J. P. Plamenatz

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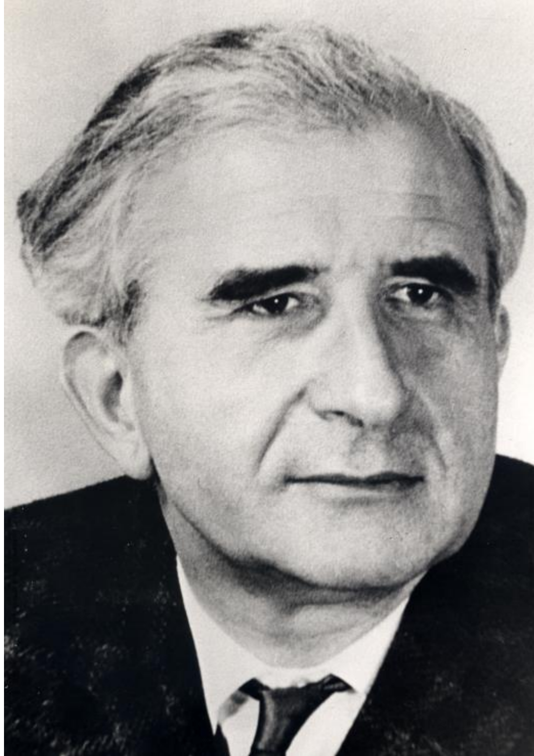

JOHN PETROV PLAMENATZ, social and political theorist, one of the four children of Petar Plamenatz and his wife Liubitza Matanovitch, was born on 16 May 1912, in Cetinje, capital of the then independent Kingdom of Montenegro. His father was descended from a family of peasant warriors who had fought against the Turks, and appears to be the first member of his family to have obtained a Western education or **[671b]** died elsewhere than on the field of battle. His mother was the daughter of one of the king’s aristocratic advisers and the goddaughter of Queen Elena of Italy. Petar Plamenatz, who had at one time been foreign minister of Montenegro, was forced to leave his country in 1917. The family

went first to France, then to Austria, and returned to Montenegro in the mid-1930s. John Plamenatz was sent to England to be educated at Clayesmore School (then in Northolt Park, now in Dorset), with the headmaster of which his father had come to be on friendly terms. He stayed at Clayesmore from 1919 to 1930, when he entered Oriel College, Oxford, as a scholar, and took the school of philosophy, politics, and economics. In 1933 he fell ill, and was awarded an aegrotat degree in the final examination. In 1934 he took the history school, in which he obtained a first class.

In 1936 he was elected to a research fellowship at All Souls College on the strength of a doctoral thesis (failed by the Oxford examiners) soon afterwards published under the title of *Consent, Freedom and Political Obligation* (1938). Three years later, when the Second World War broke out, he enrolled in an anti-aircraft battery and later became a member of the war cabinet of King Peter of Yugoslavia, then in exile in England. He was naturalised in 1941. He married Marjorie, daughter of Captain Thomas Morison Hunter of Scotland and New Zealand, in 1943. They had no children. When the war ended, he returned to All Souls College, and his life thereafter was spent in Oxford. In 1951 he left All Souls to become a research fellow of Nuffield College. He was elected to a fellowship of the British Academy in 1962. In 1967 he returned to All Souls as Chichele professor of social and political theory.

Plamenatz was one of the most respected (and prolific) writers on political theory in the English-speaking world. He developed no theoretical system of his own, sought no unifying historical or metaphysical pattern, and neither belonged to, nor created, a school of political thought. For forty years he was engaged in the exposition and criticism of the classical political texts of the West, seeking to sift the true from the false, the profound from the shallow, substance from rhetoric, in a lifelong effort to examine the relations of the individual to society.

He made little use of secondary sources, but addressed himself directly to some of the central topics discussed by the major political philosophers – the nature of political obligation, of rights, interests, law, the state, justice, liberty, equality, democracy, self-fulfilment and the like – and developed his own views by means of confrontation with the doctrines and arguments of thinkers who seemed to him to have said profound or important things about the social and political life of men. The **[672a]** philosophical movement

dominant in Oxford during his undergraduate days was that of British realism; he was trained in the use of the methods of such British thinkers as G. E. Moore, Bertrand Russell, H. A. Prichard, C. D. Broad and W. D. Ross, which dominated the Oxford scene in the 1920s and early 1930s. His tutor in philosophy, W. G. Maclagan, was a follower of this movement and had a considerable influence on the intellectual formation of his pupils.

Plamenatz believed in, and rigorously practised, careful, rational analysis: he examined the meaning, implications, presuppositions, internal consistency, and validity of each and every view he discussed, and did so in exceptionally clear language, free from rhetoric or the use beyond absolute necessity of technical terms – the prose of a rational man intending to be understood by other equally rational, critically minded readers. This was in the tradition of British political thought before and after its late nineteenth-century Hegelian phase, and Plamenatz fitted into it perfectly. His major works – the expanded doctoral thesis, rejected in 1935 and published with much critical acclaim in 1938, the examination eleven years later of the English Utilitarians, the remarkable studies of Marxism in 1953 and 1954, above all, his fullest and most important work, *Man and Society*, of 1963, a series of essays on the major political thinkers since the Renaissance, and, posthumously published in 1975, *Karl Marx's Philosophy of Man* – were all cast in this mould.

Though he was by nature somewhat withdrawn, addressing himself mainly to an academic audience, detached from day-to-day politics, his views were not conceived in a political vacuum. The Communist revolution in Yugoslavia affected him deeply: during the war, when he was on the staff of King Peter of Yugoslavia, he wrote a pamphlet, privately printed, in defence of General Draža Mihailović against his detractors; but his attitude to the East European regimes remained temperate. His critiques of Marxism are among the most fair-minded analyses of its strengths and weaknesses, lucid, detailed and singularly free from bias or failure of understanding.

Plamenatz did not expound his own political views explicitly, but his writings reveal their essence: he was a freedom-loving liberal with sympathy for Western social democracy; his sharpest arguments were directed at totalitarian ideologists, both of the right and of the left; his last book, on Marx's theory of human nature,

reveals no less about his own. Although a master of elucidation and of quietly effective, apparently naive, deflation of vast, air-filled philosophical and ideological balloons, he rejected the view that the sole business of philosophers was, by means of linguistic analysis, to clear up confusions, but not defend or attack or seek to establish the truth **[672b]** or validity of any given doctrine.

So, for example, when (in 1949 and again in 1963) he wrote on the Utilitarians, he gave his reasons for rejecting their central doctrine. Nor do his chapters on Hegel (one of the clearest expositions in English) or on Marx (the value of whose ideas he did not underestimate) leave any doubt about his own position. Unlike those who argue that ideas, especially where value judgements are involved, cannot be correctly interpreted without the fullest possible understanding of motives, purposes, social, historical and personal circumstances (and, indeed, the changing use of words) of those who hold them, Plamenatz did not believe that this was necessary, although it might be of some help. For this mainly analytical approach he has been much criticised by historically and sociologically minded writers on political theory.

The thinkers whose outlook and style Plamenatz found most sympathetic were those who spoke most clearly: Machiavelli, Hobbes, the writers of the French Enlightenment and those whom they influenced. At the same time, he remained an independent, somewhat solitary thinker, neither a follower nor a disciple of others, to some degree drawn to other inward-looking, self-absorbed thinkers who stood aside from their societies – particularly Pascal and Rousseau. He seemed to move in a timeless world of great thinkers who spoke directly to him; to them he addressed his questions, and from them, like Machiavelli, he obtained answers which he discussed in a uniquely fresh and first-hand fashion.

He was profoundly affected by British empiricism, yet his origins exercised an equally important influence on his outlook: when he wrote about equality, or the bonds of society, his feeling for the pre-feudal, semi-pastoral society from which he sprang came through clearly; so it did in his essay of 1967 on 'Alien Rule and Self-Government', and in his occasional writings on Serbian history. The interplay between the objective, rational method which he had learned in Oxford and made his own, and a knowledge of the very different life of the country of his birth, provided him with a

vantage-point from which to contemplate and criticise the industrial West in which he lived.

His writings express a highly personal and direct moral and political vision, an ability to see issues unmediated by the spectacles provided by generations of Western commentators; his style and tone are not found among other political theorists of his time. His upbringing had been partly French, and this, too, left a deep imprint upon his mind: he paid great attention to the writings of Hobbes or Hume, but he took almost physical pleasure in reading Montaigne, Montesquieu, Pascal, the plays of Racine, Molière, Marivaux, and Jean Baptiste Rousseau: the quality of their feeling and civilised and delicate imagination appealed to him more deeply than **[673a]** the plainer, less fine-grained British or German ways of thinking.

John Plamenatz was a proud and dignified man, sensitive, acute and courteous in argument, learned and unswervingly dedicated to the pursuit of truth. He was not a dominant thinker; he lacked the intellectual force and originality of an innovator or a destroyer of previous orthodoxies, but his combination of critical power, scrupulous honesty, psychological insight, skill in unravelling, and impeccable sense of justice in assessing, the arguments for and against the central social and political doctrines of the West, earned him great and continuing admiration in his profession.

His methods and personal character greatly influenced his pupils, some of whom became respected teachers of politics. The number of first-rate British writers and teachers in the field of social and political theory in the twentieth century has not been great: he was outstanding among them. He died of a heart attack at his home in Hook Norton, near Banbury, on 19 February 1975, fifty-six years to the day after he had landed at Dover.

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