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Gavriel Cohen's Conversations with Isaiah Berlin: No 6

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First posted in Isaiah Berlin Online and the Isaiah Berlin Virtual Library 4 May 2023
Most recently revised 15 May 2023

Gavriel Cohen: Conversation No 6

Conversation date: 10 December 1987
Place: Headington House, Oxford

Selected subjects covered
Elie Kedourie
Rationalism and empiricism
W. F. R. Hardie
J. L. Austin
Karl Marx
Pink Lunch Club
Geoffrey Hudson
Gertrude Himmelfarb
Lawrence Stone
Reviews of *Karl Marx*
London Library
Alexander Herzen
Vissarion Belinsky
History of ideas
Karl Popper
Max Stirner
Georgy Plekhanov
The Encyclopedists
Abandoning philosophy
Henry M. Sheffer
Flying from Montreal
Lecturing on Russian thinkers at Harvard
Return to All Souls
Writing in the 1950s
Attacks on his work
E. H. Carr

Side A

GC We actually reached St Paul's days in the chronological way.

IB We talked about Marmorstein,[1] and all that, from St Paul's.

[1] For Emil Marmorstein see F 94/6.

GC Yes. It was an extensive … [*laughter*]. It was also very interesting. I have some questions now to pose, particularly the relations between him and Elie Kedourie. By the way, I read the introduction you told me, of Elie Kedourie's book. Did you read it? It was interesting.

IB He published it separately. He's sent it to me.

GC I see. Well, I think he ought to publish it only separately, and not with the book.

IB Well, he has done so already, probably. It's full of – he still feels vindictive about [*name unclear*].[2]

GC Yes. All right. Now I wonder: I think, let's today stop for a while the chronological story, though we'll come back to it. We'll come back mainly to the Oxford days, particularly between your undergraduate days and, let's say, the later 1930s. What I want to try today is to follow your intellectual biography. Or what you remember of the process, if you do remember, of forming your opinions. Now, let's put it this way. You have developed through the years some beliefs. Let's not call them principles. Let's say pluralism as against monism. Let's say a strong, I would say, belief against the tyranny of one concept, even be it rationalism. You know. The responsibility of the individual. Anti-determinism. The role of the individual in history or in social life. One can say that you are Romantic: it's Romanticism that appeals to you more than rationalism, and Romantics appeal to you more than classics. Am I right in this?

IB No, this is wrong. I'll tell you what I believe. I believe in rationalism. I was brought up in the strict doctrine of Oxford empiricism, and my interest in these other things is as a kind of antidote. I thought it was too narrow. I thought it, and I still hold it, but I've always been fascinated by what the opposite side says. And therefore, when I discovered all kinds of things which appeared incompatible, I always tried to strengthen the opposition to views

[2] Marginal note: Gibb Joll. Which book by Kedourie?

to which I'm normally addicted. I'm not against French worship of reason in the eighteenth century. I'm not in favour of whatever it was Voltaire attacked, in favour of superstition or obscurantism or even emotionalism of any kind. But given the narrowness and the obvious insufficiency of these doctrines, I'd become fascinated by what is against them. And so then I oscillate between the two. I never take sides, and that's maybe one of my weaknesses. I shy from one to the other, and try to work out – not a synthesis – that's not the right approach. But some kind of personal, unstable compromise between them. If you ask me 'When did it all begin?' – after the war.

In the 1930s I was a perfectly ordinary Oxford philosopher. I believed in empiricism. I believed in some kind of rational approach. I was hostile to metaphysical speculation. Although I'd been taught that when I was an undergraduate, I reacted against it. I was in favour of what later came to be called Oxford Philosophy, or common-sense philosophy. That is my natural tendency. I was very traditional, empirical, and always rather a middle-of-the-road empiricist. I was never an active logical positivist. I found logical positivism fallacious in some ways. It did not explain things, skated too lightly over some things, and it was false; of which I was very well aware, and which I expounded even in the 1930s, when I had to talk to Freddie Ayer about his book, which was a manifesto of logical positivism in his day: 1935, that was. At the same time, I didn't react in the direction of historicism or metaphysics or some older philosophy of that kind. But in so far as Ayer could be regarded as left wing and the metaphysicians were right wing, I stood in some kind of mildly liberal position, which is my usual spiritual condition. That's why I was constantly at odds with both the left and the right, which I remain to this day. But all the things that you talk about, I think, happened after the war. I'm not quite sure why or when they did.

GC Did it mean you preferred Aristotle to Plato?

IB No.

GC Did you answer in those terms?

IB No. I didn't take a particular interest in Greek philosophy.

GC Why not?

IB Well, I studied it as an undergraduate. It was all written in Greek, which is a language I never really learned properly; after six years of learning Greek at school, I was never a Greek scholar. What impressed me was English philosophy. Not French, not German. English philosophy beginning with John Stuart Mill. Not so much eighteenth century. Well, Hume, certainly. Not Descartes. Not Locke. Not really Berkeley. Hume and the whole empirical tradition, Mill, followed by Russell, Moore, who were writing at this time. Particularly G. E. Moore, who had an influence on me. And then my colleague Austin became a Fellow of All Souls in 1933. I became a Fellow in 1932. We had long discussions about philosophy, most mornings, from 10 o'clock till almost lunchtime. I had pupils, he had pupils, but not that many. He influenced me very greatly in the direction of careful dissection of arguments, in the direction of not biting off more than one could chew, and chewing and chewing and chewing. In the direction of careful analysis of exactly what one meant and exactly what one believed, and what were the negative cases which knocked out rather too easily believed-in generalisations. That was the effect on me. Even then, I think I believed in freedom of the will. And I was very puzzled by the problems of freedom of the will, by determinism, which I instinctively reacted against, even in those days – I think maybe because my tutor at Corpus was in favour of free will, a man called Hardie, who afterwards became President of Corpus. He just was one of a few people who believed in free will. Most philosophers, from Plato onwards, were determinists. From then till now. The number of people who want to believe in pure freedom of the will is very very small, throughout history. And I think he may have infected me with his belief, which I held on to from that time till now. And Austin once said to me: 'People talk about determinism. Have you ever met a determinist? They all say they are, but have you ever really met one?' That was a typical Austin move. 'They say they are. I've never met a determinist. I don't think you have, either.'

GC But I tend to think that there is something in the nature of somebody, from the very beginning, if he is against determinism …

IB Oh, I think so. It's a matter of temperament. Most philosophy is a matter of temperament. Fichte was the first man who said that. That if you want to understand the philosophy, you must ask who the man is, and what his psychology is, and then you will understand why he believes what he believes.

GC Is that why, when you decided to deal with the history of ideas, you dealt with it through the man and not through abstract ideas.

IB It could well be. I think one of the factors which confirmed me in my anti-determinism was writing a book on Karl Marx. It began then.

GC That's what I would have assumed.

IB I was invited to write a book on Marx in 1933, as early as that, by Mr Fisher, Warden of New College, and one of the three editors of the Home University Library, the others being Gilbert Murray and, I think, somebody else.[3] And he first offered this book to Laski, who refused. He then offered it to Frank Pakenham, now Lord Longford, who also refused.[4] I think he was in despair, and he suddenly thought about me. He knew me, because I had taught at New College, and I used to go to lunch with him. And he didn't detect any strong political belief in me at all. He thought that would be the thing. I knew the language, I was a foreigner, I would understand. Anyhow, he asked me if I would do it. It was just a shot in the dark. I'd never read a line of Marx before this happened. But of course I used to talk about socialism with my friend Rachmilevich, whom I mentioned to you. So I knew what the Mensheviks believed, roughly, and what the Bolsheviks believed, roughly. What the differences between them were. But not the doctrine itself. At least, only superficially, in so far as it entered into the history of the Russian Revolution.

GC The Socialist Club. Did you discuss much …?

[3] Julian Huxley.
[4] For the full and accurate story see **https://bit.ly/IB-KM**.

IB What Socialist Club ? I was not a member of the Socialist Club. No Socialist Club. No.

GC I remember you were, for a while.

IB There was a thing towards the end of the 1930s, a luncheon club called the Pink Club. They were not all socialists. Some were Liberals, some were Communists. I probably voted for the Labour Party, but I was never a member of the Labour Club, for example. And I don't know what discussion there was. I wasn't a pupil of Cole, took no part in those discussions. I was simply a member of the Pink Lunch Club because I was anti-appeasement, anti-Nazi, anti the Government, but for no other reason, really. There wasn't much ideology. It was a club which used to meet after 1935 or so, 1934, 1935, 1936, that sort of time, simply to hear the views of people in the Labour Party, German refugees, interesting people, more or less left of centre.

GC Who were the participators?

IB Cole. He founded it. That's correct. I could tell you who the other members were, since we are wandering from the subject. Quite interesting. If we take something like 1937, a typical year: Crossman, Cole, Gordon Walker, Pakenham, Hampshire.

GC Stuart?

IB Stuart, Austin, Roy Harrod, who afterwards became very Conservative.

GC Yes.

IB James Mead, who was an economist, and afterwards got the Nobel Prize, who was never a socialist.

GC It was anti-appeasement?

IB It was anti-Conservative. Anti-Chamberlain is what it was. Anti all that. Anti-Baldwin, anti-Conservative, anti the government, anti the whole right wing in England, and all its ideas. It was more or

less pro League of Nations – it was anti-Germany, anti-Japanese, anti-Fascist. It was against what might be called the forces of darkness. It was what the Russians called the forces of light. Typically sort of liberal. Christopher Hill, he was a member, certainly. A man called Hugo Jones, who afterwards became a famous Roman historian, wrote a book on Herod;[5] well, I think he was probably a crypto-Communist by then. But one didn't know. Very left wing. And his wife, who certainly vividly … Who else were members? Rowse, A. L. Rowse, in those days. Certainly. Of course, Geoffrey Hudson,[6] who was an early Zionist. Always in favour of Zionism. By pure inner thought. He had no particular inclination, no reason why he should have been. He simply said the British government backed the wrong horse, as far as the Arabs are concerned. Simply made up his mind.

GC I never knew what to make of his …

IB Very careful thinker. Very well read. He began collecting newspaper cuttings at the age of fourteen, at school. He was an independent thinker. Mainly interested in the Far East. But he was entirely independent. He simply made up his own mind on the evidence. I've never known a more disinterested, more independent or more careful thinker. He might have been wrong, but it was never because he was influenced by anybody, or had any axe to grind. Never. He was certainly a member, who voted Labour, probably because he was liberally inclined. But he was never a socialist in the full sense. Never. But then who else came? Hudson certainly came. It was always very devastating, the way people confused general propositions. In a very slow, halting, almost broken sort of voice, he would introduce five powerful counter-examples, and that would settle that. That was his technique.

GC And so from there you couldn't learn about Marxism.

IB No. I already knew about Marxism by then, because, having been instructed to write a book, I asked myself whether I should. One thought occurred to me. It looked to me as if Marxism was

[5] A[rnold] H[ugh] M[artin] Jones, *The Herods of Judaea* (Oxford, 1938).
[6] G[eoffrey] F[rancis] Hudson (1903–74).

something which was going to develop, not decline. In view of Russia, in view of Communists everywhere, in view of the whole battle of Nazis and Communists, and so on.

GC It was 1935?

IB 1933. And I thought, well, if I don't write a book about Karl Marx, I'll never discover what it's about, because it was frightfully boring to read. Well, I tried to read it: stupefyingly dull to me. I literally forced myself to read it, or I'd never find out. I didn't want simply to know nothing about it. I never read Freud, for example, and have always regretted it. At least I read Marx. So I sat – settled down.

GC Whom did you consult?

IB Nobody.

GC And then you took it upon yourself. Did it take your friends by surprise?

IB I don't think anyone knew. It was not known. I was doing it, but I don't think I talked about it very much.

GC And while writing did you discuss it with …?

IB I began writing quite late, as is usually my habit. I accumulated quite a lot of stuff. I read Marx partly in German, mainly in Russian, because there were these excellent Russian – of course, in 1933, the Gesamtausgabe, the edition of Marx and Engels, stopped in Germany, because of Hitler. But it went on in Moscow. So I was able to go on reading the big edition, absolutely everything. I didn't just read the famous works. I read the letters, I read minor works. I read whatever the Russians in Moscow published. Volume by volume – 22 volumes, or whatever it is. I read far more Marx than would ever be good for anyone to read again. That's certainly true. And Trotsky, in order perhaps to stop myself from writing, which was a painful process. And so I learned quite a lot about him. When I began, what did I read? I read everything I could lay my hands on. Particularly Plekhanov. He was my favourite reading, because he

was amusing, he was witty, he was brilliant, he was sharp, not great flat stretches, like Kautsky. I was happy to discover that my opinion of Kautsky was shared by Marx. He met him. He wrote a letter about it to Engels. Said, 'I never met such a boring man in all my life.' Bernstein had some difficulty deciding whether to publish the letter or not.

And then in the course of doing this reading around Marx I began to read French philosophers of the eighteenth century – Encyclopedists. Of course, Plekhanov wrote a book about them, which fascinated me, because it was extremely clear, and very well written. And that gave me my first knowledge of these people. And that gave me an interest in the history of ideas as such. Because when I was reading whatever it was – Helvétius, Holbach, Condorcet, not so much Voltaire, but these sort of ideologists – the French left of the eighteenth century began to fascinate me in itself. And that's when I lectured on it, too. Towards the end of the 1930s, I began to lecture on French political thought. It was not a central subject at Oxford. But still, people came. And that's when I lectured on Hume's political and ethical thought, which again people didn't take much interest in in those days.

It was really Karl Marx that got me going. And the more I read Marx, the more it appeared to me (*a*) that he was a genius; and (*b*) that he was wrong. A genius not because he was original: there isn't a single idea of Karl Marx that cannot be traced to some earlier thinker. Not one. But his synthesis is unique. And he put certain things on the map. He emphasised aspects of history and aspects of social structure beyond social history, social life, which nobody else had emphasised to such a degree. And that's become the common position of everybody now. Class war was invented in the eighteenth century by Saint-Simon, and surplus value was invented by Michael Hodgskin in England – one can go on like this. Well, nineteenth, yes, 1830s, Hodgskin. The proletariat was the idea of [Lorenz] von Stein, who went to Lasalle, who went to Paris and joined him. A conservative German who went to France and described what he called the proletariat and its workings. And so it goes on. The dialectic obviously comes from Hegel. The whole anti-religious polemic comes from the Young Hegelians.

GC And materialism, is it from the …?

IB Materialism comes from the eighteenth century.

GC Or even earlier?

IB Or even earlier, yes. It's a normal view. Well-known view. Certainly. What else can we attribute to Marx? Big business! He invented it. The idea of big business begins with him. The conception and the influence of enormous – Saint-Simon talked about that sort of thing, but the idea of big business as the institution employing the proletariat, and creating a kind of ideology of its own, which would dominate society, I think, was really his. That can be said. And another thing – well, never mind, I don't want to lecture on Marx now, but anyhow that's what happened then. And I suppose his determinism was something which I couldn't swallow. And it appeared to be clear that certain terms in history could not be explained. The proposition which I least believed was Engels's famous proposition, that if Napoleon had not existed, a lot of other people between them would have produced the same effect.[7] As somebody once said, I can't remember who – a Napoleon d'Or was a Napoleonic coin, there was one under the first Napoleon, and there was one under the third – 'Change for a Napoleon is not a Napoleon."[8] After that I think it appeared to me absolutely clearly that people like Frederick the Great or Napoleon gave a push, a turn, gave a twist to history, which could not have occurred, might not have occurred, given the forces at play. That's my objection to Braudel and all that. The idea that individuals don't count. The big movements, the huge impersonal movements due to geography and climate and all that (I don't speak of class war) seems to me deeply implausible. Although perhaps we didn't pay enough attention to them before. That can be said.

GC Though even there I think that people are exaggerating.

[7] This is in fact Engels, writing to W. Borgius in Breslau, 25 January 1894: 'in the absence of a Napoleon, someone else would have taken his place'. Marx and Engels, *Collected Works* (London, 1975–2004: Lawrence & Wishart), vol. 50, p. 266.

[8] Untraced.

IB Certainly. There's quite a good article in the current copy of the *New York Review of Books*, by Stone, not Norman Stone.

GC The American Stone?

IB Yes, yes. He's in fact an Englishman, what was his first name? Old friend of mine. Lawrence Stone!

GC Lawrence Stone?

IB Which was a review of the book by …

GC Lawrence Stone was an Englishman? I thought he was …

IB Of course. He comes from Oxford. He lives in Oxford during the vacations. Has a house here. Pupil and enemy of Trevor-Roper. Pure, terribly English. He's a Professor at Princeton, yes.

GC Ah, yes, that's right.

IB It's an article in the *New York Review of Books*, reviewing Miss Gertrude Himmelfarb's book,[9] which was a great attack on this kind of thing, on impersonal history, on Marxism, on the journal and so on. It was quite a fair review, it said she exaggerates, goes too far, it was a lot more *précieuse*, which is approximately true, too much Irving Kristol, which was her husband. [*chuckle*] But nevertheless, it's quite a respectable review. She's worth reading – the book. It's called *The Old History and the New*.

GC I got it.

IB You bought it. Can it be bought in England?

GC Yes.

IB It can. In Blackwells? She's quite a devil.

[9] Lawrence Stone, 'Resisting the New', review of Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The New History and the Old* (Cambridge, Mass., 1987: Harvard University Press).

GC A devil?

IB It's fanatical. It denounces everybody, attributes Marxism to non-Marxists. You can imagine. Traces it everywhere. I once had this sort of symposium with her in New York, one of the Trilling Seminars, as they were called, and made some disparaging remark about Edmund Burke. She was very angry with me. Burke was an ally rather than an enemy. Anyway, I continue. So that's when I think my interest in the history of ideas came in. But the whole business about individualism and anti-, and conflict of values and pluralism and all that, that's late. That's after the war.

GC After the war?

IB Certainly. That's when I read Vico, that's when I read Machiavelli. That's when all that happened.

GC And now, still, when you wrote the biography of Marx your instinct probably was against determinism here, and then, not only the instinct, but you had the example …

IB I can't deny one thing. My attitude to Marx was not uncoloured by my attitude to the Soviet Union. It couldn't but be. I may be wrong. I maybe despised it too strongly. But on the whole, I didn't really want Marx to be right. But I was deeply impressed, and if you read my book you'll see that I give him his due. Some people even thought I was a Marxist.

GC When I read your book, I was in a stage of a vehement anti- …

IB Yes.

GC And I thought that you gave him …

IB Too much, too much.

GC I do not now.

IB Too much, I understand.

GC Basically, my attitude was …

IB The point about my book, the best thing that was said about my book, which was much attacked in some places, was that nobody, by reading this book, could tell what my political views were. That's absolutely true about me, then. It is clear that I was not a Conservative. It was not clear that I was a Liberal, or Socialist, or what I was. But that I was not a Communist, not a Stalinist, was clear. That is why I was attacked by Communists.

GC So when you published your book, your friends who were more to the left, like Stuart, what was their …?

IB Stuart approved on the whole. I think he read it. Bits of it. Freddie Ayer read bits of it. Various people did. Rachmilevich did to some extent.

GC Did you discuss with him while writing?

IB He didn't read it. While writing, no, I don't think I did, no. He was not an authority on Marx's precise views. No, I didn't. I don't quite remember what Stuart thought. Freddie I'd made read a chapter or two. He was certainly left wing, more than he is now. Who else read it for me? I think I acknowledged in the Introduction[10] who I made read it. Not many people. No, I think Rachmilevich did read bits of it. But most people were astonished that I should have written it. Nobody knew I was writing it. Because I was an ordinary Oxford philosopher, teaching logic and theory of knowledge, and the ordinary Oxford subjects. And Marx didn't come into that at all. That's in an entirely different side of my mind, somehow. When it appeared – it was very late, it was only printed in 1938.[11] Well, the original version was exactly twice the size of what appeared. I had tried to get it published with another publisher in full, but Fisher kept bullying me and said I must do it with him, and I must abbreviate it. So I spent about nine months shortening each chapter, which was agony. It was terrible pain. Drops of blood.

[10] The 'Note to the First Edition' thanks also Ian Bowen and G. E. F. Chilver.
[11] In fact in 1939.

And lots I left out, which I'd originally said. A lot, which I destroyed in a kind of enraged manner. I didn't keep it.[12]

GC Otherwise later, you could have …

IB I threw it away, in a very exasperated way. I certainly did. I never valued anything I'd written. I'd never kept anything because I thought it might be worth it. Never. And my opinion of my writings is not high, I assure you. Never has been. Some things are worse than others, but that's about all I can say. But it only appeared in 1939, the book itself. It got some very funny reviews. It was reviewed quite favourably in the *TLS*, anonymously, I don't know by whom.[13] Nobody praised it much. It was attacked violently in the *New Statesman* by a man called Raymond Postgate,[14] who had written a book on Marx himself. He pointed out, rather correctly, two errors of dates. I think I called the July revolution the June, the date was in July or something, and something else like that. He thought it was a very bad book. In the *Daily Worker* it received what was to me a rather agreeable review. It said that this is certainly wrong, that this should not be placed in the hands of decent comrades. But it showed the progress which the bourgeoisie had made since the crude attacks of an earlier period. That was written by a man called Campbell, who was involved in Zinoviev's letter, a famous Communist thinker. There was a violent attack by a man called, not Hutton, but something or other like that, in the *Labour Monthly*,[15] or whatever the Communist periodical was. He kept on talking about how our Oxford Marxophile – that sort of tone. On the whole it fell dead born, nobody read it really. It made no impression at all. None. Then the war started. In so far as it was read, it was read after the war.

GC [*indiscernible*]

[12] The original manuscript, or at any rate an earlier, longer version of the text, survives and is available online at **bit.ly/KM-uncut**. It is not twice as long as the published book, but 1⅓ times as long (100,000 words versus 75,000).

[13] [Richard Denis Charques], 'In the Name of Marx: The Philosopher and the Right', *The Times Literary Supplement*, 7 October 1939, 570.

[14] Raymond Postgate, 'Karl Marx', *New Statesman* 18 no. 456 (18 November 1939), 732, 734.

[15] There is nothing in *Labour Monthly* in 1939 or 1940.

IB No, no, no.

GC [*indiscernible*]

IB All that, yes. I think his name was Hutton, the man who attacked it. Can't remember his first name. One of the Communists of that period.

GC Now, did writing the book on Marx raise your opinion on the role of personalities and the role of thinkers in history.

IB Yes, it made me think that the Russian Revolution would not have occurred if certain individuals had not lived. For example, Marx. For example, Lenin. For example, Trotsky. But the very success of Marxist doctrines refuted the downgrading of the role of individuals or ideas in history, particularly ideas. And I became convinced that what Heinrich Heine said was true. There's a famous passage[16] in which Heine says: Do not, think for the term grade, I mean, do not despise the quiet philosopher in his study. These are very dangerous people. If Kant had not beheaded God, Robespierre would not have beheaded the King. Ideas are very dangerous and influential. Then that famous passage about what would happen to Germany, which Communists love quoting. Famous passage about telling the French not to disarm. I think he would have been against disarmament of the West at all points, Heine. There's a famous passage when Engels said to Marx that, considering Heine's terrible hostility to the 1848 revolution, something he should have written against, Marx said not a word. But he was among the most intelligent people alive. He was a friend. He didn't care what he said. I mean he liked him very much. Heine was violently anti, anti-socialist.

GC Now, when you wrote about Marx, had you already been well acquainted with Russian thinkers, or was it through …?

IB It was through Marx that I began really seriously reading Plekhanov. I don't think I knew him as an undergraduate. No, it's because of Marx that I began reading these people. I didn't then

[16] See POI2 xxv, SR2 84, etc.

know anything about Russian philosophy. Well, Herzen I read certainly in the – I discovered him purely by accident in the London Library. The name was known to me. I can tell you exactly what happened. The name was vaguely referred to by people who were writing about the Russian nineteenth century. I may have come across it in that way, and talked to Rachmilevich, and he probably mentioned it. But I thought he was just some pompous publicist in the nineteenth century, of no interest to me. Then I went to the London Library when I was still an undergraduate, or a young don. And we had shelf access. One would look at the shelves in the London Library, so I looked for the Russian shelves, and there were the works of Herzen. Since I knew the name, I took out the volume. And I began reading it; it absolutely fascinated me. The first two pages. So I borrowed it, volume by volume, and became totally transported by it.

GC Your undergraduate days?

IB I think it must have been.

GC Or early don days?

IB Yes. Certainly not late. I think it must have been – well, I don't know. Maybe it was in 1933 or 1934. But it may have been in 1931. It's round about then. It was very soon after I became a member of the London Library. That's verifiable from those books. I can't remember when it happened. I think I must have been a don. I think probably 1933 or 1934.

GC So you were absorbed by Herzen?

IB Absolutely. I thought it was the most marvellous book I ever read – *My Past and Thoughts*. I still think it. I became totally interested. Then I remember I read at some point E. H. Carr's book called *The Romantic Exiles*. It was a great pleasure and an amusement. I didn't then particularly react to Yeats[?], as I did later. I think I read it, in fact, just about the time I was reading Herzen. It appeared about then, I think.

GC And reading Herzen had already the impact it had on you while formulating your opinions on …?

IB It had a permanent – it had a greater impact on me, as far as my opinions are concerned, than any book I've ever read. Not philosophically, not in a literary sense, but opinions.

GC So one should, one should mention it, in mentioning writing about Marx.

IB It happened during the writing about Marx. And I was amused how much Herzen disliked Marx. And I saw why he disliked him, too. He disliked him personally. He said that most revolutionaries had quarrels among themselves after they were in exile. But such dirty linen as the Germans washed amongst themselves in the awful rows of the quarrel among the Germans were disgusting. The French, the Italians didn't behave like that.

GC But you never lectured about Russian thinkers, or …?

IB Before the war, no. Certainly not. There wouldn't have been an audience for that.

GC Were there any friends of yours whom you could discuss it with?

IB No, there were not. Nobody. I never was able to discuss history of ideas with other people at all, you know, all my life. That region of thought, there's nobody to talk to. In England, hardly anyone. History of ideas is not an English subject. I know of no historian of ideas with whom I had protracted discussions. In America, yes, some people, certainly. In England, no. Whom could I have possibly talked about it to? I mean Popper was the only man in England. He was in New Zealand then. Who could I have talked to? Stuart I'm sure wasn't all that interested in ideas.

GC I was planning to talk about it later, but when did you meet Popper?

IB Much later. I met Popper when he first came from Vienna, which was before he went abroad, about 1937 or so, before the Anschluss.

Freddie and I gave him tea in Lyons' Corner and I thought he was a very nice, interesting man. He had never been professor. I explained that. Then he went to New Zealand. We became friends. Of course he stayed in England for a while. Then he came to, for a short time, to England after the Anschluss, but then he went off to New Zealand.

GC And during the war he was in New Zealand.

IB Yes he was. And then he wrote his book called *The Open Society and its Enemies*: that he wrote in New Zealand. It was his contribution to the war. Because Plato was really Hitler, fundamentally. Communists, Nazis, I mean people whose doctrines, he thought, led to the war. And then I read it when it first appeared, and it made a very powerful impression on me.

GC I guessed.

IB I realised that the chapter on Plato, the chapter on Aristotle, and the chapter on Hegel were no good. The quotations were very interesting, but the fundamental interpretation could not stand up.

GC Because he was too …?

IB Too violent. Too extreme.

GC Plato.

IB And Aristotle, too. Plato for him had invented what he called essentialism, the metaphysical necessity of things necessarily being as they are. He was also a believer in free will. That increased my admiration for him. He was actually among the few people, one of the few philosophers [who had that belief]. But the chapter on John Stuart Mill I thought was good. And the chapter on Marx I thought was rather interesting. That impressed me. Still does. But the general impact of the book, well, even if everything in it is not accurate and so on, the whole thesis seemed to me absolutely right. I mean the dangers of the metaphysical doctrines, and doctrinaireness as such. That's why I became convinced that belief in final solutions, belief in doctrines is always dangerous. Herzen began that, because the

original denunciation of doctrines as such is Herzen, probably echoing Max Stirner (though I didn't know that at the time, perhaps, when I first read him), who says the modern form of idolatry is doctrines. People were brought as sacrifices on the altar, physically killed for the sake of these abstractions. You see, that he [Herzen] already said in the 1840s, and he said that this belief in some kind of ultimate felicity for the sake of which these sacrifices are wrought is always wrong. There's a great passage in *From the Other Shore*, not in *My Past and Thoughts*, where he says these ideals are like Moloch.[17] That god constantly lures you towards himself. And as you come nearer, it always recedes backwards. In other words, the victims are sacrificed for the sake of future felicity, but it doesn't happen. Purposes must be closer than that, remote ends are not ends. So there must be some kind of reward for your work at the end of the day. It mustn't be tomorrow. All sacrifices for tomorrow – the risk fails, and the victims are there. I think Herzen was the first person – Max Stirner had already said it, but it was a wonderful anti-Marxist antidote. Considering he was a socialist, and had ideals of his own, and so on, it was so deeply impressive that Popper said exactly the same, without ever having read Herzen, or knowing anything about him, as far as I know.

GC … that you articulated in …?

IB No, wait a moment. Already in 1938, 1939, I began to read Belinsky. That was at the London Library. Or 1934, 1935.

GC Hadn't you written about him earlier? No, maybe I'm …

IB I didn't write on anybody earlier. But I began reading him when I came to the London Library. Same shelf. And that impressed me. I suddenly realised that here was a free thinker, who was obviously liberal and so on, but who didn't lie on what is called a comfortable bed of dogma. And he struck me as a deeply humanist figure, who was perfectly sympathetic. His views seemed to me to be sympathetic, to be brave – a genuine man who really followed what he really believed and what his heart told him. He was not a slave to any kind of theories or doctrines. That always pleased me. And so,

[17] RT2 104–5.

between them, they created my interest in the antecedents of the Russian Revolution, that plus Marx. Then I used to read Belinsky during the war, in Washington. I took a single volume, a sort of pre-war volume, non-Soviet volume.

Side B

GC So there is an accumulating process, but again, you mention mainly the Russian thinkers. Were you attracted by them also because of your command of Russian?

IB Yes.

GC Long before your …

IB Certainly. I like reading Russian for its own sake. I just liked to – it was a language I knew; I didn't have many people to talk to; besides, it gave me a romantic nostalgia when I read it all. And I used to talk to people, of course; during the war I met more Russian speakers than I ever met in England. Apart from Rachmilevich and one other person and my parents occasionally, I suppose – one other person, a man by the name of Lippin [Repin?], who was at school with me, who was the son of a famous Russian painter. He and I talked Russian together, as he was a Russian. Apart from that, it always had an appeal to me as the distant country in which I was born, and about which I obviously had certain romantic, probably, visions of pre-Revolutionary Russia.

GC Pre-revolutionary.

IB No doubt. But it was because I became addicted to Herzen and Belinsky that I abandoned philosophy. That's what made it happen. My idea that history of ideas was what I wanted was induced by them, plus Helvétius, and all this eighteenth-century stuff and Saint-Simon and Fourier. All the stuff I had to read for the sake of Marx. All these writers interested me more.

GC It was then, after the war, that you decided to abandon philosophy? When was it?

IB I'll tell you exactly when.

GC There is a story about your …

IB It's correct. That's exactly what happened. During the war I used to talk about philosophy to Professor Quine, the famous philosopher, he was in the Navy Department, in Intelligence, in Washington. I'd met him somewhere, and we used to have lunch, once in three months, and talk about philosophy. At that time it was just straight philosophy: logic and that kind of thing.

GC Did you read American philosophers before you went to America?

IB I read William James, yes. That's about all. I never thought I had a – no, I read a man called C. I. Lewis, whom I was deeply impressed by, and Austin and I had a class on him in Oxford. And it was the first class on a modern philosopher that anyone held in Oxford in history. That made an impression, too, but that had nothing whatever to do with the history of ideas. That really was straightforward philosophy. He was more or less the last pragmatist. And one of the symbolic logicians: he was a mathematical logician by training. He taught Quine and so on. But anyway, that has nothing to do with the other thing. No, the story is true. It sounds mythical, but it was true. What happened was this.

I knew there was a man called Sheffer. Sheffer was a Jew, one of the isolated mathematical logicians in the world. There were very few. Symbolic logic and mathematical logic, in 1900: there was Russell, there was Frege, there was Peano in Italy. Whitehead took some interest. Sheffer was one of the very few people trained by the same – was a famous American pragmatist. Contemporary of William James, and Santayana, and all these people. And so on. I've forgotten his name [Josiah Royce]. Quite well known. Never mind. Well, there you are. He was his pupil, and then he produced a famous thing called the Stroke Function. The Stroke Function knocked out certain parts of *Principia Mathematica*. It was printed, I can't remember when it was published, 1915 or 1916 [1913]. So he was famous for that. Now, Felix Frankfurter mentioned to me that there was a man called Sheffer. And I said, 'Ah! If I go to Harvard, which I intend to do anyway, during the war, to visit somebody, I'd

quite like to meet him.' He said, 'Oh yes, I know him very well. He's a very nice man, he is a Jew from the Boston ghetto, roughly, and called Harry Sheffer.' He really led a rather unhappy life. He was married to a prostitute. Unlike all the prostitutes of story, she was not golden-hearted, but extremely nasty; she used to stand in the middle of Harvard Yard, and complain that her husband didn't give her enough money. President Lowell was very anti-Semitic, and very snobbish anyway. He never saw them, never invited them. He ostracised them. The first man who rescued him was Whitehead, when he came to Harvard. He rescued him and extracted him.

GC [*unclear*]

IB No.

GC They were of the same generation.

IB No, he was – well, no, not quite. He was younger. But I can't remember quite when he went to America. He must have gone in the 1930s. Sheffer was already a fully functioning academic, may not have been a professor, and so, no. But he realised that Sheffer was very gifted, a very nice German. War had really debilitated him. He was socially very depressed. And so, when I went to Harvard, Felix Frankfurter wrote me a letter to Sheffer. Sheffer asked me to lunch.

GC Why did Frankfurter write to Sheffer?

IB Because he mentioned him in the course of conversation. And I said, 'Ah, Sheffer. I know who that is. I'd rather like to meet him.' Simply because he was, to me, a famous man, because it was known that Russell had deep respect for him. That I knew. So he was somebody I was interested in. I didn't know he was a Jew. I thought that he might be, but anyway, I'd be going to Harvard. Who could I see there? So I was going to see [Gaetano] Salvemini, an Italian historian. I was going to see the biographer of William James. One or two people. But Sheffer was a name to me, for some reason. I think C. I. Lewis was a pupil of Sheffer's. Might have been. Anyhow, he was certainly a friend and colleague, respectful towards him. Well, Sheffer asked me to lunch at the Faculty Club. I realised when I saw him that everybody looked at him like an anchorite that had come

from the desert. People were respectful, but astonishingly to me, he never appeared in public. He was the sort of man who lived in a little cabin by himself. People bowed, but were rather astonished to see him. But he was very nice, and what he said to me was this – we talked about philosophy. He said, 'You know, there are only two subjects in philosophy in which progress is made: one is logic, my subject,' he said, 'where certain new methods knock out the older methods, as in mathematics. To be a good mathematician, you don't need to know the history of mathematics. All you need to know are the weapons which we use now. Then there's psychology. Well, that's an empirical subject. Not really philosophy any more. Apart from that,' he said, 'philosophy is not a progressive subject. Not cumulative. Nobody can talk about somebody who is an ethical scholar. Nobody says somebody is learned in epistemology. History of philosophy, yes, of course. For that matter, history of furniture is, history of anything is history.' And he said, 'The thing is, new problems arise, and people try and solve them. But you can't say we've solved this problem for ever. No more. That's been done, now we go forward. It's not progressive.' And he said, 'And if I knew that my studies in logic would lead to people like Carnap and people like Ayer, I would never have written. I would think they've ruined philosophy. The idea that philosophy consists of little black marks on paper,' he said, 'which can be exchanged for each other in accordance with certain rigid rules, is the death of thought.' He spoke very vehemently against the current school, which was dominant in some circles, of logical positivism. He said, 'Philosophy is a deep, great subject, which Whitehead, I understand, tried to take a different view of, but these people are just', he said, 'mechanics. These people are not thinkers at all, in my sense.' And he went on like this. And I was surprised, amused, impressed: here was this remarkable man, saying all these things. That was all. I never saw him again. This must have happened in 1944. Then – it was a queer thing – then I had to fly to England, as it were officially.

GC [*unclear*]

IB Well, it's not that so much. I had to fly from Montreal in a bomber. It was not pressurised. They weren't in those days – 1944. It was dark, and so one couldn't read. It was pressurised, so we had no oxygen. So one couldn't sleep, because they were afraid one

might fall on one's pipe, suffocate. So I was forced, for something like nine hours, which was what it took, to think. It was a very painful process. Descartes says somewhere that for the purposes of intensive thought, four minutes is enough. In the course of these thoughts, I began thinking about Sheffer and philosophy. And I suddenly came to the, almost to me surprising, conclusion – I had not been addicted to long thoughts about myself; well, on this occasion I couldn't help it – that I really wasn't terribly anxious to know the answers to philosophical questions, which I had to deal with professionally. Freedom of the will, yes, but I thought that nothing very new had been said since the Greeks. Maybe one or two other things, but broadly I was not gripped. I was quite good at doing it. I taught pupils, I read the literature, I took part in discussions. I wasn't too bad at it. I was competent. I even wrote articles. I was quite competent professionally. Although I was not particularly notable, not in the front rank, anyway. But still, I was all right; up to the mark. Up to what Oxford calls 'fellowship standard'. That's about as far as I went. But it wasn't what gripped me. But what did grip me was Belinsky, Helvétius, Holbach. And Plekhanov, and to some extent even Marx, and that sort of thing. And so when I came to England, I went to Oxford. At first I registered myself in London and did whatever I was supposed to do in the Foreign Office, to which I by that time belonged. Then I went to Oxford, and I announced to my astonished colleagues at New College that I wished to stop doing philosophy, that I wished to devote myself to the history of ideas; could my fellowship be extended to that? They said, 'Certainly not. We don't have a fellowship in the subject.' After the war, there would be a great deal of people coming back. 'You must go on teaching. We can't start electing – we can elect a new fellow, but in that case you will have to go.' So, faced with this ultimatum, I was quite compliant. I said, 'All right, I'll go on for a bit anyway, see what happens.' And so I went on teaching philosophy quite nicely, from 1946 onwards. But by this time I began teaching Russian ideas on the side. I had a little class about the history of Russian revolutionary ideas in the nineteenth century, to which came the few people who did the Russian courses in Oxford, like Hingley.

GC You did in translation? Or did they all read Russian?

IB No. I did it entirely – I just talked. I assumed they did. They read. I didn't ask what they read. We simply discussed. About eight people came, maybe ten. Certainly not more. And I had little classes in New College, to which I then belonged, which I enjoyed very much. And they did, quite. Nobody else was remotely interested in that. In America, yes. But I went on teaching philosophy, lecturing on Berkeley, Hume, Locke, Kant, the whole thing, quite solidly. And then I was contacted by, I think, George Kennan, who recommended me to Harvard, and I went to Harvard in 1949. By this time I had written an article on Russia in 1848, which I contributed to some Slavic journal, journal of Slavic studies [the *Slavonic Review*]. I had written something else on Russia, too.[18] And also I had been to the Soviet Union, meanwhile.[19] I bought a lot of books. I also wrote a broadcast on Belinsky,[20] and a broadcast on Plekhanov,[21] after some centenary of his birth, and generally became involved in that kind of thing.

GC About Karl Marx?

IB Yes, but people didn't particularly talk to me about that. And then I was invited to Harvard to take part in two things: the Russian Research Centre, and area studies in Russian nineteenth-century thought. There was a real clientele at Harvard; it was only a graduate class, but 70 people came. And there I lectured properly, from the beginning to the end. I began with the eighteenth century, went right through, prepared the lectures very carefully. On all the Russian thinkers, history of Russian social and political thought, as such, which I greatly enjoyed, which had gripped me much more than philosophy had done, and I realised that this was really my thing. And then, when I came back to Oxford, which must have been in autumn 1949, I talked to John Foster, I think, who was a colleague of mine at All Souls, saying it would be much nicer if I could come back to All Souls, and devote myself to the subject. The Warden of All Souls at that time was Humphrey Sumner, who was a Russian

[18] Presumably 'A Note on Literature and the Arts in the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic in the closing months of 1945' and 'A Visit to Leningrad'; both are published in SM.

[19] In 1945–6.

[20] 'The Man Who Became a Myth', *The Listener* 38 (1947), 23–5.

[21] 'The Father of Russian Marxism', *The Listener* 56 (1956), 1063–4, 107.

historian, who didn't at all approve of me before the war, who thought I was a chatterbox and was just a friend of Maurice Bowra and various Oxford wits, and I wasted my time, wasted other people's time. He looked on me with considerable disapproval. But because my status in Washington during the war had become quite well known, because all the sort of people who died at All Souls, the Fellows at All Souls, began speaking about me, for purely extraneous reasons and purely bad reasons, contemptible reasons, he became much more affable to me, because it was evident that I had made a name for myself in what he did respect, which was politics and English political life, and serious subjects: foreign affairs – that, he thought, was all right. His attitude towards me changed. He didn't like me, but he began to think me worth thinking about. And so Foster talked to him, so in the end he suddenly offered me a Fellowship in All Souls. A Research Fellowship, for this purpose. Also I had written a book on Karl Marx before the war, which showed that I was capable of some research, and actually writing, that I wasn't particularly idle. And so I went back to All Souls in 1950, and became professionally interested in these matters. I didn't do much work, it's true, but still, I did putter around in the history of ideas. That's when I produced an essay on political ideas in the twentieth century. All these things were to go into the book. And on historical inevitability, and John Stuart Mill, and all that. That happened during the 1950s.

GC Early 1950s, 1951.

IB Halfway through. In 1950–5, 6, that sort of period.

GC But before you published your well-known articles and papers like 'Historical Inevitability' and others, didn't your friends, old philosopher friends try to deter you?

IB No. Not at all. Nobody thought of me as a good enough philosopher to persuade to remain in the subject. On the contrary. Very unflattering. No. No effort was made to tell me not to go off into these parts. On the contrary, not at all. So I wanted to do that. I left New College and went back to All Souls, and nobody tried to persuade me of anything. In that sense, I don't think anybody at

Oxford has ever tried to persuade anybody to do this rather than that. To my knowledge.

GC Now, coming back to Sheffer. In this case, I believe that had you not met Sheffer, still …

IB Of course! It is a common Marxist point on your part, but nevertheless. I think, to be quite truthful – I'm sure there would have been quite an interest in this, but whether I would have actually given up philosophy … What I felt was, I wanted to know more in the end of my life than in the beginning. As I've always said. Philosophy was something in which I'd just go on doing things. I wanted to accumulate something. I had a certain interest in knowing more about something. Reading and retaining. Reading and accumulating. I'm a natural accumulator. I don't like writing. But I rather like reading, and I like making notes, and I like learning, and you couldn't learn about philosophy. You could only examine, read articles, think of answers, you could argue, but that was not my forte. My trouble was, whenever I went to the Philosophical Society, everything which everybody said seemed to be true. For and against. Always. Whenever anybody would give a good argument, I was convinced by it. As soon as somebody knocked it out, I was convinced by that. Then, if somebody knocked that out, I was convinced by that. At the end, I didn't know what I believed. Whereas in this case I knew what I knew. For example, I gave a broadcast about Lasalle,[22] which I enjoyed doing, because I read – liked Lasalle, knew about Lasalle. Connected with Marx. That was at least a contribution to something.

GC And the idea of trying not to be strong on this side or the other side?

IB I knew what I was against. I'm not quite sure what I was for.

GC All right.

[22] 'Lassalle', review of David Footman, *The Primrose Path: A Life of Ferdinand Lassalle* (London, 1946), Third Programme, 17 December 1946.

IB I knew what I was against, I knew what I thought they were wrong about. And I knew what went in the wrong direction, for me. I knew what I wanted to attack. That's why I got the reputation as a polemical writer. I was once described by my ex-pupil, Professor [Donald] Mackinnon, who is now ex-professor of theology in Cambridge, as an intellectual swashbuckler. I didn't like that very much, but I knew what he meant.

GC What's the expression?

IB Swashbuckler. That means a man who fights against everybody with a kind of sword. It means a man who's always fighting.

GC Yes, yes.

IB It's not a true description. Like somebody who comes into the room and immediately starts hitting out in all directions. No, it's not true. But I knew why he would have said it. Because I've always violently drawn swords on – take for example 'Historical Inevitability': everybody was against it. I had no allies.

GC Really?

IB Really. Catholics were against it, because it was against doctrine. Marxists obviously. *The Spectator*, the Conservatives were against it. It was against tradition, against certain persons who – I had no allies. Popper was on the same side, but he didn't say anything. He was a very vain man who never praised anybody. Only himself, nobody else. I don't think I ever received any praise or any friendly references, nothing. Later, I was sort of vaguely referred to, but no, I remember that the lecture was an absolute disaster when I delivered it, that's one of the reasons. It was attacked by E. H. Carr. The first thing which happened. Then it was attacked by a man called Christopher Dawson, who was a Catholic ideologist. He attacked it very violently. And then it was attacked in *The Spectator*, by a man called – what was his name? The one who invented the idea of the Establishment, he's a journalist … It's a man called Henry Fairley.

GC Ah, Henry Fairley. I like his …

IB Well, he attacked me with considerable force. He's been in America now, for twenty years. He was a friend of Professor Talmon. Not so much as Attlee: a real friend of Attlee, who's now become a violent reactionary. Now he writes these terrible articles in *The Times*. Let me see now, who was in favour of it?

GC Perhaps historians.

IB Anybody, anyone. Same thing happened with 'Two Concepts of Liberty', yes. No allies. I think the only people who were at all in favour were some people like Irving Kristol in *Encounter*, that's for my – the only people who were at all favourable to it. And there were some rather Conservative figures in that. Otherwise I know nobody, nobody in Oxford, nobody in Cambridge. At that time, nobody.

GC On me it has had a great impact. A very strong impact. And when you reviewed E. H. Carr's book, which was in my opinion a very important article

IB It was the *Sunday Times*.[23]

GC In the *New Statesman*. Yes?[24]

IB No, I never wrote anything in the *New Statesman*.

GC I'm sure, in this article is …

IB Not true. I'll tell you two things about him

GC I don't understand …

IB Wait, wait. There are two separate things. The first volume of the History of the Revolution was reviewed in the Sunday Times.

[23] **'Soviet Beginnings'**, review of E. H. Carr, *A History of Soviet Russia*, vol. 1: *The Bolshevik Revolution 1917–1923*, *Sunday Times*, 10 December 1950, 3.

[24] Yes: **'Mr Carr's Big Battalions'**, review of E. H. Carr, *What is History?*, *New Statesman* 63 (January–June 1962), no. 1608, 5 January 1962, 15–16.

You're talking about *The Listener*.[25] That's where we had the controversy. Because he published an attack on me.

GC No, no: he [you?] wrote about it in the *New Statesman*.

IB No, I didn't. He delivered a course of lectures, which became *What is History?*, which were printed in *The Listener*, and that's what I attacked, before it appeared as a book. These lectures were printed in *The Listener* as lectures. Not the Reith Lectures: no, they were not.

GC But I remember the lectures …

IB They were called, they were lectures which I was invited to deliver, but he delivered them instead. They were delivered – no, wait a minute.

GC But I read them in *The Listener*.

IB That's not what E. H. Carr delivered. Carr's lectures were called the Trevelyan Lectures …

GC I read them.

IB … in Cambridge. In them he attacked me.

GC And I thought, I still think, that what you wrote in this short, concise article …

IB Yes?

GC … [which] you should have developed into – after all, in your credo against them …

IB Yes, quite.

[25] 'What is History?' (two letters on E. H. Carr's so titled Trevelyan Lectures, broadcast in shortened form by the BBC and printed in *The Listener*), *The Listener* 65 (1961), 877 (18 May), 1048–9 (15 June); repr. at B 41–2, 48–50.

GC … is so important that – all right, you wrote what you wrote in 1951. I think that you ought to write another, long, article, instead of only this short one. It was very persuasive. But indeed, in *The Listener* a lot of not very …

IB No. Of course not.

GC I know that there is – I thought that this article – almost everybody tells me that they haven't read it.

IB No, no. Of course not. Why should they? There's no reason. It is not appearing in print. E. H. Carr delivered lectures which afterwards became a book called *What is History?*, to which I replied.

GC In a very strong article, very concise.

IB He attacked me in *The Listener*. His lectures were printed as articles, and I replied as a letter to *The Listener*. Nothing to do with that. Not directly, it had nothing to do with this. They were not Russian thinkers.