective laws, like the phenomenon of gravitation, whereas they *can* in fact be altered by sufficient concentration and direction of human willpower and energy, if necessary by revolution – is again something which is by now accepted by quite a large number of sane thinkers.

Yet this is quite recent. The notion that, for example, existing systems of justice or existing systems of economic organisation are somehow endemic in the nature of things; the old worship of the law of supply and demand as somehow part of nature, or even divinely ordained – certainly something which no human

effort could alter – were largely accepted towards the end of the eighteenth and during large portions of the nineteenth century. These have certainly been severely shaken by both the practice and the theory of Marxism. And this is very liberating: not necessarily in the direction preached by Marxists, who somehow, most of them, contrive to be grimly determinist as well, by a dialectical logic which I don't grasp.

On the other hand, there is an inevitable reaction against Marxism: one can say that the glamour of rational planning of **[23]** society, or the belief that total democracy is compatible with the preservation of minimum civil rights, for example, or individual liberties (unless these are protected either by a strong tradition or by some other powerful sanctions: liberal principles proof against wild oscillations of the democratic process) – these naive hopes of early radicals, which Marx shared, have also been severely broken.[1] As a result of Marxist experiments, people have realised that a mere alteration in the basis of economic life, or in the basis of social life, isn't always sufficient to cure societies even of the particular evils which these panaceas are meant to cure; that they can breed their own evils, which the founders may not have anticipated, but which in fact are upon us in a very violent and visible degree.

It's rather like antibiotics, which cure the diseases which they are intended to cure, but sometimes have unexpected and

[1] [This sentence is unusually clumsy and hard to follow, but resists uncontroversial editing. The intended sense seems to be as follows: 'one can say that the glamour of rational planning of society, or the belief that total democracy is compatible with the preservation of minimum civil rights, for example, or individual liberties ([whereas total democracy is in fact compatible with neither,] unless these [civil rights and liberties] are protected either by a strong tradition or by some other powerful sanctions: liberal principles proof against wild oscillations of the democratic process) – these naive hopes of early radicals, which Marx shared, have also been severely broken.' Thanks to Terrell Carver for interpretive help.]

undesirable by-products: for one thing they breed new forms of disease, previously either unknown or at any rate unnoticed, and for another they probably insure the bacteria against which they are directed, and make them to some extent antibiotic-proof, and so increase their range of destructiveness. Something of the sort happens whenever a very violent or very radical solution is applied in social life as well.

This is a risk we cannot help taking. Not to use antibiotics would be just as obscurantist and just as silly as not to introduce radical reforms where social evils call for them, for fear that any change may bring about undesirable consequences, or merely transform the evils.

BRANDON Would you say that both Marxism and democracy are now going through a crisis?

BERLIN Well, democracy is certainly going through a crisis. The crisis in democracy is fundamentally, I suppose, the difficulty of combining, on the one hand, the political participation of the majority of a given society in the processes which control our lives with, on the other, the inescapable need for highly trained experts and specialists for the purpose of controlling the very elaborate machinery which human ingenuity and genius have created. That is the fundamental crisis of industrial democracy. But I don't notice any **[24]** deep malaise about democracy as such, where it exists. I see the possibility of other forms of social malaise.

As invention increases, the conditions of labour will improve and the hours of labour will decrease. Leisure will increase, and the influence of culture will become even more widespread than it is now, and then there will be all kinds of new dangers: vast increase in boredom, accelerated disintegration of traditional units – faster even than now – on account of increase in social and every other kind of mobility. Social problems of this type, I think, are bound to arise. Again, this is no reason for not pressing on in the direction in which we are going, because stagnation,

which is the alternative, is far worse. That is the problem of democracy.

It is not a very new thing to say, but there is no doubt that the democratic control of experts has always been a problem for all free societies – of the experts who are at their best frustrated by the stupidity and lack of imagination of the legislators, who are democratic precisely to the degree to which they are obliged to please their electorates (I know of no other test). This tension seems unavoidable: it is the price which we pay for a large degree of liberty.

Marxism, I think, is going through a not very dissimilar crisis. Again, technological progress has to be allowed to go forward not too heavily trammelled by the iron control of a fanatical one-party system, and yet politically directed – a conflict which is felt in Russia today, and will one day be felt in China.

But Marxism is going through not only a political crisis, but a moral one too. The moral crisis is simply that the more education makes its way in the Soviet Union, or in Eastern Europe, and the more scarcity is conquered, even on a relative scale, the more human beings under these regimes will demand what human beings demand everywhere: more individual liberty, more honesty in public life, less bullying, more pleasure, less strain, less tension. I don't think the Soviet 'rebels' demand a different form of political organisation, they simply make basic human moral demands, which in a totalitarian system are invariably suspect. With us it's the opposite. We are going through a social crisis too, a crisis born of the attempt to marry the need for increasing specialisation with the terror of **[25]** being governed by specialists, a craving for far more equality.

BRANDON By specialists you mean technicians, the military …

BERLIN It spreads to other spheres as well. Technicians and the military are the most obvious examples. But also the whole development of the party system, its bureaucratisation, the fact that parliament is not as free as it seems to be, that corporations

and councils and boards and committees and foundations govern and obstruct, that a high degree of specialisation has been introduced, that there is a high and increasing degree of streamlining in the actual inner organisation of the parties, which leads to iron laws of oligarchy, and all the rest of it – that all this is happening. The mere spread of psephology, of poll-taking itself, has had an effect upon our political system, of altering party goals and altering the organisation of parties to suit, so to speak, the highly technological information which is derived from the new, ingenious use of statistical methods, the kind of things which presumably didn't occur before.

Specialists breed a need for specialists. In a way this is good. The more knowledge we have, the more we understand ourselves, the more free we shall be to act as we wish. But this carries the opposite danger. The more we know about ourselves, the more we have to rely upon those who know or claim expert knowledge, and, as knowledge is becoming more and more diverse and more and more specialised, the fewer are the persons who know enough of anything.

It isn't so much that we know more and more about less and less. That isn't true. That always was a philistine schoolmaster's or clubman's gibe. The point is that knowledge does, as a rule, liberate, but that it's evidently impossible for even an elite of human beings to know enough about everything to be wholly in charge of a complex society. One of the paradoxical consequences of progress in enlightenment is the splitting up of the specialists into compartments, and therefore the dependence of a large number of human beings upon a collection of ill-coordinated experts, each of whom sooner or later becomes oppressed and irritated by being unable to step out of his box and survey the relationship of his particular activity to the whole. The experts cannot know **[26]** enough; the coordinators always did move in the dark, but now they are aware of it. And the more honest and intelligent ones are rightly frightened by the fact that their responsibility increases in direct ratio to their ignorance of an ever-expanding field. I don't know if this is too obscure?

BRANDON No.

BERLIN I'm afraid I've uttered a lot of long, convoluted sentences.

BRANDON Is knowledge beneficial, therefore?

BERLIN Always. I wish to be emphatic about this. Ignorance is sometimes bliss, but I don't wish to subscribe to this doctrine, even if it's true. I scarcely wish to examine it, at any rate here. I have elsewhere.[2] Knowledge is growing. This enables people to control the environment and themselves more rationally and more deliberately, if you like, than ever before, and they are less at the mercy of the unknown and therefore of uncalculated factors.

BRANDON Political instinct comes in there too.

BERLIN Political instinct and every other kind of instinct for the conduct of life. This has always been true, but it's much more frightening now, because if the rulers make a mistake we shall pay much more heavily for it in any centralised system. An error in judgement made at the centre will be more heavily paid for than in a society where mobility is not high or communications are not good. Therefore when you ask 'Is knowledge a good thing?', yes, knowledge is a good thing but by itself it is never enough: one needs in addition some sort of quality difficult to describe – some sense of the general wants and needs of diverse groups of human beings, if not actually individuals, which presupposes a very high degree of social and moral responsiveness, and unless our rulers possess this we shall suffer, suffer greatly. The whole argument for democracy consists in the fact that, because knowledge

[2] In 'From Hope and Fear Set Free' (1964), repr. in *Liberty*, ed. Henry Hardy (Oxford, 2002).

changes all the time, because every dogma of today becomes the fallacy of tomorrow, because general propositions by human beings, particularly **[27]** when they are applied to these human beings, alter these human beings themselves and therefore change the very goals for the sake of which they were originally invented, and make themselves obsolete, and because this system allows for the constant supersession of one body of control by another, the persons in power cannot ever rest secure in that power. They must continue to curry favour, to use no better term for it, to curry favour with the electorate, even though this may involve a certain amount of corruption and hypocrisy. So long as that system persists there is always a hope that things don't become too tight, that at least brutality and servitude is avoided and human beings are not over-governed. The argument for democracy therefore lies in the inevitable price one must pay for the human condition.

BRANDON That nevertheless requires a fairly high standard of education.

BERLIN Democracy? Of course, yes.

BRANDON Therefore do you think that it will be able to maintain itself against dictatorship, or the growth of one-party leadership?

BERLIN You mean in the outer world?

BRANDON Yes.

BERLIN You are asking me to prophesy. I cannot do that. I can only express a hope, because unless democracy is maintained human beings will grind to a stop, or roll backwards. There's no doubt that single-party leadership is not an instrument of great intellectual progress. Technological progress sometimes

contributes; intellectual progress too, in certain spheres in[3] which the single party doesn't interfere too much. But there is no doubt that in large spheres of human activity, which are regarded by the single party as containing potential dangers of heterodoxy and therefore dangerous to its own authority, progress has been artificially arrested whenever the single party comes to power.

I don't think there is a case on record of great cultural advance **[28]** on the part of a single-party dictatorship in a world in which other countries enjoy some degree of democratic rule. I mean, you could say that the history of France under Louis XIV, for example, of a France which was anything but a democracy, constituted one of the great cultural advances of mankind. But this was not a situation where a notably greater degree of freedom occurred outside France. Repression of freedoms always leads to retrogression in the sphere of creative activity of whatever kind. In the seventeenth century the rule of Louis XIV was, relatively speaking, less repressive than a good many meaner and drearier despotisms all round him: in Germany or Italy or Spain.

BRANDON Where is the struggle in the underdeveloped world between democracy and dictatorship going to lead?

BERLIN Of course, democracy cannot be real unless there is a certain standard of education and also of political responsibility, unless there is a general sense of justice in the community and an adequate sense of equality. A fraternity which these communities probably do have, and have perhaps beyond ours, is not enough. The only way of introducing democracy is by introducing it, and the fact that it is introduced, at times, too early, and therefore must create some kind of crisis, is not something against it.

There is no doubt that the kind of corrupt pseudo-democracies with which some underdeveloped countries start are

[3] In the *Sunday Times* version, the break between p. 41 and p. 42 occurs here.

bound to produce their own antidotes in the form of an attempt at a more efficient and sometimes even a more just form of government on the part of so-called dictators, whether military or civilian, but this will not last. In that respect, I'm both idealistic and optimistic. All dictatorships, in the end, crumble, and even though they may be brought about as a kind of antibody by an imperfectly functioning or even very corrupt pseudo-democracy, in the end they do crumble and sometimes make way for better forms of government. The Africans have a very dark future to get through, certainly.

BRANDON Carlyle said that 'History is wiser than we.'[4]

[29] BERLIN Oh, this is one of those great metaphysical generalisations which I don't quite understand.

BRANDON Does it mean that it's an advantage for a statesman to know history?

BERLIN Some people think so – Marx thought so, E. H. Carr and my colleague A. L. Rowse both think so. I don't know myself. I have my doubts. It's an advantage to a statesman to know anything. The more statesmen know, on the whole, the better. Ignorance doesn't help them much, but there are dangers in knowing history. The obvious danger is that one supposes one can derive general propositions from it, one can derive laws from it. Laws may in principle be capable of being derived, but nobody has ever derived any dependable historical laws as yet. I don't say this will not be done one day, but for the moment all the candidates for historical laws which have been produced have on the whole proved not to be very plausible.

The second danger is that one is always winning the last war, that one tends to assimilate existing situations to past situations and to apply remedies which might or might not have worked in

[4] Cf. L 127.

the past to situations in which the specific differences are precisely what matters. Therefore it is better to start afresh. Therefore I don't believe, as some of my colleagues do, that knowledge of history is necessary for statesmen.

BRANDON Kennedy, for instance, when, after his meeting with Khrushchev in Vienna, he decided to send strong reinforcements to Germany to protect Berlin, did it because he remembered what happened in 1940 'when England slept'.[5] De Gaulle, on the other hand, is now the one who believes you can't go on fighting the last war, that NATO is now outdated, that the post-war era has come to an end.

BERLIN Kennedy, I'm sure, was dominated by the idea that one must avoid precisely those policies which his father was rightly or wrongly accused of approving while he was Ambassador here. I'm sure he constantly thought about the dangers and infamies of appeasement, and this is also what **[30]** stimulated Eden over Suez. Both these men were dominated by the situation in the 1930s: in one case successfully and in the other case less successfully.

I wonder whether it is history which is at stake here: the only thing we can think about is the past, because nothing else exists. If what history teaches you is that weakness is bad, that resolution helps, that is some kind of general proposition which props up faith in clear reason and strong will. But then lessons drawn from the contemplation of human character throughout the stretches of history can perhaps be as well learned from studying the classics, as Machiavelli did, and Hobbes; or from studying some other discipline, say jurisprudence or sociology, or any other form of life in which human beings are involved. Kennedy could have derived his belief in action just as much from some other source. The case is really not for the lessons of history. The case is for

[5] A reference to Kennedy's *Why England Slept* (New York, 1940), whose title echoes that of Churchill's *While England Slept* (New York, 1938).

general education, which enables one to reach an appreciation of what works and what doesn't work in specific situations.

BRANDON Sometimes one hears a different application of the historic parallel – that the United States is in a declining phase reminiscent of the days of the late Roman Empire.

BERLIN I see no analogy there at all. No, the United States is in the full blast of progress. You may deplore all kinds of aspects of this progress, but I see no signs in the United States of technological or material decay, which are the first signs of a declining empire. No, the relationship of Europe in general, perhaps England in particular, to the United States, as a kind of Athens to the United States as Rome, is rather closer to the mark.

The thing that impressed me most in the United States in the last twenty years – in which I've known it fairly well – is the enormous difference made by education. This isn't sufficiently stressed, perhaps. When I first went to the United States, secondary school education, and to some extent university education outside the great half-dozen best universities, was inferior to that of Western Europe – at any rate before Hitler. Whatever the cause, an **[31]** enormous transformation has occurred in the level of education both in the schools and still more in the universities. Evidently the spending of money with skill and wisdom has completely transformed the American scene and produced an intellectually livelier, better-educated and altogether more civilised population. A large army of technological experts of an extremely skilled and extremely superior kind, superior even as human beings, has been bred, with a great appetite for further knowledge, interest in the world, and other human characteristics of a very attractive and enviable kind.

I do not know how this has happened. Perhaps simply as a result of the enormous and effective increase in the sense of the need for higher education in the United States. This is not felt sufficiently strongly in this country, even now. This is one of the

great causes of our relative backwardness. This isn't effectively realised yet – I'm speaking, of course, of subjects which concern me as an academic – but I feel strongly on this matter.

Old-fashioned English general education produced excellent people in the better universities. It produced civilised, intelligent and responsible human beings, an excellent civil service, and an honourable and civilised professional class. This system, as we all know, laid very little stress on technological proficiency (unless minute classical scholarship was such), as being on the whole vocational, narrowing and illiberal. This is a terrible Achilles' heel. To deplore the need for it is foolish enough; it may be undesirable at school; it is indispensable for mature men with any degree of intellectual self-respect. Nostalgia for the life of a Montaigne or a Horace Walpole is a form of opting out of the times, the intellectually marvellously fertile times we live in. Specialisation is the modern form of humanism. Unless specialisation is no longer regarded as somehow anti-humane and unworthy of fully developed human beings, unless it is realised that we need many more experts in every field (not only in the technological field), which, of course, presupposes a huge expansion in graduate studies, we shall continue steadily to decline. What is realised is the disparity of standards between, say, the older and newer universities, in an attempt **[32]** to close the gap. But this gap certainly cannot be closed by undoing those universities which still, in view of their prestige, their resources, their sheer intellectual excellence, must be, for a while at least, the schools for the rest.

This country suffers from a deep malaise: the combination of a suspicion of specialisation as such with a desire for equality – very admirable in itself and anyway inevitable. This combination could lead to the knocking down of high standards wherever they rear their precarious heads in the putative cause of raising standards all round. This is not the way things ought to be done.

BRANDON You think the Americans have emerged from the levelling of standards?

BERLIN I do. Indeed I do. There's a great deal of admiration in America for sheer intellectual achievement as such, admiration for mental power, for effective expertise, and this is not happening in this country on a nearly sufficient scale. Both the Conservative Party and the Labour Party suffer from singular purblindness in that respect.

This may be too general a charge, because there are obviously exceptions, but I should say the Conservatives are still wedded to the gentlemanly idea of a cultivated amateur who is so well trained that he is capable of doing pretty well anything that he puts his mind to. This attitude is still to be found in the Foreign Office, and in that respect makes it less aware of the social and historical roots of odd behaviour by foreign nations, for which more naive and superficial and egocentric explanations are given than by, say, the State Department, which has always believed in specialists.

And as far as the Labour Party is concerned, there is a great passion for equality of status, which, as I say, is estimable and desirable and indeed overdue in itself, but which can lead to a kind of irritated attack upon institutions with high standards, because they are socially offensive and associated with privilege and exclusiveness and social injustice. And so, historically, they may be, and perhaps still are; but they go on laying golden eggs. To discriminate against them – indeed not to prop them up, not to democratise them and invest in them, but to abandon them – is to spite **[33]** one's face foolishly. The damage to the progress of this island would be severe.

BRANDON How do you get out of this rut?

BERLIN By persuasion on the part of those who see it, applied to those who do not. How else does one do anything in democracies? By steady sincere propaganda on the part of those who both know this and mind about it. Educational centres of higher learning – for example, Oxford and Cambridge – suffer

from a certain inferiority complex, because they feel that they are being attacked for being citadels of privilege, which renders them weaker in defending themselves against schemes of reform which would be ruinous not merely to themselves, but for the country at large.

Very well-educated, intellectually competent persons, wherever they may be, even if the education was produced by means which are socially unjust (as in a large number of cases it was), should not feel morally ashamed of possessing these unjustly gained qualities; they should fight for equal access to the arts and sciences, but not underestimate their own rare possessions. So long as they do, there will be a tendency to leaven down indignantly simply in the interests of equality and in the interests of justice.

Social equality and social justice are ultimate ends of life, and any society which doesn't pay enough heed to them perishes; but they must not be driven too hard at the expense of intellectual excellence, and there can be real conflict here. The immediate lowering of academic standards in some new Communist countries was seldom unavoidable: it sprang from fury and false populism, not social need.

BRANDON To what extent has education gone beyond instruction?

BERLIN It never was mere instruction in England: too little, if you like. It's always too much so in certain countries on the Continent. What we need is more instruction, and perhaps what they need is less.

I feel very strongly that there is a great need to spend a sufficient portion of our national income on creating a larger proportion of experts: **[34]** men and women drawn from everywhere, obviously without the squalid play of irrelevant criteria – one does not have to mention them – all people trained in the new disciplines that are multiplying today, a sign of exuberant mental growth.

We must do this not so much because it's intrinsically desirable to do it – meritocracy is not more attractive than any other finely competitive world – but because other countries do it and will get ahead of us too fast if we don't. It is simply a case of not shutting our eyes to the fact that the biggest single factor in the huge technological advances of the countries which have advanced, particularly the United States, and to some degree, of course, even France and the Soviet Union, is this conscious attention to the practical results of a planned educational policy. We are still too greatly obsessed by the injustice of our educational system and not by its inefficiency.

BRANDON I'm sure that's true. There is a fear in this country of giving up overall knowledge to specialisation.

BERLIN I understand this fear very well, but this country need suffer less from this than any other, because, overall, general knowledge has been a speciality in this country for a very long time. Therefore it could well afford to retreat a little in that respect. Nothing would be more disastrous than if this country went downhill simply in the interest of preserving a rather vague educational ideal and keeping out knowledge – knowledge and a sense of reality – for fear that it may narrow the mind or make people less socially acceptable or less civilised.

BRANDON Perhaps we should organise a new form of lend-lease: bring more Americans to English universities to gain the general knowledge which the English are so good at dispensing, and which is needed for world leadership, something American universities are not so well equipped for; and in return send more English students to the United States to train the specialists we need, something American education excels in.

But let me be more personal now: who are the people who have had the greatest influence on you?

[35] BERLIN Oh dear, this is a terrible question to answer. You mean professionally or otherwise?

BRANDON Mostly professionally. I mean, as a philosopher, as a historian.

BERLIN I am no historian, I am afraid; and a queer sort of philosopher. Books more than persons, I am afraid. I have to admit that. And contemporaries more than seniors. Among philosophers the strongest single influence on me was that of my colleague the late John Austin in Oxford, who was a year younger than I, but whom I used to see every day in term-time – and we talked often for several hours on end, morning and afternoon – in All Souls, where we then both lived. Between 1933 and 1935 or so I must have talked about philosophy – and other things – with him more than to any other human being before or after, and apart from the kind of thing which I got from lecturers and tutors when I was an undergraduate, I probably gained more from him than from anyone else. Not in the way of specific doctrine, but rigour of thought, boldness, originality and power of mind, which I've never been able to emulate but which I have always admired very greatly.

Also having to write a book on Karl Marx, which was offered to me (after Harold Laski and the present Lord Longford had declined the task), did have an influence upon me: it made me aware of the importance of the history of ideas, the importance of historical currents in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It involved me with interesting ex-Marxists and altogether gave me a lifelong interest in what might be called intellectual history, the history of doctrines and the interplay of doctrine and practice. That's really it: a really strong influence.

Also life in the United States during the war, in both New York and Washington, made a powerful impact upon me, both in general and in particular, by making clear the degree of influence which small groups of resolute men could have upon the entire development of a society, both good men and bad men, and gave

me a lifelong conviction that human beings are not all that determined by impersonal forces, and that the deliberate impact upon the **[36]** development of even enormously large societies on the part of groups held together by common moral ideals, common social ideals, provided that some among their members possessed sufficient resolution, courage and intellectual power, was very great indeed. I don't think this was quite so noticeable in England in a comparable period.

BRANDON Which individuals?

BERLIN I mean President Roosevelt and his entourage. I mean the New Dealers whom I met in Washington during the war. I mean the people who impressed their personalities upon government departments and agencies. Here was this vast society the direction of which really was to a large extent determined not simply by the collision of various persons in power but by the quite open, unashamed and enthusiastic acceptance of ideas. There was no false shame about ideas under the New Deal, there was no resistance to the intellect because it was intellect. There was no fear of intelligence and no fear of cleverness, which was one of the most admirable characteristics of that regime.

People were not frightened of ideas, nor contemptuous of them (as in the ruling conservative circles in England then and now?), and were prepared to implement them. They were not terrified of being called doctrinaire or even intellectuals, and they were not over-impressed by the wisdom of businessmen or the wisdom of other empirically successful persons, but had confidence in themselves and their own intellectual equipment, and really did marvels with it. That is what produced a lifelong impression upon me: as it did on the world.

BRANDON Do you think there was a repetition of this under Kennedy?

BERLIN At the beginning, certainly. It was much more organised under Kennedy, much more streamlined, and the ideas were relatively speaking less new. Still, of course, it was the most impressive array of intelligence and energy organised in a rational and progressive cause in the world: to see Kennedy's marshals together was deeply impressive. The technical ideas in economics were new, but the New Deal was a **[37]** much more consciously ideological movement: it was really the first time that a great modern democratic industrial society tried to reform itself in the direction supplied by what are ultimately abstract ideas in a not over-doctrinaire fashion, with due attention paid to the imperfections of the human beings who were being governed or for whose benefit this was done, and, it seemed to me, with the most exceptional sensitiveness to the particular nature of the human beings, to the asymmetrical, to the irregular, to the peculiar, to the idiosyncratic, to everything that could not be reproduced in a statistical form, on the part of the people of the United States.

As a combination of intellectual imagination, recognition of the value and importance of ideas, and natural humanity and empiricism of method I don't think the period and the men concerned have ever been equalled. I remain an unrepentant and lifelong admirer of the New Deal and its makers.

Partly this was of course due to the fact that I was young and politically passionate in the 1930s. The Europe of that period was in a particularly gloomy situation. It was the Europe of Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin, Schuschnigg, Chamberlain, Daladier, Franco: not a very attractive world to anybody who believes in decency or freedom or human progress. The only beacon of democracy which was really alight in the world at that time was the rule of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who was almost the only statesman of major size who both hated oppression, fanaticism, sloth, and believed in the kind of ideals that one believed in oneself, and was not afraid of the future. He seemed gay, energetic, generous and self-confident. This was a unique thing.

If President Roosevelt had died for some reason, say, at the beginning of the 1930s, then it seems to me that the history of mankind would have been very different from what it was, and a very, very great deal worse. In that sense I'm a full believer in the role of the individual in history.

BRANDON There are no such beacons now.

BERLIN Perhaps we need them less. The situation is nothing like as gloomy as it was in the 1930s. Whenever one wants to **[38]** keep one's courage up in the face of all the disasters that we are facing, one begins to remember what a nightmare it was to be young and inadequately equipped with ordinary human attributes and to be living in Europe in the 1930s. There can have been few worse periods.

BRANDON Do you think people in Eastern Europe would say the same thing?

BERLIN I don't think they enjoyed themselves much in the 1930s. If one was Czech one could probably breathe more freely in the Czechoslovakia of the middle 1930s than one can breathe in Czechoslovakia today. But this varies. If one was Russian one is obviously better off now than one was then. Perhaps if one was a Greek there wasn't too much to choose – or a Romanian – I simply don't know.

BRANDON Do you see that the one danger for the long-term future is a divided Germany?

BERLIN I may be over-optimistic about the Germans. It seems to me they've had it. I don't believe the Germans will under any circumstances wish to engage or have anything to do with precipitating a process which would end in a large-scale war, even if it was not a full-scale atomic war.

I see, of course, why the Russians must be frightened of the Germans. I see why the whole of Eastern Europe might be, and I can see in general that it's a reasonable thing to fear the Germans. That is what is called knowledge of history. But I don't know why I am very confident that the whole trend of world development is towards the unification of Europe, in which the Germans will certainly play a large and perhaps a dominant part. They may become economically somewhat expansionist – Italians and Frenchmen are well aware of this – but militarily I doubt it. Neo-Nazism is disturbing: but it seems to me to have a look of the last hideous contortions of the loathsome old beast.

BRANDON And Gaullism: is it only a temporary diversion?

BERLIN De Gaulle's services to France really are immense. I don't wish to appear to lack admiration for a most extraordinary and in many ways great and admirable man, but after him the forces of the European union will vastly increase and the Germans will simply, in view of **[39]** their numbers and skills, play a dominant role. Other European nations, whether they like the Germans or not, will quite rationally accept this, or will accept it when the time comes. By that time we shall come in too – that in itself will redress the balance and stop the Germans from asserting themselves in some aggressively dangerous direction.

This may be pure optimism. I believe it strongly: of course follies on our part – misplaced caution, fear of being rushed into the European Unknown – that could ruin it. But even British isolationism, the strongest in the world, with splendid historic services to its credit, shield of one of the least cruel and servile of civilisations that have ever been, is at last growing thin and obsolete.

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