not thinking like a liberal

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Raymond Geuss

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Aber schon der nächste Tag brachte eine arge Enttäuschung. Törleß hatte sich nämlich gleich am Morgen die Reclamausgabe jenes Bandes gekauft, den er bei seinem Professor gesehen hatte und benützte die erste Pause um mit dem Lesen zu beginnen. Aber vor lauter Klammern und Fußnoten verstand er kein Wort und wenn er gewissenhaft mit den Augen den Sätzen folgte, war ihm als drehe eine alte knöcherne Hand ihm das Gehirn in Schraubenwindungen aus dem Kopfe.

The next day brought a terrible disappointment. On the very next morning Törleß had bought the Reclam edition of the volume he had seen in the professor's room and he used the first break in lessons to start reading. But there were so many parentheses and footnotes that he did not understand a word, and if he tried conscientiously to follow the sentences with his eyes, he had the feeling that an aged, bony hand was slowly extracting his brain from his skull, winching it out as if winding it around a screw.

—Robert Musil, *Die Verwirrungen des Zöglings Törleß*

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preface

Sous quelque angle qu'on le prenne, le présent est sans issue. Ce n'est pas la moindre de ses vertus.

No matter how one looks at it, the present has no future. That is by no means the least of its virtues.

—*L'insurrection qui vient* (2007)

THE ANGLO-SAXON political, social, and economic model, the combination of a capitalist economic system with a liberal form of parliamentary democracy, seemed to work well for Great Britain and its English-speaking former colonies from the end of the eighteenth until the end of the twentieth century—and especially well for the elites of those countries. In the second half of the twentieth century it even seemed to be establishing itself as the major benchmark for all modern societies. However, it has now been visibly unraveling for the past decade or so. The increase in the speed of this decline in the last five years, during the period of the ascendancy of Donald Trump in the United States and the campaign in the United Kingdom to leave the European Union, has been staggering.

There was always a certain tension in the way the Anglo-Saxon model was perceived in Britain and the United States. On the one hand, it was presented as a universal paradigm to which all people in all societies aspired, and the adoption of which would be in their own manifest self-interest. A rule-governed international system of parliamentary capitalist societies was "the solution to the riddle of history which knows itself to be that solution," to use a phrase that Marx uses for a rather different political project (communism).[1] On the other hand, it was very clearly understood (although perhaps never clearly stated) that if the whole world adopted capitalist liberal democracy, the result would inevitably be that "we"—Britain and the United States as political entities, and the members of the dominant socio-economic groups within each of these two societies—would remain reliably on top. One can see the tremendous ideological power of a construct that combined universalist pretensions with hard-headed self-interest, especially when it seemed to be confirmed by tangible economic and military success. It is difficult, I think, for anyone who grew up in one of these two societies to appreciate how odd it was to assume that these two aspects—the universalist and the exceptionalist—would reliably continue to be correlated forever. Even those who were clearly socially, economically, or politically downtrodden and who might have been expected to have no special motive to accept the ideology did not necessarily find it easy to articulate their dissatisfaction because they lacked appropriate concepts and an appropriate framework. Members of marginal groups with their own theoretical traditions, even if these were deeply premodern, might have had a better chance of seeing the conflict between these two aspects clearly. As the economic and political situation became more troubled for the United States and for Britain, the tension

between these two conceptions became harder to ignore and manage. In his own crude way, Donald Trump saw this and drew a coherent, if repellent, conclusion.

The economic crisis of 2008 was directly caused by the deregulation of the banking system, that is, by the application of what certainly look very much like standard liberal principles to the realm of finance. For a while, however, people seemed unwilling to recognize the significance of this fact, and, when they did, their reaction was surprisingly muted. The stress created by the economic collapse, however, had a gradual ripple effect which took a while to propagate. Only eventually, almost a decade later, did it cause the political systems in the United States and Britain to seize up. Whatever the exact etiology, Trump and Brexit have significantly dented the international appeal of a form of society that justifies itself by citation of John Locke, Adam Smith, the *Federalist Papers,* and John Stuart Mill. Liberalism is such an important part of the ideological framework of the Anglo-Saxon countries that the real economic and political decline of the United States and the United Kingdom cannot be expected to be without effect on the fate of liberalism.

I wrote this text in January 2021 while under lockdown during the coronavirus pandemic, just after the United Kingdom left the European Union. Although I do not mourn the passing of liberalism, these reflections also stand in this other, slightly different, political context. In a way the whole text is an indirect lamentation of the loss which the departure of the UK from the EU entails. My unbelievably privileged position as a retired professor with various entitlements (for instance, pensions) makes me relatively immune to the catastrophic economic effects of Brexit. The loss of much of what remained of British political power and influence in the world is something which I think

might not actually be so bad at all, but the massive cultural loss that is a concomitant of our severing of ties with the European Union is one I think I shall probably never get over.

Thinking about Brexit and what the future holds for us automatically summons up for me memories of the Philadelphia I knew when growing up there in the late 1950s just before I left to go to boarding school, a place trying desperately to live up to an image of itself derived from a distant past, and fully aware that it was failing in that. Philadelphia had been a significant city in the 1790s, but by 1955 everything important was taking place elsewhere, in New York, Washington, DC, or Chicago. What is more, people in Philadelphia, in some vague and inarticulated way, knew that. My boarding school too lived in a highly stylized past, which I shall describe in this book. Brexit, too, is (partly) about a dream of returning to a fantasy past, in which the population of the UK was racially and culturally exceptionally homogeneous, and the society was powerful enough, and isolated enough on its islands, to be able to make decisions without much reference at all to the opinions, interests, and needs of its immediate neighbors or indeed of the rest of the world. The primary topic of this book is liberalism; a secondary one is the logic of living in a bubble of nostalgia.

Readers may find more about the details of Catholic theology, belief, and practices, about obscure religious polemics, and about early Christian history than they expected and more than they can easily tolerate. Inclusion of this discussion might seem peculiar for a number of reasons. After all I am not an expert on any of this material, and my opinions about it are nothing more than reports of what I heard in 1960 from a secondary-school teacher, who was himself no master of any of the relevant fields even as they existed in 1960. The reason for rehashing this now is the general point I am trying to make with this story. I wish

to claim that growing up as a member of a subgroup with its own very dense and highly theoretically reflected history, and with an account of how that history fitted into the rest of the world as a whole, can give one a cognitive advantage at least when it comes to resisting the allure of certain widespread illusions that are deeply rooted and persistently reinforced by the normal operations of social processes. This can be true *even if* the ideology of the subgroup in question is, in itself, not anything that upon reflection one might care to embrace.

Lenin and Lukács both spoke of the need for an ideology for the proletariat. It was not enough to *be* oppressed or even to know that one was oppressed; one also had to have ways not just of expressing the distress one felt (for instance in songs), but of articulating and refining it theoretically and connecting it with a general view of society, human action, and history. One needed something like what Catholicism provided. So I have expatiated at perhaps greater length than some might feel was absolutely necessary about Catholic details. It seemed appropriate to me for these purposes to give the reader some sense of how substantial, how detailed, how interconnected, historically extended, and historically aware this ideological form was. A further reason is perhaps the surprising, and, to me, dismaying, resurrection of traditional religion in Western societies during the past twenty or thirty years. Given my general Feuerbachian approach to religion, which sees it as arising from unsatisfied human needs, I ought really to have expected this resurgence, after the colossal failures of political action which became evident at the latest by the end of the 1970s, and the obscene growth of human inequality since the 1990s, but in fact I was surprised. I expected people to look for satisfaction in much more privatized and esoteric forms.

The difficulty, of course—and in a way this is probably the defining philosophical difficulty of our time—is that we have become

rightly suspicious of all totalizing ideological constructions, such as communism and Catholicism. This means that the real total ideology of our era, the conjunction of democracy, liberalism, and capitalism, actually presents itself as something other than a total ideology; in fact, in some of its more sophisticated forms it presents itself as the anti-ideology par excellence.

It is not hard to see through this specific deception, but even when we have done that we are still confronted with an inherently unstable and uncomfortable situation: We seem, for a variety of reasons, to need something like a total worldview, and yet we have reason to believe that none, at least none of those available to us, will be satisfactory. The intellectual life of a moderately observant and intelligent person in our times has to consist of a series of business trips, expeditions, rambles, and almost aimless wanderings through a landscape that is essentially structured by what seems to be this great paradox: that total worldviews seem both indispensable and untenable. Normally, a business trip follows a well-established route to an intended end point, but an expedition is a journey into the unknown. Both of these, however, are strongly teleologically structured activities; they are directed toward a goal (even if the goal, as in the case of an expedition, is the discovery of something new). A ramble isn't like that at all, but is characterized by more internal spontaneity and is responsive at best to whimsy, and the pleasure of the moment. A truly aimless wandering is even less structured. The text that follows tells the story of one individual path through this landscape. In retrospect, I have imposed on it more shape, unity, and structure, and more of a sense of direction than it seemed to have while I engaged in proceeding along it. It often seemed like aimless wandering in a singularly inhospitable environment.

However, it does seem to me now to be true that it is possible to tell it as a coherent tale of the kind I recount in what follows. This in itself is not insignificant because it might not have been possible to do that without an intolerable amount of arbitrary bending, distortion, addition, and deletion. The exact relevance of my account is something I must leave up to the reader's judgment.

not thinking like a liberal

Introduction

Il n'y a pas d'autre monde. Il y a simplement une autre manière de vivre.

There is no other world, just another way of living.

—Jacques Mesrine, *L'Instinct de mort*

LEADING POLITICIANS of contemporary societies in Western Europe and North America like to characterize the regimes in which they operate as "liberal parliamentary democracies." Obviously this is a problematic self-description in a number of different ways.[1] Many of these societies are actually hereditary monarchies, in which feudal religious structures still play some role. In the United Kingdom, the prime minister has some prerogative powers derived from the queen, and not subject to normal parliamentary control, and, as in Iran, religious leaders have political power: bishops have an automatic seat in the upper chamber of the legislative assembly, the House of Lords. On stricter constructions of the meaning of "democracy," no parliamentary regime can be truly "democratic."[2] We also now see attempts to create explicitly illiberal, but purportedly democratic, regimes, as in contemporary Hungary. Still,

on the whole, this general characterization of places like Canada, Greece, Norway, Spain, Mexico, the United States, Italy, and the Czech Republic does not seem completely off the mark, especially in view of the necessarily approximate and flexible nature of any kind of description in politics; it is, after all, a general description intended to apply to many different cases. In politics, it is a highly political matter whether one construes certain central terms more strictly or more expansively, and that means that the underlying concepts must at least in principle lend themselves to this, or not exclude it from the very start. In this book I do not propose to discuss "democracy" or the idea of a "parliamentary" regime, although both of those are topics of great importance. Rather I want to focus on the description "liberal."

Some form of liberalism is, in my view, still the basic framework which structures political, economic, and social thought in the English-speaking world. The text you are about to read is not a sociological analysis of modern polities or a set of philosophical or political arguments against the basic tenets of liberalism (no matter how defined) or a critical discussion of the effects of trying to run a society along these principles in a world like ours. All of these would be eminently worthy enterprises, but they are not mine, and anyone who tries to read this book looking for detachable arguments against liberalism will miss the point and be disappointed. It is rather a kind of ethnographic account, with a strongly autobiographical component, of one particular niche in the ecology of modern societies. Large and complex societies will differ greatly in the number and kind of such relatively independent interstitial positions they permit to develop and persist, but one characteristic that most of these niches have is that they are highly dependent on a particular context and sometimes also on a particular historical configuration. The one I am going to describe was certainly fragile, and at the end of this book I shall say

something about how it eventually dissolved when a brief historical conjunction which made it possible ended. Still what I am describing is not a mere theoretical possibility, but something that actually could and did exist in a relatively advanced Western society as recently as the early 1960s. This fact, as I shall try to show, has consequences for how we might think about our political world.

The philosophical habit of focused individual criticism of clearly formulated theses is not useless, but it is of limited value in discussing large-scale, historically persistent movements like Christianity, nationalism, or even Darwinism. There are obviously important differences between religions, political ideologies, and scientific theories, but in some respects—such as, precisely, their ability to bring together large groups of people over more than one generation around constellations of relatively abstract concepts and ideas—it is possible to treat them as similar. Refutation (whether by pointing out internal contradiction, weakness of or error in argumentation, or simple empirical incorrectness) is a perfectly useful category, if one has a sharply defined and fixed target in the form of a specific, fully articulated statement, but one of the features of these large-scale movements is that they are not like that at all; they have clear ideational components, which are in some sense essential to them, but they are also in many ways amorphous, open at the edges, and like living organisms in their ability to change (in various ways) while retaining their identity. This is also not merely a defect or disadvantage; their open texture is part of what makes them valuable. They are not just descriptions of existing reality, but are also programs for future research, theoretical development, and action. The ability to change, adapt, and develop is part of what they essentially are. They are intended, among other things, to guide us through an uncertain future, in particular to help us to make decisions vis-à-vis *new* unknown situations and form

new opinions about them. Thus they need to be inherently open to variation, evolution, and change.

To be more exact, there are three things one must keep in mind in thinking about such movements. First, there is the Nietzschean point, which I just mentioned—namely, that they have no definition in the strict sense.[3] They have a history, and at any time in that history their myriad variants share enough properties to allow us to identify them as instances of the same thing (for instance, Christian sects, as opposed to Platonic schools). Certain things are more central to them than others: for instance, belief in the resurrection of the dead is more central to most early forms of Christianity than, say, vegetarianism—which some sects also practiced.[4] However, all this can change, and attitudes or beliefs that seemed central at one point can become peripheral (or even be dropped, such as a prohibition on taking oaths or on working as a money-changer), while others can shift into the center of the movement, as for instance the obsession with certain items of sexual morality which has risen to special prominence in some recent versions of Christianity.

Second, there is a general point about the role of "refutation," which is derived from Thomas Kuhn and the subsequent discussion of his work.[5] Whatever might be true in an ideal world, it is simply *not* true that the way in which science advances through time is by a simple two-step process: at first people hold to, say, Darwinism until one of the apparent individual constituents of the theory is "refuted" (by showing it is incompatible with other constituents or with reality), and then, in a second step, as soon as such a refutation appears, the underlying theoretical approach is abandoned wholesale. Movements are infinitely fertile in discovering ways to obviate or discount apparent refutation, not all of which are inherently reprehensible—because, after all, what seem at one moment to be important objections

can eventually turn out to be based on mistakes of one kind or another. Historical configurations like Christianity or nationalism that are not inherently scientific theories can also mutate in the face of opposition or refutation, or, for that matter, just in the face of general historical change. Ptolemy's model of the solar system is perhaps an extreme case of persistence despite a history of failure, where each discrepancy between what the theory would require and actual experience of what was the case was considered merely to be a sign that further fine-tuning of the basic theory was needed. According to Ptolemy, the planets, the moon, the stars, and the sun moved around the earth in fixed circular orbits. On closer inspection, though, the positions occupied by planets, moon, and sun did not seem to correspond to those which the theory would require. Rather than change either of the two central assumptions of Ptolemy—that the sun and planets move around the earth and that celestial motion is always perfectly circular—some astronomers preferred to add to the model further circular motions of celestial bodies around imaginary points to make the result something closer to what was observed. The only reason for the additions of these "epicycles" was to save the theory. The term "epicycle" originally had a clear concrete reference to additional hypothetical movements added to the basic stock recognized by the theory, but has now come to refer to ad hoc additions to a theory introduced into it merely to avoid refutation. There is no specifiable individual point before which it is reasonable to try to save the theory by correction and after which it is not. This makes it much more difficult to distinguish evidence-based assessment from other forces that might be operating to maintain an existing theory. One can in fact and in principle always add such further epicycles, and, with enough time and ingenuity, the day of abandoning the theory because it has been "definitively" refuted can be put off *ad kalendas graecas*.

Third, there is the Marxist point that you won't get rid of religion merely by showing that its claims are false, but only by satisfying the underlying need, the non-satisfaction of which gives rise to it; and one might well think that this point held more generally.[6] Even if, that is, *per impossibile,* you did wean people from Christianity as a specific form of religious observance and belief, as long as people continued to have an underlying need for thinking that their lives were embedded in some kind of external metaphysical and normative structure, all that this would mean would be that you would replace one form of consolation-based religion with another. As long as humans did not find in their social world the security and satisfaction they needed, they would continue to project the satisfaction of those needs onto some other imaginary world, and no amount of refutation of the details of that projection would stop the underlying mechanism from continuing to function and throwing up ever new illusions. Theodor Adorno tried to show this to be true by analyzing the astrology columns in the newspapers of the 1940s. An unsatisfied population that didn't believe in God needed to believe in the stars.[7]

People, after all, do not in general abandon a well-entrenched form of thinking and living that responds to some of their basic needs unless they can see that they have a reasonable alternative to it. A reasonable alternative means one in which the basic need would disappear or be adequately satisfied in some other way. What, though, concretely is a "reasonable" alternative? How do you frame the spectrum of possibilities? What sorts of needs would an alternative to Christianity have to satisfy? What would give those who might be receptive to criticism of some of Christianity's features the assurances they would need in order to be motivated to abandon it? How all-encompassing and plausible would an alternative to Darwinism have to be? Since these are, in a very general sense, political questions, it is not at

all surprising that the same kind of issues arise in discussions of political ideologies like liberalism. Liberalism, *as opposed to what*? Furthermore, what conditions would something have to satisfy to be a reasonable alternative to liberalism?

The claim that there *is* no alternative is a powerful and often effective one, as shown by the political career of former British prime minister Margaret Thatcher. In her case, "There is no alternative" really meant "There is no economically and politically acceptable alternative," and what "economically acceptable" in turn meant was: acceptably advantageous to the economic agents with whose interests Thatcher identified. She might actually perfectly sincerely have identified the self-defined welfare of those agents with the national interest; others, to be sure, were skeptical about that identification. However, there is a variant of the "there is no alternative" strategy which has also been highly successful: the generation of false dichotomies. The former British prime minister Tony Blair was the absolute and undisputed master of this form of sophism. If you could get people to believe that the only political choice was to support the US invasion of Iraq *or* to endorse everything the Baʿathist regime in Iraq had ever done, then the task of manufacturing support for the war was significantly facilitated. This is a version of "there is no alternative" because one of the elements of the false dichotomy is specifically formulated in a way that makes it unacceptable.

"Liberalism *or* authoritarianism" is just such a false dichotomy. "Authoritarianism" itself designates a number of rhetorically increasingly extreme descriptions of a purported alternative to liberalism, of which fascism can perhaps be considered to be the end point, the ultimate form of anti-liberalism. To be sure, liberalism is in the intended sense an amorphous and shifting collection of things with a clear ability to renew itself, change its shape, and revise the formulation of

its central beliefs. If that is true, then why expect it to have a single opposite? Why should there even be a single sequence of increasingly powerful opposites that all lie along the same dimension? The criticisms of certain of the more characteristic tenets of liberalism are telling and well known, and yet it seems to have survived them, which suggests that its appeal is rooted in the fact that it responds in a particularly satisfactory way to deep human needs and to the vested interests of powerful economic and social groups.

This brings one back to Marx's analysis of religion. Would it be possible to think about political ideologies as similarly rooted in fantasies about the satisfaction of pressing human needs that cannot be accommodated and catered for under the existing social and economic conditions? What would one find if one considered the persistence of liberalism from this point of view? If one takes, as I do, the fantasy of being an entirely sovereign individual as being at the core of liberalism, it would seem obvious that such a fantasy is a reaction to massive anxiety about real loss of agency in the world. This fear is perfectly justified in the world we live in, and so the fantasy is clearly connected to the satisfaction of a real need, even if the form the satisfaction takes is illusory. One difficulty is that actually changing the world in such a way that the fears become groundless would require many people to act in ways that might actually reinforce the view that they are sovereign initiators of action. Also, exit becomes even more difficult to envisage once one realizes that liberalism is not merely *self-imposed* illusion; it does not serve only as an imaginary consolation for frustrated needs, but it actually does effectively and palpably benefit some powerful economic actors. The benefits of liberalism are by no means imaginary for CEOs of the fossil fuel industries, and they thus have both a very strong incentive, and ample resources, to con-

tribute to maintaining it in existence and to strengthening its hold on the population.

So is there, or was there (recently), an alternative to liberalism? Is there one that defies the dichotomy liberal *or* authoritarian, or even the dimension along which this contrast purportedly lies? This book tries to trace the track of one life-path that diverges from the liberal consensus without being authoritarian and to give a thick description of it. It is a possible path, or at any rate it was a possible path in what is now the very recent past, because it is one that some people actually took (me, for instance). The intention, then, is descriptive rather than specifically argumentative. That is, this book is an attempt to paint a picture of a form of life and set of beliefs which is not just possible, but which actually existed, where this is to be contrasted with the construction of arguments in favor of a position or the refutation of objections. Some readers may feel that the text reads more like a work of history or ethnography than like a philosophical treatise, because, after all, they might think, philosophy is really all about arguments, not descriptions, about participating in a dialectic of claim and counterclaim, proposal and objection, and rebuttal and counterproposal. I do not, however share this view about philosophy.

To put it differently, I have always thought that showing that "it is *possible* (realistically) to think *this* way" is a better way of describing the goal of philosophy than the usual—and usually also misguided—attempt to show that "it is *necessary* to think *that* way." I have always been mildly repelled by the idea that philosophy should be understood essentially as a matter of finding arguments and refutations, which is a way of thinking about the subject that should have been put to rest in the fifth century BC after the *Dissoi logoi*.[8] My discomfort with the model of argument/refutation is connected with two other features

of the way in which philosophy has come to be done and which I find unfortunate. The first is the gladiatorial structuration of much philosophical discussion. Nietzsche, following Burkhardt, drew attention to the fact that Greek culture was *agon*-centered, and that this was particularly true for philosophy as a cultural practice—although in fairness, since Nietzsche was himself fully capable of reading the relevant texts, he had no real need of instruction from anyone else about this. Does, however, formalized conflict always help to generate understanding and reveal truth? The second feature I dislike is the one which Robert Nozick described in the preface to one of his books. He says he wanted to give an argument so powerful that it would fuse the brain of those who heard and understood it and *force* them to accept it.[9] Even apart from the visibly sadomasochistic element in this, it does not seem to me that an approach that conceptualizes discussion in this way, as the search for this kind of argument or refutation, is the most likely way to attain any kind of understanding of the world. Perhaps that is the major reason why I feel distant from the prevailing philosophical culture—namely, I am not as keen to win arguments or convince people that they must bend to my will, as I am to get some kind of understanding of some basic features of the world. If understanding is a conceptual key, this has consequences for how one can also conceive discussion, not to mention the possibility of collaborative effort.

In view of the fact that this is the general position I hold, I make no apology for the presence of a strong autobiographical component in this text, which in fact is structured around a sequence of events in my life. To anyone who thinks that philosophy should be a pure argumentative discipline from which all autobiographical elements are banned, I would first reply by suggesting that this is impossible, and therefore there is some advantage in being explicit about it: pretending

it does not exist will not make it go away but rather just foster hypocrisy and self-delusions of various kinds. Second, why the obsession with purity? My most important teacher of philosophy at university, Sidney Morgenbesser, used to say that behaviorism was the thesis that anthropomorphism was inappropriate in the study of human behavior. I have always thought that this was one of Sidney's best jokes, both very funny and also profound. In a similar vein, but without the humor, I might ask where autobiography would be appropriately located, if indeed it had no place at all in thinking about the sovereign human subject and its vicissitudes.

Since, then, the autobiographical element is embedded in what is basically an ethnological report, I should perhaps reinforce an important point. Many of the positions which I describe—especially, for instance, when I am talking about the content of my religion classes in school—do *not* represent views that I myself am endorsing. They are basically reports about what I was told, so large sections of this are in *oratio obliqua.* I tried to punctuate the account with comments such as "Krigler said" or "as we were told," but this became stylistically irritating, and so I was not always absolutely assiduous in keeping it up. Of course, my memory may well be faulty, though I am actually surprised now to see how much of the material I learned in school is actually still, when I now search for it, in my memory. The instruction I received then obviously made a deep impression on me, although not in every respect in a direction of which my teachers would have approved. However, that is not to say that my recollection is perfect. I cannot guarantee that no later embellishment or further reflection has influenced what I recall. I do try to mark cases in which I know that I am reflecting from this moment more than fifty years later and commenting on, adding something to, or modifying something specific that I recall my teachers to have said.

CHAPTER 1

My Fate

Comment s'étaient-ils rencontrés? Par hasard, comme tout le monde. Comment s'appelaient-ils? Que vous importe? D'où venaient-ils? Du lieu le plus proche. Où allaient-ils? Est-ce que l'on sait où l'on va? Que disaient-ils? Le maître ne disait rien et Jacques disait que son capitaine disait que tout ce qui nous arrive de bien et de mal ici-bas était écrit là-haut.

How had they met? By chance, like everyone else. What were their names? What does that concern you? Where were they coming from? From the closest town. Where were they going? Do people know where they are going, any of them? What did they say? The Master said nothing, and Jacques said that his captain used to say that whatever, good or bad, happened down here, was written up there.

—Diderot, *Jacques le fataliste*

I HAVE SOMETIMES been tempted to think that I was doomed or predestined never to be able to get on even moderately good terms with liberalism, but of course that is complete

nonsense. *Moira/fatum/destiny* are archaic conceptions, and while family pressures and expectations might for a while in the early modern period have exerted something like a shadow of full proper "destiny"—"The men in our family have always joined the military and you must, too"—at a certain point the merely sociological nature of such pressures became too obvious to be overlooked, and with the growth of the ideology of individual career choice even this shadow lost its ability to inspire an appropriate sense of utter inevitability, and gradually disappeared. Equally I could never really take seriously the Christian transformation of *fatum* into Divine Providence and the corresponding shift in values, which had as one of its results that instead of garnering high praise for the acceptance of one's ineluctable fate (*amor fati*), individuals were encouraged to heed the Christian invocation of hope, *elpis/spes*—the firm confidence that the world made sense and had some inherent meaning, and that God would take care of his own.[1]

What has always seemed to me perfectly self-evident is that both of these approaches are too simple, and incorrect, because they depend on recognizing a nonhuman intentional agency where none exists. Neither fate nor god exists. Any reasonable attitude toward the world we live in would have to be two-pronged. Metaphysically, if one wants to understand our world it is best to approach it through the late-ancient idea that *tuchē*—contingency—rules all. Finally the universe is just a quivering mass of energy propagating itself in contingent ways (although, of course, we see the propagation itself as obeying detectable physical laws), or perhaps the cosmos as a whole is merely an abstract system of formal relations, flickering randomly in and out of existence. The whole thing may instantiate certain patterns, and, if one absolutely wants to, one can call these a "meaning," but there is no intention, no volition, no orientation to value of any

kind and no teleology anywhere in sight, except, of course, where humanity has emerged, become active, and imposed a meaning. When that has happened, one has to add to the randomness of the universe a second prong embodied in Napoleon's observation (as reported by Goethe) that ancient tragedy is impossible in the modern world because destiny has been replaced by politics.[2] The destiny encountered by the young military cadet is the *political* decision which his parents and other relatives made to continue to send their sons into the armed forces as previous generations had done.

Politics is a matter of human intention, choice, and volition. Not, of course, *only* of human decision, because there will be a necessity in the concatenation of events that result from any human decision (whether the agent knows this or not). There is in many cases such a thing as the "logic of the situation." Thus, when the United Kingdom decided to leave the European Union, this decision was to put it at a systematic disadvantage in its major market, because even if, as in fact happened, an agreement was reached to continue to trade with the EU without tariffs, the cost of the paperwork involved in crossing what the UK had insisted must be a proper, palpable border was non-negligible. Now, this situation was one that arose not through any action of the goddesses of destiny, but from a series of complex human decisions. Nevertheless, these had as one of their results that a process was set in motion that had a certain directionality. Recently, it has been proposed by some politicians that now that the UK is out of the EU, it is appropriate to reduce consumer and environmental protection regulations, and workers' rights, to permit the growing of genetically modified crops, and further to deregulate hedge funds, because this is what our present situation—outside the EU—requires. This is the only way for us to get back to something like the state of economic prosperity we were in before we left the union. One cannot

deny that this line of argument now has something in its favor. After all, as we now might well ask ourselves, why did we put ourselves through the nightmare of years of negotiations about the terms of exit? What was the point? Surely not just in order to make ourselves poorer. So if we follow the dictates of a certain conception of economic rationality, we must try to exploit what relative advantage we *have* acquired (compared with all those we have given up). That advantage lies in implementing the measures proposed above. This, of course, was not something proponents of Brexit trumpeted as a "natural" consequence of leaving the EU before the vote. They had good reason not to draw attention to it because it would have been unlikely to make Brexit more attractive to voters. That many senior figures in the Labour opposition did not see that exiting the EU would have this consequence is simply their mistake. Of course, again, there is no *necessity* that we will reduce workers' rights, but it now for the first time becomes both possible and desirable in a way that it was not before—a path is marked out for it—and so to avoid it requires a continual strenuous act of political will, rather than being something that is simply excluded by the context within which normal politics takes place.

The French poet René Char used the term "*ornière*" (the ruts made in the road by wagon wheels) for something like what I mean here. Thus, toward the beginning of *Feuillets d'Hypnos,* the collection of prose texts which he wrote in 1943–1944 while constantly on the run from the Germans and the supporters of the Vichy regime, he writes, "*Ne t'attarde pas à l'ornière des resultats*" (Don't dawdle in the rut of results).[3] One can leave a deep rut—simply drive one's cart off the road altogether into the forest—but it requires more energy and concentration to do that than to continue along the beaten track.

Thinking about it in this way, I can now rephrase my initial remark about being predestined not to be on good terms with liberalism. It

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