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The State and Society

Colin Ward

February 19, 1962

When G. D. H. Cole died, I remember being amazed as I read the tributes in the newspapers from people like Hugh Gaitskell and Harold Wilson alleging that their socialism was learned from him here, for it had always seemed to me that his socialism was of an entirely different character from that of the politicians of the Labour Party. Among his obituarists, it was left to a dissident Yugoslav communist, Vladimir Dedijer, to point out what this difference was; remarking on his discovery that Cole “rejected the idea of the continued supremacy of the State” and believed that “it was destined to disappear.”

For Cole, as for the anarchist philosophers from Godwin onward, the distinction between society and the state was the beginning of wisdom, and in his inaugural lecture in the Chair of Social and Political Theory in this university, he remarked that “I am well aware that it is part of the traditional climate not only of Oxford, but of academic teaching and thinking in Great Britain, to make the State the point of focus for the consideration of men in their social relations”, and went on to declare his belief that “Our century requires not a merely Political Theory, with the State as its central problem, but a wider Social The-

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ory within which these concepts and relations can find their appropriate place.”

For him this demanded a “pluralism” which recognises the positive value of the diversity of social relationships, and which repudiates what he called “the Idealist notion that all values are ultimately aspects of a single value, which must therefore find embodiment in a universal institution, and not in the individual beings who alone have, in truth, the capacity to think, to feel and to believe, and singly or in association, to express their thoughts, feelings and beliefs in actions which further or obstruct well-being – their own and others.”

This particular rejection of the Idealist theory of the State was voiced in 1945, the year when the States that liquidated Hiroshima and the State that liquidated the Kulaks celebrated their victory over the State that liquidated the Jews. If you think that people’s personal philosophies are a response to the experience of their own generation, you would have expected that year, of all years, to have initiated a period in which vast numbers of people, recoiling from this object lesson in the nature of the state— all states— would have begun to withdraw their allegiance from their respective states, or at least to cease to identify themselves with the states which demanded their allegiance.

But the wave of rejection of the grand, all-embracing, and ultimately lethal political theories has been very largely a movement of ... professors. You have only to think of the strands contributed to the rejecting of political messianism and historical determinism by Cole’s successor, Professor Berlin, or by Professors Popper, Oakshott and Talmon. It has come from the right and the centre, and to a lesser extent from the left, but it does not seem to have been accompanied by a new theory of society and the state and of the relationship between them.

In the loose, and no doubt, erroneous way in which we attach currents of thought to particular decades, we can characterise the nineteen-fifties as the period of the attack on mes-

sianic political theories and on “ideologies”, and we can note how it coincided with that period in the early fifties when the most important topic discussed among the intelligentsia was the social make-believe of U and non-U, while a new generation was lamenting that there were no longer any causes to get worked up about. Then suddenly the climate changed and thinking people found themselves face to face with those ultimate questions of social philosophy on which the professors had given us such tantalising hints. Suez, Hungary, the Bomb, the dethronement of Stalinism, must have made millions of people in both East and West ask themselves those questions which resolve themselves in the question “To whom do I owe allegiance, and why?”

Do I belong to myself or to somebody else, or something else? Are my social obligations to the many informal and overlapping social groups to which I adhere of my own volition and can withdraw from if I wish, or to an entity which I have not joined, and which assumes the existence of a contract to which I have not put my hand? Are my loyalties to society or to the state?

These are not academic questions. They are being answered today by the state in its Central Criminal Court, where it is arraigning those members of the Committee of 100 who have dared to assert, through disobedience, that their loyalties lie elsewhere.

“We have to start out” declared Cole in 1945 “not from the contrasted ideas of the atomised individual and of the State, but from man in all his complex groupings and relations, partially embodied in social institutions of many sorts and kinds, never in balanced equilibrium, but always changing, so that the pattern of loyalties and of social behaviour changes with them.” This approach which is both pluralistic and sociological in its orientation, explains the sympathy which Cole felt for anarchists like Kropotkin, who also sought “the most complete development of individuality combined with the highest

degree of voluntary association in all its aspects, in all possible fields, for all imaginable purposes ... ever modified associations which carry in themselves the elements of their durability and constantly assume new forms which answer best the multiple aspirations of all."

Cole's "pluralism" had its ancestry, I believe/partly in the eclectic and libertarian tradition that runs through English socialism, and partly from an academic tradition through Maitland from Gierke and those early German sociologists who reacted against German idealistic philosophy. It was echoed recently by Professor Edward Shils, in expressing his regret that what he calls the "pluralistic theory" has "over the years degenerated into a figment of antiquated syllabi of University courses in Government and Political Science." He thinks that it is ready for "a new and better life" because of its relevance to the needs of the "new" nations of Africa and Asia, since they are said to lack what Gunnar Myrdal calls an infra-structure which is defined as "the complex network of civic and interest organisations, co-operative societies, independent local authorities, trade unions, trade associations, autonomous universities, professional bodies, citizen's associations for civic purposes and philosophic groups, through which a participation more effective than that afforded by the usual institutions of representative government could be achieved."

Well, I don't know why pluralism (and the infra-structure it implies) should be confined to the trunk of cast-off political clothes which we hope might come in handy for our poor relations in the "new" nations. I want some more effective infra-structure here, and I want a more effective participation too, and like Myrdal, I see it arising from a strengthening of society at the expense of the state. When we look at the powerlessness of the individual and the small face-to-face group in the world today, and ask ourselves why they are powerless we answer, not merely that they are weak because of the vast central agglomerations of power (which is obvious), but that they are

most perfect form. This is why the weakening of the state, the progressive development of its imperfections is a social necessity. The strengthening of other loyalties, of alternative foci of power, of different modes of human behaviour, is an essential for survival. In the 20th century, unreliability, disobedience and subversion are the characteristics of responsible citizenship in society.

weak because they have surrendered their power to the state. It is as though every individual possessed a certain quantity of power, but that by default, negligence, or thoughtless and unimaginative habit, he had allowed some-one else to pick it up, rather than use it himself for his own purposes.

The German anarchist Gustav Landauer made a profound and simple contribution to the analysis of the state and society in one sentence: "The state is not something which can be destroyed by a revolution, but is a condition, a certain relationship between human beings, a mode of human behaviour; we destroy it by contracting other relationships, by behaving differently." (This is a refinement of the idea I have just suggested of personal quotas lying around waiting to be used and since we haven't the initiative to use them ourselves, being adopted by the state so that a power vacuum is avoided). It is we and not an abstract outside entity, Landauer implies, who behave in one way or the other, state-wise or society-wise, politically or socially.

Landauer's friend and executor, Martin Buber, in his essay *Society and the State* begins with an observation of the American sociologist Robert Maclver that "to identify the social with the political is to be guilty of the grossest of all confusions, which completely bars any understanding of either society or the state." And he goes on to trace through philosophers from Plato to Bertrand Russell the confusion between the social and the political. The political principle, for Buber, is characterised by power, authority, hierarchy, dominion. The social principle he sees wherever men link themselves in an association based on a common need or a common interest.

What is it, he asks, that gives the political principle its ascendancy? And he answers, "The fact that every people feels itself threatened by the others gives the State its definite unifying power; it depends upon the instinct of self preservation of society itself; the latent external crisis enables it to get the upper hand in internal crises. A permanent state of true, positive and

creative peace between the peoples would greatly diminish the supremacy of the political principle over the social.”

“All forms of government” Buber goes on, “have this in common: each possesses more power than is required by the given conditions; in fact, this excess in the capacity for making dispositions is actually what we understand by political power. The measure of this excess, which cannot of course be computed precisely, represents the exact difference between administration and government.” He calls the excess the “political surplus” and observes that “It’s justification derives from the external and internal instability, from the latent state of crisis between nations and within every nation. The political principle is always stronger in relation to the social principle than the given conditions require. The result is a continuous diminution in social spontaneity.” The conflict between these two principles, dominion and free association as Gierke called them, *rajniti* and *lokniti* as Jayaprakash Narayan calls them, is a permanent aspect of the human condition. “The movement of opposition between the State and society” said Lorenz von Stein, “is the content of the whole history of all peoples.” Or as Kropotkin put it in *Modern Science and Anarchism* “Throughout the history of our civilisation, two traditions, two opposed tendencies, have been in conflict: the Roman tradition and the popular tradition, the imperial tradition and the federalist tradition, the authoritarian tradition and the libertarian tradition.”

There is an inverse correlation between the two: the strength of one is the weakness of the other. If we want to strengthen society we must weaken the state. Totalitarians of all kinds realise this; which is why they invariably seek to destroy those social institutions which they cannot dominate.

Shorn of the metaphysics with which politicians and philosophers have enveloped it, the state can be defined as a political mechanism using force, and to the sociologist it is one amongst many forms of social organisation. It is however “distinguished from all other associations by its exclusive invest-

ment with the final power of coercion” (McIver and Page: *Society*). And against whom is this final power directed? It is directed at the enemy without, but it is aimed at the subject society within.

This is why Buber declares that it is the maintenance of the latent external crisis that enables the state to get the upper hand in internal crises. Is this a conscious procedure? Is it simply that wicked men control the state? Or is it a fundamental characteristic of the state as an institution? It was because, when she wrote her *Reflections on War*, Simone Weil drew this final conclusion, that she declared “The great error of nearly all studies of war, an error into which all socialists have fallen, has been to consider war as an episode in foreign politics, when it is especially an act of interior politics, and the most atrocious act of all.” For just as Marx found that in the era of unrestrained capitalism, competition between employers, knowing no other weapon than the exploitation of the workers, was transformed into a struggle of each employer against his own workmen, and ultimately of the entire employing class against their employees, so the State uses war and the threat of war as a weapon against its own population. “Since the directing apparatus has no other way of fighting the enemy than by sending its own soldiers, under compulsion, to their death — the war of one State against another State resolves itself into a war of the State and the military apparatus against its own people.”

It doesn’t look like this of course, if you are part of the directing apparatus, calculating what proportion of the population you can afford to lose in a nuclear war just as the American government and indeed all the governments of the Great Powers are calculating. But it does look like this if you are a part of the expendable population — unless you identify your own unimportant carcass with the State apparatus — as millions do..

In the 19th century T. H. Green avowed that war is the expression of the “imperfect” state, but he was wrong. War is the health of the state, it is its “finest hour”, it expresses its