

National Endowment for the Humanities

The Fifteenth

Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities

Leszek Kolakowski

"The Idolatry of Politics"

(For private use only. This text may not be reprinted or reproduced without permission of the author.)

EMBARGOED: For Release after 8:00 p.m. (EDT), Wed., May 7, 1986

THE IDOLATRY OF POLITICS

BY

LESZEK KOLAKOWSKI

It is proper on this occasion to look, for a moment, at what is probably the most famous single sentence ever written in the Western hemisphere: "We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness." (If it is not the most famous, it is the second most famous sentence after the saying 'Coke is it!') Once we glance at it, we immediately notice that what seemed self-evident to the patron saint of our meeting tonight would appear either patently false or meaningless and superstitious to most of the great men who keep shaping our political imagination: to Aristotle, to Machiavelli, to Hobbes, to Marx and all his followers, to Nietzsche, to Weber, and, for that matter, to most of our contemporary political theorists. Since what is self-evident must appear self-evident to all or nearly all rational creatures--as is the case, e.g. with the principle of contradiction--the truths just quoted are not self-evident at all. They are now reserved for pontifical messages or Sunday sermons, yet they are banned beyond recall from the permissible philosophical or theoretical idiom; there are few thinkers who still stick by the belief

that the criteria of good and evil, instead of being freely invented and freely canceled, if needed, by the human race, or of expressing, at the best, its biological invariants, are somehow embedded in the order of things. Those adventurers are well aware of treading on a perilous and slippery soil.

That this change of perception does matter there is no need to prove. The rationalist refusal to take for granted any inherited order of political or moral rules was, as we know, a side of the same centuries-long process whereby the modern idea of negative freedom, and the principles of freedom of economic activity and of legal equality were established. Market economy, rationalist philosophy, liberal political doctrines and institutions, and modern science emerged as interconnected aspects of the evolution, and none of them could have asserted itself separately. The reasons for this interdependence are reasonably clear and well investigated by many historians.

Even though the prime target of attack of this entire ideological and political development was one the Church with its claims to spiritual and political supremacy, an important part of the Enlightenment was ideologically inconsistent in its attitude to the Christian legacy and in the scope of the effective debt it owed to this legacy. It often affirmed the rights of the autonomous reason, the principles of personal rights and of tolerance against ecclesiastical institutions, yet not against Christian tradition, not unlike the way the Reformation and medieval heresies, earlier on, appealed to the Gospels in order to destroy the institutional and dogmatic framework of the Roman Church. And it was more than the matter of ideological self-blindness or political expediency. One may reasonably argue that modern liberal

doctrines were historically rooted in the biblical belief that in a basic sense all human persons are equal and equally precious. However tortuous and self-contradictory was the path from the religious to the political meaning of this insight, however often it was strewn with conflicts and struggles, it was historically real.

It has been largely forgotten by now. The ideas of religious tolerance and of the separation of the church from the state--and by extension, of ideology from the state--belong to the natural equipment of the republican tradition. They were established against clericalist, if not, strictly speaking, theocratic, forces in Christianity, and they won in Western civilization. They imply that no religious body is either privileged or discriminated against by law, that there is no compulsory religious teaching in public schools, that religious loyalties are irrelevant to the rights and duties of citizens, etc. Few possible or real deviations from the principle of strict neutrality of state are either largely ceremonial, like the status of the Anglican church, or of little importance, like special positions of churches in taxation and charity law in various countries.

Yet we may ask: to what extent can this religious and ideological neutrality of the state be consistently upheld? In democratic countries, ideas as well as religions are governed by the rules of the market: a consumer has countless options and countless possibilities of choice. However, this freedom of producing, advertising and distributing religious and ideological goods is itself a result of an ideological--and indirectly religious--option. If we believe that freedom is better than despotism, that

slavery, i.e. the ownership of a human person by another person or by the state, is contrary to the very notion of being human, that equality is right and legally established privileges are unjust, that the spirit of religious tolerance ought to be supported and oppressive fanaticism opposed and so on, we are not 'neutral' in matters concerning basic values. Neither is a state which, in one form or another, inscribed those values into its constitutional framework; otherwise it would be neutral toward its own neutrality, whereby the neutrality would defeat itself. If such values are directly or indirectly of biblical origin, there is no reason why stating this would undermine the principle of separation. In terms of both its historical origin and of its prevailing norms, it would be silly to say that any state within the realm of Western civilization, by being neutral, is non-Christian in the same sense as it is non-Muslim or non-Hinduist.

During the discussion last year in the United States about voluntary prayer in schools, one could not help being struck by the almost hysterical tenor in those who attacked permission for such prayers, as if not to forbid a few pupils to say the Lord's Prayer during a break in the school amounted to throwing the country into the abyss of a sinister theocracy.

To be sure, this particular issue is a fragment of a larger conflict which includes more serious questions like abortion and capital punishment, as well as pressures coming from various intolerant or even fanatical religious groups. I believe, however, that it would be advisable to impose certain moderating restrictions on the general framework of the debate about relationships between politics and religious tradition.

It is undoubtedly true that over the last years we have been witnessing, in various regions of our planet, the growing role of religious bodies and ideas in political conflicts. This might be an effect of the increasing disappointment of many people with dominant political ideologies we inherited from before the first world war when the political landscape seemed--rightly or wrongly--mild and promising by comparison with ours. It might have resulted from the natural need of having rules of conduct which are both simple and absolutely valid. It might be due in part to the simple fact that in many countries of the third world the available political ideologies seem to be of little operational use, whereas the need for an ideologically grounded legitimacy of the existing power system is more pressing. While we may observe this process with alarm, it is fair to say that it has not produced any significant growth of theocratic tendencies in Christianity--in contrast to Islam where this tendency, however explainable by historical vicissitudes of Islamic faith and its content, is quite vigorous. To fear that the Western world is likely to fall prey to a totalitarian theocracy seems groundless; the opposite tendency which reduces Christianity to a political ideology, thus cutting off its roots, appears instead fairly resilient.

The other part of the same political framework is this: we try to survive in a world torn asunder by a conflict which cannot be simply seen as the competition of big powers vying for enlargement of their respective areas of influence; it is a clash of civilizations, a clash which for the first time in history has assumed a world-wide dimension. However distasteful our civilization might be in some of its vulgar aspects, however enfeebled by its

hedonistic indifference, greed, and the decline of civic virtues, however torn by struggles and teeming with social ills, the most powerful reason for its unconditional defense (and I am ready to emphasize this adjective) is provided by its alternative. It faces a new totalitarian civilization of Sovietism and what is at stake is not only the destiny of one particular cultural form but of humanity as we have known it: not because this new civilization is militaristic, imperialistic and aggressive but because of its educational goals, because it promises us to convert human persons into perfectly replaceable parts of the impersonal state machine, each of them having no more reality than this machine is ready to confer on it and each having a mind which would be, ideally, a passive replica of the lifeless Robot, with no will, no ability to revolt, no critical thought of its own. While we have arguments to assume that this ideal is unattainable for reasons which are inherent in human nature (the abysmal economic ineptitude of this civilization, its retreats and reluctant concessions reveal it), a strong movement toward it has already brought about unspeakable cultural disasters and is likely to cause more.

I would even go further and repeat what Karl Jaspers once wrote. Jaspers, who was extremely sensitive to religious intolerance and fanaticism in Christian tradition, said that if he had the distressing choice between Christian (he meant Catholic) and communist totalitarianism, he would opt for the former, after all, because the spiritual source of Christianity, the Bible, is the source of European culture, and therefore our civilization, even in such an oppressive form, would not lose its continuity or be severed from its origin.

Needless to say, those of us whose minds have been shaped to a larger extent by the Enlightenment and who are not prepared to dismiss its legacy altogether, no matter how self-defeating its upshot might appear, abhor the prospect of such a choice. And we might be wrong in thinking that it is no more than an abstractly concocted possibility; it is not imminent, to be sure, but it is not a fanciful or surrealistic vision either, considering the energy of movements which make it conceivable.

It has been the contention of many people that if we want to face the danger of our civilization collapsing into a nihilistic sluggishness and becoming an easy prey for tyranny, and to face this danger in a broader historical perspective, rather than in terms of direct political or military technique, the spiritual legacy of the Enlightenment calls for revision; there are indeed at least three crucial points in which humanist beliefs seem to have reached a suicidal stage.

The first point is the belief in so-called 'absolute values'. To sneer at 'absolute values' has been extremely easy, of course, since the movement of the Enlightenment managed to convince us that all human beliefs about good and evil are culture-bound, historically relative, and that mankind had already suffered enough because of struggles between various religions and doctrines whose adherents, on all sides, were deeply convinced of being the only privileged carriers of the absolute truth. Humanist skepticism, including its dismissal of 'absolute values,' forged a powerful weapon against the fanaticism of sectarian strife and laid a foundation for the institutional framework of a pluralist and tolerant society.

It revealed its danger, though. It made those very ideas of pluralism and tolerance as relative as their opposite. We got used to shrugging off many horrors of our world by talking about cultural difference. 'We have our values, they have theirs' is a saying which we frequently hear when dealing with the atrocities of totalitarianism or of other forms of despotism. Do those who say so seek really to state that it is pointless and arrogant to make value judgments on the difference between pluralistic forms of political life and those societies in which the only known method of political competition is to slaughter the rivals? When we extend our generous acceptance of cultural diversity onto all the rules of good and evil and aver, e.g., that the human rights idea is a European concept, unfit for, and ununderstandable in, societies which share other traditions, is what we mean that Americans rather dislike being tortured and packed into concentration camps but Vietnamese, Iranians and Albanians do not mind or enjoy it? And if so, what is wrong with racial laws of South Africa and why should we not be satisfied with saying that the Afrikaners simply 'have some values of their own' and that we have no way to prove that ours are any better? Or, to put it crudely, shall we say that the difference between a vegetarian and cannibal is just a matter of taste (even if taste is admittedly involved)?

To be sure, we usually do not express our enlightened tolerance in such a daring manner, but this might result from our reluctance to make explicit the consequence of our faith. It is easier to say vaguely 'societies have various values' or the 'belief in absolute values is obsolete and naive,' than clearly to admit that slavery is as good as freedom, granted that nothing is

intrinsically good or evil. More often than not we are simply inconsistent, less for cognitive, and more for political reasons: we like to profess our relativistic complacency in cases we prefer, on political grounds or because of cowardice, to treat with civility and to reserve our moral intransigence and 'absolute values' for other cases, e.g. to be moralists in problems concerning South Africa but Realpolitiker and courteous relativists when dealing with Communist systems ('they have their values...') or vice versa; this means we convert our political commitments into moral principles and this is precisely what idolatry of politics means: to fabricate gods for an ad hoc use in a political power game.

To say this does not solve any particular political issue and by no means implies that moralistic inflexibility provides a good basis for all political decisions or that one could infer the entire policy of a country, say, from the concept of human rights. This is clearly impracticable. In many decisions moral cost is inevitably involved, alas. Bloodshed is always evil, but we have to admit that it is not the ultimate evil. All through history people have accepted bloodshed for good cause, and it would be silly to decide that we ought to avoid bloodshed in all circumstances and at any price, as in some cases not to avoid it is the only way to avoid worse calamities and greater bloodshed. This might be unpleasant to say in a world living in the shadow of a possible war and facing the daily horrors of terrorism, but this is trivially true all the same. The point is rather to be aware of our choices and call things by their name, which is infrequent in political conflicts: if we have no option of avoiding evil, at least we ought not avoid identifying it as such.

But, let us repeat, to believe in intrinsically valid rules of good and evil and to admit that it is unfeasible to base political decisions exclusively on them does not settle any specific political issue. However, there is nothing extravagant in a reflection which, without being directly useful in political affairs, aims at examining the non-political sources of diseases which affect political life: not our technical inability to cope with problems but rather our inability to handle problems which are not technical and not soluble by technical devices. And it is arguable that this inability of ours is a part of the mentality we inherited from the Enlightenment and even, one may say, from the best aspects of the Enlightenment, from its struggle against intolerance, self-complacency, superstitions, and uncritical worship of tradition. Even if the great masters of the Enlightenment did not necessarily unfold their relativistic ideas in the form which, as I am arguing, exerts a paralysing influence on our current ability to oppose evil and intolerance, they planted a good seed which turned out to produce dangerous fruit. The denial of 'absolute values' for the sake of both rationalist principles and the general spirit of openness threatens our ability to make the distinction between good and evil altogether; to stretch the tolerance onto fanaticism amounts to favoring the victory of intolerance; to abstain from fighting evil on the pretext that 'we are imperfect' might convert our imperfection into barbarity.

The second point in which we can notice the self-degrading movement of the Enlightenment is the uncertain and conceptually fragile status of human personality. The saying about the social nature of human creatures has been repeated for twenty-three centuries. Its meaning, however, is at least twofold: it might mean something trivially true or something that is not only

highly controversial in philosophical terms but, if generally accepted, very damaging, perhaps disastrous to our civilization. It is, of course, trivially true that the language, knowledge, ways of thinking, emotions and aspirations of each of us have been shaped by what we experienced in human environment, that we could not survive either physically or mentally without sharing our experience with others and communicating with them. Still, this platitude does not entail that the reality of each of us is entirely reducible to what others have given us, that apart from our participation in communal life a human creature is literally nothing, as if each of us were only a collection of masks which are put on an empty space, as if there were no other humanity but collective, no self save Rousseau's 'moi commun.' The belief in an irreducible and unique core of personality is not a scientifically provable truth, certainly (apart from its description in genetic terms which is not what is meant) but the notion of personal dignity and of human rights is, without this belief, an arbitrary concoction, suspended in the void, indefensible, easy to be dismissed.

The belief that the human person is entirely society-made, even if moulded from a raw material (which is physical, and not human) has a number of alarming consequences. Many people have noticed and investigated the erosion of both the very concept and the feeling of personal responsibility in contemporary civilization and it is difficult not to perceive how this process is linked to the belief I am talking about. If 'I' am not 'I', if the word 'I' is a pronoun to which no reality corresponds, at least no morally constituted reality, if I am totally definable in 'objective' terms of social relationships, then indeed there is no reason why I, rather than the abstract 'society' should be responsible for anything. I remember seeing on American

television a young man who was convicted of brutally raping a child, a little girl; his comment was, "Everybody makes mistakes." And so, we now know who raped the child: 'everybody,' that is, nobody. Let us think of the famous recent trial when a tobacco company was brought to court by a family which charged it with being guilty of the cigarette addiction of their deceased member. Shall we see a rapist suing the 'society,' that is a school or the government, for being a rapist? Or a wife demanding that the government order that her husband, who eloped with another woman, should love her again? There is no point in dwelling on this subject or multiplying the examples as the general tendency to devolve the responsibility for the individual's acts (in particular their wrongdoings and shortcomings) on anonymous collective entities is well known and can be documented only too easily.

The more sinister side of the same loss of our ability to assert the separate, irreducible ontological status of personality consists in that it makes us conceptually defenseless in the face of totalitarian doctrines, ideologies and institutions. There are obviously no grounds to attribute to the human person an absolute and irreplaceable value on the assumption that it is no more than an expression of impersonal aggregate; and therefore there are no grounds to oppose the idea that individuals are organs of the state and that all aspects of their life, and life itself, are to be treated accordingly, that their worth is entirely to be measured by their usefulness--or otherwise--at the service of the state. On the same assumption we are helpless in resisting those sides of democracy which in some conditions--empirically observable--are compatible with totalitarianism; the principle of majority conceived of as an absolute rule is thus compatible.

The distinction between the personal and collective sides of our life, though banal and investigated for centuries by philosophers and social thinkers, does not cease to be worth inspecting. It takes on special significance in modernity, when it is politically expressed in two requirements, always distinct and sometimes limiting each other: participation in power on the one hand and personal rights on the other. The right to participate in power, expressed in democratic institutions, does not by itself assure the protection of personal rights. The latter, far from being an extension of the principle of majority, puts limits on it, considering that personal rights can be suppressed with the approval of the majority and a despotic or even a totalitarian order which enjoys the majority's support not only is conceivable but can be actually shown by examples. A society shattered by despair and dread, thrown into panic, can look for a solution in a tyranny which robs individuals, including those who support it, of personal rights. Majority gave power to Hitler, to Khomeini, perhaps to Mao, if not always by active assistance, then by inert submission to the rape. In the normal course of things all the revolutions which establish a tyranny end in a bitter hangover very soon, but usually too late for people to shake off the self-imposed yoke.

It might be the case for arguing that to guard personal rights is more important in our world than to defend the system of participation in power. If personal rights can be brought to ruin with an active or acquiescent support of the majority, the reverse is true, too: they can be protected in a condition where there is very little participation in power. We can show in

various historical periods and in various countries examples of a mild autocracy or oligarchy where participation in power was restricted to a tiny privileged section of population, where no universal suffrage existed and personal rights were nonetheless protected--if not perfectly, then reasonably well--where people normally did not fall prey to lawless brutality, and where the law was enforced and cultural life suffered no severe restrictions. The most superficial glance at European history can convince us that a life in a non-democratic order does not need to be an unceasing horror, that individuals--rich as well as poor--can survive reasonably well and arts can flourish, that an autocracy can be, if not quite generous, at least not cruel. And, to support this line of argument, some people argue that the participation in the democratic process is largely illusory or is reduced--as the much underrated French thinker Jacques Ellul says--to the so-called political 'commitment' which means nothing but the surrender of one's own will to professional politicians. We may add that in democratic countries, according to many signs, the degree of identification of people with the government they brought to power in free elections is not impressively high. It is enough to ask a childish question: if people have the government they elected, that is a government they wish and, consequently, the law they wish, including the taxation law, why do millions cheat on their taxes? One should suppose that in a good democracy people are required to pay in taxes as much as they wish to pay, but to draw this conclusion, in full naivete, from constitutional principles, can only reveal the grotesque hiatus between principles and psychological reality.

Those arguments are probably reasonable but they are only half of the truth. The other half is that, while we can find examples of a benign

autocratic or aristocratic order, they come from the past and not from the present. Benevolent tyrannies, enlightened and tender-hearted autocracies, are not in existence any longer; perhaps they have become culturally impossible. Why it is so, we can only speculate upon. Power has always been desired and sought after as a good in itself, not only as a tool to gain other benefits. But the idea that everyone has a right to participate in power is of relatively recent origin, and it so much belongs to the ideological armory of modernity that it is verbally admitted in the most hideously despotic regimes. Once it has been established it cannot be canceled and the participation in power in a democratic process, however dubious it might appear to individuals (who often perceive in it a proof of their own helplessness, rather than a device whereby they can influence events) is the only reliable defense against despotism and therefore, in our world, a necessary condition of personal rights as well as cultural pluralism being protected. It is not a sufficient condition, though, and therefore I believe it important to keep in mind that personal rights set limits on democratic principles rather than being their natural consequence. And personal rights are defensible only on the assumption that there is a realm of personal reality which is definable in moral, not biological, terms; they have to be vindicated on moral grounds, much as their implementation depends on political conditions. In a world where everything has become politicized it does matter to repeat the time-honoured truism that political goals have to be assessed in terms which are not political. This truism carries perhaps more weight today, as there is no agreement even on the most general framework of political ends, and no one can define in a non-controversial manner what the Aristotelian 'good life' as a political objective means. We have been taught by long

experience that basic goods which we might be ready to approve conflict with each other: security and freedom, freedom and equality, equality and personal rights, personal rights and the rule of majority.

Personal rights, moreover, insofar as they include the right of property, inevitably conflict with the idea of distributive justice. It would be futile to assert both without qualification. The normative notion implying that all people are entitled to have a share in the wealth of nature and in the fruits of civilization, that they may make claims to a minimally decent life, that the institutions of the welfare state are to be upheld as a matter of justice, and not only of political necessity, is incompatible with everyone's right to enjoy legally acquired property.

In vain do we repeat slogans which mix up all our 'values,' as if we knew how to implement them jointly. When we say 'peace and justice' we have always to bear in mind that forty years of peace in Europe have been based on glaring injustice, on the enslavement of Central and Eastern parts of the continent. However precarious and unstable this peace--in the sense of the sheer absence of war--might be, it has been preserved for four decades. And so, when we use generalities like 'peace and justice' as an expression of our good wishes, more often than not we simply avoid real issues and real choices.

We thus go back to Max Weber's classic distinction between the ethics of intention and the ethics of responsibility. A politician's good intentions clearly do not count in his performance; he is assessed according to his skills in foreseeing the foreseeable consequences of his acts--in fact he is usually called to account for the unforeseeable effects as well. We cannot

avoid the notorious fact, however disagreeable, that acts which we are ready to deem noble when performed by an individual for moral reasons might be not only inexcusable but disastrous when they are converted into political acts, let alone into rules of politics. These pacifists of old who, on religious or moral grounds, refused to carry the sword but were ready to serve on a battlefield as stretcher-bearers or nurses and to share the dangers of soldiers, deserved full respect, since they proved that their refusal was morally motivated rather than being just a search for safety. Those pacifists who today act as political bodies have to be assessed by political criteria, that is by their ability to calculate the consequences of their actions and not by their intention to secure peace--as though anybody might now wish to provoke the global war. If one may reasonably argue that their actions make war more, rather than less, likely (as, I believe, is the case with the advocates of unilateral disarmament in Europe), they have to be judged accordingly. Still, the intended consequences, whether actually materialized or not, obviously have to be judged as well on non-political criteria, otherwise the efficiency in pursuing any goal, however hideous, would remain as the sole measure.

Owing to the tradition of Enlightenment we once got used to the belief that all the pillars on which human hope for a good world rested--freedom, justice, equality, peace, brotherhood, prosperity, abundance--can be built jointly in a harmonious progression. Very few of us can now preserve this belief and take it seriously. European liberals and socialists who spread this faith were time and again accused by conservatives of their failure to perceive the inherent evil in human affairs or to explain it. They saw evil, according to this criticism, as a technical blunder, something contingent that

can be eradicated by an adequate social technology. Liberals and socialists, in their turn, accused conservatives of using the doctrine of the ineradicable evil as a pretext to oppose all reforms which could make our lot more tolerable and reduce human suffering. There is some justice in both charges and therefore it is probably safer for us that progressives and conservatives coexist in the unremitting conflict rather than that one of those irreconcilable mentalities should gain the definitive victory.

The third point at which the legacy of the Enlightenment has become destructive in our civilization is the erosion of historical consciousness. I do not mean, of course, historical research that is flourishing and apparently in robust health; nor do I mean historicism as a philosophical doctrine which kept growing as an ideological device since the end of the 18th century. I do not even mean the amount of historical knowledge people get in schools or from books and television. I have in mind the progressing decline of the awareness that our spiritual life includes the sedimentations of the historical past as its real and active component and that the past is to be perceived as a never-fading frame of reference in our acts and thinking. That our life actually does include this component and hinges on this frame of reference might be the case without our being aware of it. It is the withering away of this awareness which I am getting at.

This is, of course, hardly a new tenet: it has been worrying many people for several decades and by broaching it I do not pretend to discover new continents. But it is worth discussing as we usher in an epoch when children, from the earliest age, are going to sit at their computers and, as a result,

their minds will be entirely shaped by the acts of calculation, with historical self-understanding sinking into irrelevance or oblivion.

The Muse of history is gentle, learned and unassuming, but when neglected and deserted, she takes her revenge and she blinds those who scorn her.

An important trend within the Enlightenment, since Descartes, used to shrug off the historically defined notion of human existence for obvious reasons: first, because it appeared irrelevant to the progress of science, technology and the future happiness of mankind (and is not the past, after all, a huge mass of irrational passions, ignorance and foolish mistakes?); secondly, because the respect for history included worship of tradition as such, the veneration of what is old and established for no better reason than that it is old and established. Conforming to this mentality it is we, the moderns, who are old, whereas the ancients were children--as many thinkers, since Francis Bacon, have claimed--and there is no point for the elderly to look for wisdom in the minds of infants. And what profit, apart from a possible entertainment, can we get from being informed that Zorobabel begat Abiud and Claudius was done in by Aggripina? To be sure, hardly anyone today expresses the rationalist contempt for history in such a simplistic fashion. But the natural disposition of the rationalist mind seems to have gained the upper hand of historical curiosity in general education and in the mental habits of modernity. We have been told time and again that we do not learn from history. This saying, too, is trivially true in a sense and perniciously wrong in another. It is trivially true in the sense that historical events and situations are by definition unique, and the stuff historical processes

are made of is countless accidents, irrepeatable coincidences, disparate forces unpredictably interfering with each other. Apart from common sense platitudes we cannot acquire from historical studies any useful rules of conduct that would be applicable in new situations. A politician--to take a Machiavellian example--does not need to study the vicissitudes of Roman emperors in order to discover that he cannot rely on the unconditional loyalty of people he promoted; to be aware that lost wars are likely to provoke domestic upheavals, we can do without immersing into chronicles of modern Russia.

To derive from such observations a general principle to the effect that 'we do not learn from history' implies, however, that historical knowledge would be useful only if it provided us with a technical guidance we would subsequently apply in governing, in vying for power, in warfare, not unlike consulting a manual to repair a broken vacuum cleaner. Since historical studies are demonstrably futile in this sense, they are worthless tout court. This manipulative, technical approach to the past is a natural consequence of the general rationalist view on life and it might prove ruinous to our civilization.

We learn history not in order to know how to behave or how to succeed but to know who we are. And what matters is not the scope of our learning. From a good historical film about, say, Richard III, I can learn more than I have ever known on the subject and even with reasonable accuracy. But I know this as a matter of amusement, and my newly acquired knowledge in terms of my mental life does not differ from the 'knowledge' I gain from a purely fictitious thriller. Educated and even uneducated people in pre-industrial

societies, whose historical learning was very meager, were perhaps more historical--in the sense I mean here--than we are. The historical tradition in which they lived was woven of myths, legends and orally transmitted stories of which the material accuracy more often than not was dubious. Still, it was good enough to give them the feeling of life within a continuous religious, national or tribal community, to provide them this kind of identity which made life ordered (or 'meaningful'). In this sense it was living and it taught people why and for what they were responsible, as well as how this responsibility was to be practically taken up.

It would be difficult, on the other hand, to refute the objection that history which is conceived not as an object of scientific inquiry, a mundane knowledge, but as an imperative force tying people together by the awareness of common destiny and common responsibilities, is bound to be a mythological history--unquestionable and immune to rational scrutiny. Moreover, historical myths have usually confined their power to tribal or national entities, and the universal history--either as a framework of our mental life or even as reality--has only begun to emerge. What come the closest to all-encompassing, meaning-generating social memory have been the myths of universal religions, none of which, however, has proved so far to be capable of becoming truly universal. Buddha and Jesus have certainly provided mankind with the memory of events of universal significance, not restricted to any tribal perception, but even the powerful radiation of those events has broken the resistance of tribal self-containment only to a small extent. And while historical self-understanding has the virtue of giving a sense to a particular community, it has the vice of dividing the human race as a whole.

I do realize that this might sound like old reactionary prattle. It is old. It was not new when Sorel taunted the utopian dreamers who, ignorant of historical realities, were building in imagination their world of perfection. It was not new when Dostoyevski scoffed at the apostles of progress who hated history because they hated life itself. It was not even new when Burke argued (in part against Thomas Paine) that all legitimate social contracts involve past generations and that we are 'responsible' for the past. But I do not believe that whoever is interested in, and worrying about, the spiritual fragility of young people can deny that the erosion of a historically defined sense of 'belonging' plays havoc in their life and threatens their ability to withstand possible trials of the future.

And we have reasons to worry about the decline of historical awareness in a more specific and politically more pertinent sense. A manipulative and rationalist (as distinct from 'rational') approach to historical knowledge is an organic part of the general belief that the potential of social technology is unlimited, in other words that the society is 'in principle' as malleable as any material, that we can step by step eliminate chance from historical processes as efficiently as we eliminate it from our machines and that, if we are clever enough and benevolent enough, we can, by employing those technological skills, produce a society without evil and hostilities, without scarcity and suffering, without frustration and failures. Once we let ourselves be convinced of the idea that the past is pointless because it fails to provide us with reliable prescriptions for solving any specific current problems, we fall into a paradoxical trap; on the one hand, by losing the clear awareness of the continuity of culture and thus losing the historical frame of reference for our issues, we lose the ground on which those issues

can be properly stated at all; on the other hand we easily imagine that the past--ignored or reduced to nothingness--is not a real obstacle to our dreams of perfection, that political technique, properly improved, can reach the point of near-omnipotence and that all human worries are soluble by political means. To expect that chance can be removed from social processes, e.g. that history can be simply canceled, is a deadly illusion. To believe that human brotherhood is a political 'problem' amounts to imitating the Saint-Simonists of old who designed special jackets which were buttoned from the back, so that nobody could dress or undress himself without the help of others; this was supposed to promote universal fraternity. It is reasonable to hope that various forms of human suffering be successfully fought against--that hunger can be overcome and some diseases become curable, but to imagine that scarcity as such, scarcity tout court, shall be eradicated is to defy all historical experience, because scarcity is defined by wants and human wants can grow indefinitely. In all those hopes we perceive the same spirit of idolatry.

There are no 'laws of history' but there are layers of reality--climatic, demographic, technical, economic, psychological and intellectual--which change and move at a different pace, combining their energies in an irregular way and surprising us time and again with unexpected extravagances and caprices. Historical knowledge cannot prevent those surprises from occurring, it gives no clues to predict the unpredictable, but it can at least protect us against foolish hopes and reveal the limits of our efforts, limits defined by physical and cultural invariants, by permanent aspects of human nature and of the great nature, and by the burden of tradition. The conditions of political competition are so tough that professional politicians and statesmen have no

time or energy to spare for disinterested study and, to succeed, they usually have to start their career early in life; necessarily, they restrict their knowledge to what might be useful and relevant to their day-to-day preoccupations and cannot afford to keep this distance from current events which a larger historical perspective might help them to acquire. Those few politicians of the last decades who were on more intimate terms with the historical past--like de Gaulle and Churchill--were not protected against making blunders; but if their influence was more profound and longer-lasting this was perhaps due to their sturdy awareness of living within, and being limited by, a continuous historical stream.

In all three areas in which, as I tried to point out, the ambiguities of our cultural heritage matured into immobilizing self-contradictions, we cannot be comforted, alas, by a hope of discovering a well-balanced juste milieu. The belief or disbelief in 'absolute values' is often offered to us as a choice between fanatical intransigence and nihilistic indifference. To assert or to dismiss the intrinsic and irreducible value of personal life might easily mean either simply to reject the idea of distributive justice or yield to the totalitarian temptation, that is to say, to accept either the unacceptable sides of liberalism or the unacceptable sides of collectivism. To experience the historical dimension of our life as a source of meaning or to deny the validity of this experience amounts often either to going back to the inert romantic worship of mythological past or to decreeing that history as such is irrelevant and thus demolishing all non-utilitarian grounds of communal life. To state that one is "in between" those options or that one has reconciled them in a synthetic view is most easy in general terms and most difficult when the detailed choices are to be made. One is rather tempted to locate oneself on two irreconcilable extremes simultaneously.

In political decisions and attitudes people can appeal to the divine law, to the natural law and the theory of social contract, or to the feeling of historical continuity of which they are agents even if they revolt against it. It appears that we are about to lose all those three reference points; thus we either reduce politics to the technical rules of success or try to dissolve our existence in a mindless and fanatical devotion of one kind or another, or else we are escaping from life into drugs and other self-stunning devices. I believe that we can be cured but not painlessly.

An objection might be raised that what I have said could well borrow the title from the famous treatise of Abelard: Sic et non. I would be in trouble in trying to rebut this charge except saying that 'Sic et non' is a suitable title for most of the stuff our mind is made of.

#

EMBARGOED: For Release after 8:00 p.m. (EDT), Wed., May 7, 1986