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Interview with Peter Jay

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JAY Good evening, and welcome to this, our next discussion in 'In Quest of our Civilisation'. By 'our civilisation' in this series we haven't so much meant the cultural aspects of our society as their political, social and economic organisation, and the physical environment around us. We've defined 'our society' as meaning countries like Britain over the next twenty-five years or so. And this evening we are going to concentrate on the political aspects, and we are very fortunate to have with us Professor Sir Isaiah Berlin, formerly the Chichele Professor of political philosophy at Oxford, who has also held very many other distinguished posts, and now might be described as an intercontinental sage and philosopher.

Sir Isaiah, it might be a fair contemporary comment that at least a newspaper editor or a journalist might make that people are worried that we in this country are becoming in some not very clearly defined sense ungovernable, although there are others who say that we are not ungovernable, it's just that we are rather badly governed. But there is a suggestion that the habits, the constraints, the self-discipline on which governability has been presumed to depend is in some way and for some variety of reasons breaking down, and this seems to pose perhaps the [most] basic of all questions of political philosophy, which is the question, 'Why should anybody obey the established authority in the land?', whatever it might be. Now this clearly is a question which has preoccupied political philosophers for many hundreds, indeed thousands of years. And I thought it might be helpful if we were to

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start by trying to identify the kinds of answers which political philosophers have returned to this very fundamental question.

BERLIN Yes, well, I quite agree. I think that the question ‘Why should one obey?’ is perhaps the central question in political philosophy. If there was no need for obedience, if we were all a happy anarchist society of everyone harmoniously cooperating with each other and there was absolutely no necessity for any kind of discipline, I think perhaps political philosophy would never have arisen at all as a subject. I think it arises from the fact that there are certain problems, because obviously people don’t agree with each other, and some kind of order has to be established, and then the question arises, ‘Why should I obey X or Y? Why should I obey an institution? Why should I obey an individual? Why shouldn’t I do what I want to do?’

Well, there are almost as many answers as there are schools of philosophy. Indeed, the history of political philosophy is the history of these answers, to a large degree. I mean, you can say, ‘We must obey because God has so ordained.’ There are people who obviously find the answer in sacred texts, or in the pronouncements of certain qualified interpreters of these texts – priests, prophets. Or there are more sophisticated people, like Plato, I suppose, who think that certain people can understand the nature of the world, what men are like, what the world is like, what the relation is of men to the world, and these are the experts. They understand what society is like and what it must become, what its true nature and purpose are, and these are the wise men whose orders must be obeyed because they are good for the development of all the people under them. Roughly speaking, that’s Plato’s answer. Well, there are all kinds of other answers as well. If you take the vast span – I can’t go through all the answers, but I mean the sort of typical ones would be a utilitarian answer: ‘Because unless there is some machinery by which some people obey other people there will be less happiness, and what we want is happiness, what we want is harmony, and this is the best arrangement we have been able to think of.’ This is a kind of technological answer. There are people who think that the answer is to be obtained in the laboratory. That is to say, you study human beings very carefully, as you would societies of bees or beavers – that’s what somebody said in the eighteenth-century – you discover what

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human needs are, you discover what human beings are, you discover how to supply these needs, you supply them. Who supplies them? Experts supply them. There are certain people who know how to supply these needs, and they are the people who lay down the rules, and you should obey them because if you don't you'll be less happy.

Then there are people who think we have to obey because we promised to obey: that's the famous social contract theory. We promised to obey, or our ancestors promised to obey, and we behave as if we too – what's called tacit contract – we do it because we promised and it would be wrong to break a promise. Or again, you could say, like the people who believe in the organic nature of society: human beings are not islands, we are all parts of one another, society is a kind of living whole to which we all belong. We develop together, and obedience is simply rather like something in a family, a sort of natural human relationship in which for the purpose of arriving at some kind of common good, some kind of great social common good, we all co-operate together, in a half-conscious fashion even, rather in the way which Burke talked about, because there are all kinds of impalpable bonds between us, because we are connected in all kinds of ways with our past. We are connected with our traditions, we are connected to each other by means of our language, our institutions, and this creates a kind of stream in which we are, as it were, drops of water; and we carry on with this stream [in] an almost half-emotional, certainly semi-instinctive way, and the idea of trying to analyse this in cold rationalist terms will only tend to break it up. This is what might be called the romantic conception of the State or society as an organic whole which mustn't be analysed too carefully. Well, then again there is the Marxist view, by which we obey because the whole of the history of society is the history of class struggles. There are certain classes on top and certain classes below, and the classes on top give the orders and the classes below have to obey them, which is that answer. I suppose there are lots of other answers as well, but this is the kind of thing.

JAY Yes, there seems to be – one could perhaps group some of these answers into two or more groups. I mean there are those philosophers who had in common at least the belief that this was a

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question to which there needed to be an answer, and that the answer was one answer, it was a clear answer, and it was in some sense true for all time. It might be very difficult to arrive at what it was, and people might not necessarily agree about it, but in principle it was a question which sufficiently clever philosophers with sufficient research, reflection or inspiration could in the end arrive at the right answer to, and therefore the ultimate basis of the requirement that people should obey was the perception of this one fundamental truth. Would that be a fair description of ...?

BERLIN Yes. If I could say a little about that, because I think this is something I have thought about rather, and have something to say about, if I might just talk for a little on this. You see, I think the whole heart of the Western tradition, both in politics and in everything else, is that to all real questions there is only one answer, one true answer, all the other answers being false. If a question is a real question it must have an answer. If it doesn't have an answer at all, or has more than one answer, then in what sense is it a real question? This has not been invented by modern positivists as sometimes is supposed; Plato believed it, the Middle Ages believed it, people in the Renaissance and the eighteenth century believed it, and it's a very natural thing to believe. If the question is a serious question, there must be *the* answer. How to obtain it is another question. As I told you, some people thought the answer is in sacred books, some say it's in laboratories, some say it's in the intuition of a metaphysician, some say it's what ordinary men believe – you don't need experts, everybody really if they look into their hearts can answer certain moral and certain political questions. Some people, like Rousseau, say we are all terribly corrupt because our institutions have destroyed us, but somewhere the answer still lingers, say in the breast of a simple peasant or an uncorrupted child. In some pure heart there is an answer. Some people say majorities have the answer; the proper answer is what the majority votes for – *vox populi*. Others, as I say, think that some special expertise is needed. But all these people agree that there must be *a* true answer, and this, I think, we no longer quite believe.

Let me tell you. People of course disagreed about where the answer was to be found, as I've tried to point out, and also who the authorities were, and no doubt great wars were fought over

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this kind of thing, whether Christianity or Islam was the answer, or whether the answer was in religion or in science. These are ultimate issues, and since happiness, truth, salvation ultimately depend on that, these were very serious issues and one quite understands why people did fight. You could maintain, for example, that man was too weak ever to obtain the answer: that's all right. You could say with certain Christian thinkers that original sin makes us incapable of discovering the true answer on this earth. Maybe men knew it before the Flood, maybe men will know it one day in the hereafter. Maybe men will never know it at all. Maybe only angels know the answer. Maybe only God knows the answer. But somewhere there must be a true answer, and so the idea is there is a kind of search for the hidden treasure. The only question is, which is the correct route? But that there is a hidden treasure can't be doubted, otherwise what are we asking?

Well, this, I think, really did – was, I think, a persistent central idea for many centuries – 2,000 years, certainly. There were people who questioned this. The Greek Sophists, I think, allowed themselves to say that maybe the answer which you gave in one place was different from the answer you gave in another, and the answer was relative and it depends on people's temperaments or circumstances, but Plato and Aristotle squashed that. They were extremely hostile to it and somehow eliminated these people: they weren't really given much opportunity of disseminating their views, and very little of them is left as a result. Certain doubts began to set in in the sixteenth century, seventeenth century about whether there really were these true answers, perhaps largely as a result of the frightful religious wars which broke out between Protestants and Catholics, which because it looked as if they were going to be terribly Pyrrhic, the victories were going to be very Pyrrhic, and they would destroy each other, people agreed to differ, so to speak, but that was a kind of *de facto* exhaustion rather than the recognition that there might really be several answers to the same question.

But in the eighteenth century something did happen, it seems to me, towards the end of the eighteenth century in Germany, where, for reasons which I think it might be too long to go into here, a kind of resentful resistance to domination by the French, particularly, arose, and there were certain German thinkers who began to say: different cultures give different answers and all these

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answers are perfectly valid for those cultures. If you are a Roman you are a Roman answer, and if you are a Greek you have a Greek answer. It's all right for the Greeks to have a Greek answer, and it's all right for the Romans to have theirs. The answers are different because the soil is different, the traditions are different, the character is different, and why should an answer which was good for the Romans necessarily be good for us? Why should Roman law, for example, be authoritative for us? It was quite all right for Rome but that was a long time ago. What Plato and Aristotle said was no doubt very suitable to the Greeks, but we are Germans, and therefore what Leibniz or Kant says is our answer to this. And so you get the idea of cultural differences. There is a German truth, and there is a French truth – or something all right for the French, something all right for the Germans.

At first the person who put it forward, who was the German thinker Herder, thought that it was like a garden of many flowers, to use Mao's phrase. There was no reason why different people shouldn't give different answers and all live very peacefully together in a kind of harmony. I mean, the French will cultivate some kind of French form of life, the Germans will cultivate a German form of life. What is suitable for the Germans is not suitable for the French. You don't want to impose your forms on one another. Herder was terribly anti-imperialistic, he thought it was terrible of Julius Caesar to go and conquer a lot of people in Asia somewhere, and impose his forms on them. He thought it was dreadful of the British to go and impose their forms of life on a lot of Indians, terrible of the Germans to impose their form of life on a lot of Balts, and so on.

But gradually this became militant and aggressive. And then you get the notion, so to speak, that the answer is not so much the true answer, it's *our* answer, *we* are Germans, *we* are Frenchmen, *we* are Danes, *we* are Poles and our tradition is – goes in this direction, and the right thing to do and the right way to live is the way, so to speak – is *our* way, and we're prepared to commit ourselves to a particular form of life because we are Poles, because we are Danes, because we are Icelanders, and it doesn't necessarily hold for anybody else. And this really does lead to a destruction – or at least to permanent damage to the idea that there are universal, true, timeless answers, true for all men everywhere in all places, to the

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central questions of how to live, what kind of society we want to have.

JAY Does this second approach, the one that began towards the end of the eighteenth century, the more relativist one, necessarily lead to, as on the face of it [it] might appear to, these rather tolerant, each-man-or each-group-can-do-his-own-thing political conventions, with a thousand flowers blooming? Because, on the face of it, historically one can trace to some of those ideas some of the most oppressive and brutal regimes and escapades in modern political history.

BERLIN Well, of course, it cuts both ways, you're quite right. In theory one can understand Herder's position. You see, if you really believe there is one truth and you have it, it's very difficult to be tolerant. If you really know that twice two is four, you don't really want to say, well, I say twice two is four, some people say twice two is seven-and-a-half, other people say twice two is seventeen, and the world is all the better for having lots of views on this subject, which is a sort of praise of variety and difference. But if, of course, you believe that each culture has its own tradition and its own answer to these questions, if you are benevolently disposed, as Herder certainly was, you say variety is a marvellous thing, why should the world be monotonous, why should the world be the same? And you know, the idea of variety, and the idea that variety is a good thing, is very late. I don't think anybody praised variety or differences or the whole idea that monotony is terrible and we don't want uniformity, we want a lot of wonderful individualistic self-expression all over the place and it's marvellous there should be differences – [this] is a very late development indeed, partly as a result of this breakdown of the notion of the eternal validity of certain answers. It cuts both ways in this way: if you believe that the answer will be different for each group, you, of course, say why don't we tolerate the other groups if they tolerate us? We have our answer, [you] have your answer, why should we fight? On the other hand, of course, if you think that your particular goals cannot be attained without some sort of conquest, let us say, or without preventing other people from doing certain things which you think do you damage, then you think that your individual interests justify everything, because they

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are they are the only thing that justifies anything at all. In the name of your interests you can do anything you like. Under the old system, at least, if you thought that there were certain true answers to these questions, some things were prevented. If all men believed that murder was wrong, if all men believed that unprovoked aggression was wrong, if all men believed that debts should be paid or pacts should be kept or whatever it might be, then there were certain acts which were simply out, and there were certain wars which were plainly unjust, and certain forms of aggression which all men were obliged to stop if they possibly could. There was a thing called universal law, natural law, the law of nations, or whatever it might be. If of course you think one nation, one law; one group, one law; one culture, one law; one religion, one law – then it gives – it unties your hands. So it works both ways. If you are – on the one hand you say, we must tolerate other people's views because there isn't a single truth. On the other hand you say, why should we tolerate anything at all if it's to our advantage? There is no universal law which precludes me from pursuing it. So it cuts both ways, in a curious sort of way.

JAY So there would be a sense in which what we think of as the rather loose, relaxed, liberal, easy-going tradition of the Anglo-Saxon countries, the British political tradition of the last two hundred years, belongs to the same pedigree as some of the harsher continental political traditions – I mean, indeed, Nazism, I suppose – that these two seemingly very different things both come from the moment when people started saying that there is no single one truth and that each civilisation, each nation must find its own way, and each way is in the eyes of God equally valid.

BERLIN Yes, I think that's true. I think that's perfectly true. Mind you, I think the Anglo-Saxon tradition is a little different from the others, because I think this business about relativism really started in countries like Germany, as a kind of defence against cultural domination by, let us say, the French, and secondarily the English. The English having been free from invasion, having done extremely well in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, tended, I think, secretly to believe that their way of life was really universal – was really – what they believed was absolutely valid for everybody, only some people, of course, weren't wise enough or fortunate

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enough to have it – which was not the belief of the passionate nationalists on the European continent. The Germans in their nationalistic phase didn't really think that the French ought to be like them, they thought the French were inferior in some way, or the Italians were inferior. In England, I think, on the whole there was a kind of general view that English institutions should really spread over the world, that people were fortunate to be able to adapt them if they could.

JAY I was going to say, I mean, after 1918 and again even more so perhaps after 1945 there seems to have been both from the English and indeed from the Americans more or less an assumption, I mean an assumption which I suspect the English and the Americans thought was a self-evidently benign assumption, that as it were what other countries needed and wanted was democracy of a parliamentary form, free trade unions, free press and ...

BERLIN That's right.

JAY ... all these things, and that it was a benefaction to more or less write these things into the constitutions of other countries and to write it into the Charter of the United Nations and the basic rights and so on. So that in that sense they did behave as though they thought they had a universal formula.

BERLIN Yes, I think they did; I think they did. I think they are the last inheritors of this central Western tradition. They are less relativistic, if you like; they were rather, you see – and if people didn't have it, well they were tolerant – they were tolerant because they were quite happy themselves. They weren't interfered with by these others, they were on top. Top nations on the whole tend to look with benevolent contempt upon nations below them. The nations below them tend to look with a certain resentment upon the people on top and then proceed to march out their own particular values and say, 'What have they got that we haven't got? We are just as good as they, in fact we're better.' So that there is a sort of – aggressive insistence upon one's own national values tends to be a function of resistance to as it were some sort of

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imperialism, resistance to some sort of superiority on the part of others; it's a kind of backlash.

JAY Well, I think that would probably be a convenient moment to interrupt ourselves, and having in a rough and ready way located ourselves in the mainstream of the traditions of political philosophy over the last two thousand years – very neatly and very rapidly – then, I think, when we come back we ought to try and talk about what is if anything seems to have gone wrong with what, up to the point where we've got, seems to be a rather complacent and self-satisfied view of our political philosophical achievements. Why does it now appear that we are in some sense becoming ungovernable? We will be back in a moment.

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JAY Welcome back. In Part One I was discussing with Sir Isaiah Berlin the answers which political philosophers down the ages have returned to the question: Why should one obey? Why should one accept any particular form of political authority? And he was suggesting that, until about the end of the eighteenth century, most philosophers had agreed at least on one thing, namely that there must be *an* answer to this question, though they hadn't much agreement about what it was or about how it was to be found out. And he was further suggesting that from about the end of the eighteenth century, particularly in Germany, a new tradition sprang up, which was that there was no one answer to this question, that there were different answers which were suitable for different nations, for different States, for different communities, and that there was no particular reason why they should be the same. And he was further suggesting that in some cases this tradition led to a rather broad, tolerant, easy-going attitude, and that in other cases this had led to a rather harsh nationalistic attitude which in some cases even led to violent wars between States.

Sir Isaiah, I think we ought to discuss now what, if anything, has gone wrong with this formulation, at least as it operates in our own country, to begin with. But before we pose the question 'Why do people no longer appear to believe that there is any sufficient reason why they should obey, and why therefore do we have this apparent phenomenon of ungovernability, as some people regard

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it?’ we ought perhaps to specify a little more precisely what it is that has been what one might call the conventional British answer to the question as posed by British political philosophers in the last hundred and fifty years or so. Could one say that there was a consensus amongst British political philosophers about why political authority should be accepted in that period?

BERLIN Consensus is perhaps, is of course a terrible word which we are not allowed to use any more, but – I don’t know about consensus, but there is a certain broad, yes, a certain, I wouldn’t say agreement, but something approaching that, that is to say ...

JAY Lowest common factor?

BERLIN There is something, yes, broadly speaking we can say that, although there are conservatives, liberals, socialists – we’ve had them all – nevertheless there is a certain pervasive liberal democracy which penetrates them all. We’ve had very little extremism on either side. There have been very few eminent British Fascists or British Communists, to put it at its mildest, or British authoritarians – very few, comparatively speaking, of the extreme kind. And there are no first-class, I suppose there are no really eminent British Marxist thinkers, not really of the front rank. While there are various historical explanations for this which Marxists are only too ready to provide, and some of them are quite plausible – but what I think is common to them is what we normally call liberal democracy, a much discredited word by now which is regarded as a mere disguise for a wicked society, with which I don’t agree. Quite apart from the historical roots of this, which perhaps is something to do with industrial society and the particular development which we have had in the last two hundred years, there is this to be said for it: that the old certainty that there are true answers which we know and which we seek to make other people accept, which is a tremendous source of strength if you really believe it, is now confined, I suppose, to Marxists, who certainly have it in a very strong degree – perhaps to Catholics, perhaps to others, but has rather melted away in most Western countries and in particular in this one. And in a way you can say this has led to a greater degree of tolerance, and it’s led to a greater degree of respect for different views, and agreement to differ, and

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the general notion that freedom of thought and freedom of expression ought to be allowed because people shouldn't suppress one set of views in favour of another. You may say, why not? After all Auguste Comte said in the nineteenth century, if we don't allow free thought in mathematics why should we allow it in morals and politics? If you really thought that there were these absolutely firm answers, why should we – we don't allow schoolmasters to tell schoolboys that twice two is sometimes not four, sometimes seventeen-and-a-half; why should we allow them ...?

JAY It sometimes seems to me that the new maths almost does amount to saying that.

BERLIN Well, I expect it does, but there obviously are nevertheless certain, I won't say certain axioms, but accepted propositions in, let us say, mathematics, which most mathematicians would accept, and there are certain criteria for eliminating mad or bogus mathematicians. Whereas there aren't really very accepted criteria for eliminating mad or bogus political theorists – at least they are not so clear, not so conclusive.

JAY But if we take the central tradition of liberal democracy, I mean, what answer have the philosophers who have expounded that view given to the question, 'Why should I obey the decisions of democracy? Why should I obey the decisions of the majority?'

BERLIN Well, mainly of course because they believe in self-government. Mainly, I suppose, because they believe that if I impose a law upon myself, that is to say, if participate in the decision, whether directly or through elected representatives to whom I give these powers, then this doesn't oppress me. It's not a form of obedience, it's a form of self-government in some way, and all mature persons ought to be allowed to govern themselves. Obedience is really, in the strict sense of the word – I mean unquestioning obedience – is only confined to children or slaves, and we have no slaves. In the case of children it still obtains to some extent, but in the case of mature and grown-up individuals the whole notion of obedience has perhaps become rather compromised in the thought of these people. But if a case is to be

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made for this kind of thing, then let me say this. I think what we've lost is the wonderful original certainty that – except in some cases, which I think we may perhaps come to mention later – there are certain propositions which I think even we still accept even in our so-called ungovernable society. But broadly speaking the old splendid certainty has, I think, melted away and the intolerance which goes with it has melted away too.

JAY The tolerance or the intolerance?

BERLIN The intolerance. Yes, intolerance of the false answers and the fact that we really must make other people believe what we believe because it's true, and we try and persuade them, and we try and educate them, but if they resist then of course we have to force them. This is the thing which people who really believe in the one truth tend to believe, because if you really think you have the true answer you tend to become fanatical and ultimately rather coercive. Well, as I say, there are certain advantages in this having melted away because we have become more tolerant and we have become much more understanding of differences of view. So far so good. The thing I think which people really feel, and I don't know for how many people I speak, is that we don't really know what is the best form of government on earth. We don't really have a direct answer to the question, should one do this, or is representative democracy better than direct democracy, or is a republican form of government better than a mildly constitutional monarchy? – or whatever it may be. What we can tell is what people actually want: that is empirically discoverable. We can find out what people want and we can find out what makes people happy, and we can find out what makes people contented and what satisfies their basic needs, not only for food and shelter and security but also for self-expression, for freedom, for all the things which men in general, and particularly men in our day, obviously do feel. Now if we can discover that, that is what – any system which provides them with as much of that as possible is an acceptable system and has some kind of – we can defend it on the grounds that at least we have some sort of empirical basis for doing what we are doing. We say we give to as many people as possible as many of the things that they want as possible provided

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they don't prevent other people from getting the things they want, that's the basis of liberal democracy.

JAY And the way we give it is by, as it were, allowing them to decide what it is that they get, whether it's in the, as it were, political marketplace of the ballot-box, democracy, or in the economic actual marketplace. That's the theory. I mean you could presumably set out to give people what they want without consulting them at all, because you thought you knew.

BERLIN Well, of course, yes, that's what you do with children, to some extent, rightly or wrongly, but the thing is, certainly we give them what they want within limits. The limits are first of all, of course, the old John Stuart Mill limits, that you can't give A what he wants if it's going to deprive B of what he wants too much. You can't give things to the sharks, so to speak, which you don't give to the carp, because then the sharks will eat the carp. If you make the sharks too strong they will consume the carp and therefore you must protect the weakest, you must protect everybody against everybody else, you must do that. That's the absolute minimum of what the government can achieve – is to be at least in the liberal sense a traffic policeman, so to speak, for preventing collisions, but also of course for protecting individuals and groups from each other. Otherwise there will be a most frightful jam, an enormous jam will occur, that's number one.

Moreover you mustn't be too superficial. You must realise that in a free-for-all the strongest will probably get the mostest, and that things which look like impersonal institutions are in fact created by men. That is to say a *laissez-faire* society which apparently allows everyone to do what they want in fact leads to the squashing of the weakest and sometimes of the worthiest and leads to terrible injustices and therefore a high degree of public control has to be instituted in order at least to provide the minimum of what people need to everybody. This can't be done without repressing some people from doing the things which they want to do. It means that the strong have to be prevented from getting too much for themselves and even the clever and the enterprising and the brilliant must sometimes be held back if the result of their work is likely to humiliate or in some other way deprive other human beings who have a perfect right to at least a

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minimum degree of self-expression. Now that brings me to the original point which I made, that there are certain rules apart from democracy which I think we have to observe, which are what is called human rights. Unless there is a minimum of human rights by which you say – even if the majority wants it, we can't allow people to murder each other. We can't allow people to burn witches.

JAY Public executions.

BERLIN Public executions. You say public executions deprave people, they brutalise people; we can't have that; and you say, but the majority want it; you say, never mind. Never mind, there are certain rules which must really be binding upon people, and which they must know to be binding. Otherwise a society can't function at all. These things mustn't be under the control of variable majorities, otherwise you get into the impossible position of saying, anything a majority wants is all right. I mean this is what's called pure democracy. Well of course it's quite clear that vast numbers of people wanted to burn witches: (*a*) believed that witches existed, and (*b*) wanted to burn them. Well, this on democratic grounds would be perfectly all right. A large number of people wanted to believe that the Jews poisoned wells, a large number of people believe that coloured people smell or that they are inferior human beings in some way; quite apart from the fact that the majorities may hold false propositions, even if the propositions they hold are true their tastes may lead them in some very destructive direction. And so we still cling even in our so-called ungovernable society to certain basic ground-rules; we think on the whole that people should not be allowed to bear false witness in law courts; people shouldn't be allowed to pass retrospective legislation which makes people out to be guilty of things which were not illegal at the time when they did them, and that kind of thing; and this is not – we don't want that to be subject, or too much subject, to day-to-day majority control.

JAY But the suggestion at present as I understand it is that some of the basic ground-rules, the built-in restraints, the built-in normal tendency to obey, other things being equal, unless there is some very strong provocation – that these things are being eroded, not

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as it were by the majority as such, as some great sort of corporate elephant charging around all over the place, breaking the rules, but they are being broken by minorities. As it were, that the sum of the minorities amounts to a majority, and that's why it's a serious problem that, whether it's in the behaviour of terrorist groups, which clearly are nowhere near amounting to a majority, or perhaps more importantly in the economic domain, in the behaviour of more and more groups being driven to the conclusion, even if they didn't have it originally, that the only way, as it were, to conserve their standard of living is to band together and to withhold their services from society unless their demands are met, that in consequence of all of this and of the fact that as it were the majority seems to tolerate, doesn't very much like it, perhaps, but seems to tolerate or be unable to do anything about this kind of behaviour, that therefore the basic rules that make a liberal democracy successful as a way of conserving the rights of the individual, as a way of ensuring that the individual is sovereign in society, is disintegrating; that in a sense the tolerant tradition has gone so far that to an extreme it's become a charter of anarchy, I mean a wholly formless society, anybody can do his thing, we're in a jungle, therefore nothing is right, nothing is wrong, and you better look after yourself, probably in association with other people because that works best. Is that a fair characterisation?

BERLIN I don't know that it is entirely fair, because I think some of these groups, you see, which want to obtain certain advantages from society by whatever it may be, by holding them up in some sort of way [*inaudible*] and so on, of course do believe in certain principles themselves. I mean, terrorists usually are fanatics, in some way, who believe that they know the truth, and they don't do it just for the hell of it, I don't think. They do it – I mean, they sometimes risk their lives. They may be mad, and they may be destructive, and the truths which they believe in may not be true at all and may be extremely dangerous and bad, but they do believe in them and therefore in a sense it's a kind of boredom, I think, with an excessively tolerant and liberal society and a return back to some sort of original effort to find some sort of absolutely inexpugnable truths in the name of which you can do these terrible things. I think even the case of unions, even the case of people who strike – they have a feeling I am sure that they are entitled to

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what they get because they, or their parents, or their grandparents have been exploited by society for a long time and something is owed to them. It isn't only that they can get more by doing it, but also that somehow they are on the wrong side of – they have been too long on the wrong side of society, and now it's time that they were paid back for that. And this is ultimately founded, in however muddled a way, upon some kind of desire for justice. What you can say is that this is not a way to obtain it; what you can say is that, if too many people pull in too many directions, society disintegrates. I think this is perfectly true, but I think the principles which underlie it, so to speak, the basic motives, aren't simply a kind of wild anarchistic sense of what Durkheim called anomie – I mean, there's no law anywhere, this is a jungle, we – each takes what he wants and I don't care what happens to the others, and so on – I am not sure that's happened yet. I think there is always some moral or political justification pleaded for these acts.

JAY So that if we are as it were destroying the constitution of liberty or the framework of liberal democracy, we are doing it as a by-product of individually or individual groups pursuing other ideals which appear directly to the people pursuing them to be just, and indeed ...

BERLIN Yes, I would say.

JAY ... unavoidable. Then there is surely a question for political philosophers, and it is essentially a question for political philosophers to, as it were, solve; I mean, the problem is much more serious if people are doing these things because they are justly motivated or in their own eyes so far as they can see, indeed so far as other people can see, in the limited situation, limited context that they are operating, they are justified. If just behaviour by individuals adds up to an unjust or unworkable society, then there is a fundamental intellectual problem about the political design of your society which is quite different from just saying just there are too many people, too many gangsters, and we must have tougher police to cope with them. So how then can – are there ideas on offer from political philosophers which would enable one once again to reconcile the legitimate aspirations for justice, as you described it, of individuals and individual groups with the basic

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necessity for cohesion and liberality in the total polity of the society.

BERLIN Well, of course, I mean, that is what we're all struggling to get, of course. In any liberal democracy that is the primary problem, to create some kind of machinery of government which does satisfy the grievances of people who use excessively violent means, so to speak take the law in their own hands in order to cure them, and that is the problem before us, certainly, both economically and politically. I mean, that is the problem of every tolerant democracy – is to create some kind of instrument which, without eroding the liberties of the individuals too far nevertheless doesn't allow whole groups of people to be pressed against the wall. If they fail to do that, then I think what happens is that they are succeeded by some kind of despotism of some group which is stronger than the other groups, and which imposes its own solution upon society which for a time is accepted by everybody because at least it's coherent, at least it's probably consistent with itself and has a certain rather terrible inspirational quality because of the fanaticism which goes into it. This is certainly what happened, for example, in the case of the French Revolution, where I think society was rather – obviously there were certain groups who did feel aggrieved, who did feel they weren't getting what they wanted, where the result was – and the people who I think weren't giving it to them were not very convinced of the justice or truth of what they were doing. It's when the governing class so to speak feels un-self-confident and defeated and doesn't feel the validity, I mean, isn't all that convinced of the validity of its own principles, that these things happen, and then of course you get a passionate despotism of some sort, like the Jacobin despotism, and that goes wrong too because people don't like it. In the end, of course, people revolt against any form of excessive oppression, and then you get usually some kind of recession from that. You get a rather cynical period, a kind of *Directoire*, [*inaudible*] quite a lot in history.

JAY In a sense the political philosopher, then, talking to people in a society, like Britain at this moment, is saying, well, history shows a certain swing of the pendulum in events between degrees of perhaps greater tolerance, even excessive tolerance, which leads to

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a sort of anarchic breakdown and a swing the other way to greater and greater oppression until such time as that brings in its own responses which then corrects it, and that ...

BERLIN That's too sad, I think, yes, I agree, this is ...

JAY ... that maybe you can do something to prevent it if you're prepared, if we are all prepared collectively, to say to each other, well we don't actually want to travel that rather dreary and painful route and therefore let us decide now as a pragmatic matter of individual self-interest to abstain from certain forms of conduct. We need to invent, perhaps, certain institutions to make it easier to abstain from the conduct which is destructive of the political order; and then we can perhaps keep the liberal democratic thing going for ever, or rather longer, or something.

BERLIN Yes.

JAY It's an undramatic programme.

BERLIN It's unglamorous, rather, yes. I mean, you see, the two propositions on which I would found the defence of what might be called liberal democracy are two. One is what I've already said, namely, that it simply seeks to provide people with much of what they want as they could have without penalising others, because we can at least discover what people want, that in the end all we know, because we no longer think that we know what the goals of social life are in the way in which, I don't know, people in the seventeenth century knew them so passionately, so well, because they'd read it in the Bible or because they were told by people in whose inspiration they believed absolutely. The second thing is this: you see, what excites people most is of course some kind of Utopian vision, what excites people most is, if they are told, if you do this and if you do that, it may be rather difficult and painful, then you really will get a marvellous universe in which everything will be all right. People will be happy, and wise, and just, and virtuous, and free, and this is worth almost any sacrifice, because it really is round the corner, the only people who stand against are some sort of wicked group, say capitalists, say militarists, say nationalists, whatever it may be. The truth is, it seems to me, that,

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supposing – when you do give people what they want, supposing there is some ideal for which I spend my life fighting, and I get it, the very fact that I get what I want, that my aspirations are satisfied, alters me and by altering me gives me new desires and new things to want. Therefore the idea that there is some kind of solution to what might be called the social problem, that there is some sort of jigsaw puzzle here, which if only all those little bits can be fitted together will produce a universe which will be totally harmonious, totally peaceful, totally happy, which will just tick on in this sort of way can't be true because even if this were done those who obtained their wishes are transformed by the success in obtaining them and therefore have new wishes, and therefore this goes on for ever, and therefore the whole philosophy, so to speak, of there being a particular order of society to which we must sacrifice ourselves, *the* one final solution after which all cruelty, all misery, all stupidity, all human ills will disappear, is in principle wrong. Partly for that reason and for another reason too, and that is, it seems to me that not all values are compatible. You see, in the old system when you thought there was only one true answer, then you knew that every question has one true answer; all the true answers must at least be compatible. It's a logical truth that one true answer can't be incompatible with another true answer; therefore if you can get all the true answers and put them together, this is it, this is how human life should be lived. Maybe we can't do it because we're not clever enough, or powerful enough, or omniscient enough, or something, but if we could get to it this would be it. Now supposing, when you discover to your horror that some values don't lie down comfortably with other values, that you can't be both totally efficient and totally spontaneous, though both these are – you can't have total equality and complete liberty, because if you have complete liberty, then the strong people will beat the weak on the head, and if you have complete equality you must restrain people from doing that. Therefore liberty will be abridged in order to make for equality, and equality must be abridged in order to make room for a certain amount of liberty. When you discover that perhaps truth and happiness aren't compatible, knowledge and happiness. Perhaps if you knew everything that there was to be known, you might be made miserable by that knowledge. Perhaps some happiness comes from not knowing some of the more horrible aspects of our universe,

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for example. Supposing you discover, in other words, that not all values, not all good things can be had, then you have to choose, and if you have to choose you have to lose something, and if you have to lose something, you want a loose system in which it's possible for choices to be made and for compromises to be arranged between the incompatible goals of incompatible human groups. Not incompatible human groups but what I really mean is human groups who want things which are incompatible with each other. You – some people want one thing, some people want another thing, you can't have both to their maximal degree, and therefore you make arrangements for some rather uncomfortable, rather precarious compromise which you think will hold and create a machinery which is flexible enough not to freeze these things in such a way that there is bound to be a conflict between those who want total equality and those who hate it, or those who want a totally efficient society and those who want a certain amount of looseness, and so on. But this is very unglamorous, of course.

JAY This is a fascinating description of the sort of pathology of liberal democracy, but it does suggest to me that there is a kind of conflict, let us not call it a contradiction, built into the very centre of the idea, which is that on the one hand liberal democracy for its healthy survival requires precisely this looseness, this tolerance, this give-and-take that you've just been describing; on the other hand, as you were saying earlier, man seems to need – whether it's a psychological need, I suppose, or a political-psychological need – the view of some Utopia towards which he is striving; that, as it were, he cannot be sufficiently inspired by the down-to-earth, mundane, highly mature view of how a liberal democracy needs to work which you were just describing. That's not something which enthuses people with a great picture of the future, not if they are already in a liberal democracy, which they actually see as grey, drab, suburban, uninspiring, obsessed with material things and so on. And that there is in fact no kind of Utopia which is consistent with this psychology because in a Utopia people would have to be happy, and in order to be happy you have to have the feeling that you are striving on towards the next thing, and that in turn leads by progression to kinds of crusades, causes and extremism, which in the end destroys the liberal democracy.

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BERLIN Certainly.

JAY Now is that tension there?

BERLIN Well, there is a tension there, and I don't know what the answer is. You see, of course, you see, if you ask, what are the societies in the world today which are, as it were, inspired by some kind of passionate ideals, I daresay, I don't know whether the Soviet Union is any longer, but I should think there are communist countries which are, and I daresay China is, and I daresay Cuba is. And this is where some of our more dispirited or disillusioned citizens turn their gaze because they feel that these people live at a higher tension, and in some way their ideals are more inspiring to them than the rather, as it appears to them, I suppose, the rather drab and pedestrian ideals of their own society. But of course that kind of attitude is fundamentally, I don't know what to call it, militarised. It's an attitude of an army marching. It's – the virtues of a really disciplined communist society are military virtues, you can see that, the whole language is that. People must be loyal, people must be faithful to the party, people must accept orders because only in this way shall we win. We must catch up and overtake. Goals are constantly offered to a society one after the other; once you've attained one goal, there is the next goal. This is exactly like an army marching from victory to victory, so to speak, and all the virtues are military virtues. You must restrain yourself – a certain kind of asceticism. You must throw – sacrifice yourself. We have believed in the opposite, rightly or wrongly. We thought on the whole that life is life, I mean, that it isn't true that there is such a thing as what might be called a burning purpose of the whole society as a society. We think on the whole that each group, each person is allowed to pursue their own lives as best they can, and all that the State can do is to create the best milieu, the best medium which enables as many people as possible to get what they themselves most passionately desire. But the idea – the other thing is attractive because of course people in armies, temporarily at least, feel they are marching somewhere. And people – there is a certain tendency on the part of human beings to want to link arms with other people.

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JAY A curious paradox here. I remember Henry Kissinger, the American Secretary of State, pointing out long before he held that office, in about 1968, that it was a strange thing that Marxism, which is a self-declared philosophy of materialism, seemed to be the philosophy which exerted the maximum appeal to the idealistic urges, at least of many young people, particularly not in those countries, whereas the American eighteenth-century liberal tradition, which is avowedly a tradition of idealism, exerted its greatest attraction on people who as it were assessed things in terms of what was the likely effect on their standard of living within the next period of a few years.

BERLIN Yes.

JAY Is this not an extraordinary irony?

BERLIN Well, I don't know about materialism, you see – materialism and Marxism. I mean, the fact that they held certain metaphysical views about the nature of matter, of the relation of matter to spirit, I don't think is a very prominent feature of what attracts people. I don't think it's mainly that.

JAY But it is a doctrine, is it not, about the primacy of economic causes, connections, in human affairs, the primacy of economic goals?

BERLIN I think what really attracts people is that they give a coherent, clear and dogmatic answer to the question, who is to blame? If you say, why aren't we happy? Why is there injustice in the world? Why is there misery? Why are there all these defects in society? The answer is because history has a certain pattern and we have reached such and such a point in this pattern, and history is the history of class war, and until the war between the classes is eliminated by the victory of the last class in history, namely the proletariat, these things are bound to happen; and therefore there is a goal towards which we are marching, and once we liquidate the last class which remains to be liquidated – until that period we are at war (and of course war is a very inspiring thing to people, if you think you are fighting for the right, which no doubt many of these people do think), and once we've eliminated them, then we enter

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the gates of paradise. Then we shall have a just society, we shall have a happy society, of no longer men fighting with men, but the united, rational effort to subdue nature to human needs, or something of that kind. That's the formula, and I can see that anything which promises you a glorious solution, I mean, some kind of happy ending to this sad story of human struggle, is likely to excite people or to inspire them much more than what I've been saying, which is: the story is an unending story, we must do what we can in this rather difficult world, we compromise with one another, we live and let live, we try and arrange our lives in such a way that people don't get in each other's way too much, which is of course far less inspiring than the thought that there is a glorious future, which is worthy of any sacrifice. And it's only if you don't believe that this glorious future is really there, only if you believe that this is founded on some kind of fallacy, are you going to abandon that, but it's very difficult to induce people to abandon faith that this story is not a meaningless story, there must somehow or other be a splendid happy ending to what is otherwise a terrible story of struggle and blood and injustice and oppression.

JAY But you would see this as a sort of immature, psychic need for political history to be written in everybody-lives-happily-ever-after terms, which in fact is not only immature but leads to extraordinarily disagreeable and avoidable consequences?

BERLIN Well, brutality, yes – but not entirely, no, I think that would be to go too far. I think that Marxism undoubtedly had profound insights into the nature of history. I mean, the fact that the economic factor does play the part which it plays was not allowed for by earlier thinkers. It's perfectly true, I think – there is a great deal, in fact, of penetrating truth in Marxist analysis, but I think what inspires people is not so much the fact that they feel that there is a good deal of truth in the fact that what a lot of people regard as universal truths are in fact only good for their particular class and so on, which is what Marxists maintain, and that people disguise from themselves that their self-interest appears to them in the role of universal ideals; I think what inspires them is the idea of a struggle for a brighter future, which can only be successful if we have a correct theory of history which

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guarantees that in the end we shall get there. Stars in their courses are fighting for us – nothing is more inspiring.

JAY So if we were to try now briefly to sum up what might be thought of as the options facing our society, as it looks ahead over the next twenty-five years, there are, I suppose, well, two broadly different kinds. I mean, one is goal-directed approaches, I mean that you try and identify some Utopia towards which you are striving, of which the most obvious one on offer seems to be the Marxist approach. The alternative approach is to say that's not actually the way to think of it. The way to think of it is that the art of the game is to live with your problems, not to solve them, to find a formulation which, as it were, continually is agreeable, satisfactory, avoids unnecessary brutality and poverty and so on, and that it is of its nature unglamorous, and that, you would then say, I imagine, that the pursuit of glamour is a dangerous and destructive one of which we should try to cure ourselves.

BERLIN In politics, yes. I think this is perhaps a little bit too passive and negative in approach. I think all I am really trying to say is that I think the idea of the best is perhaps dangerous, but the idea of the better is all right. I mean, that is to say, we must say: we have poverty, we must eliminate it as far as possible; there is a great deal of injustice, we must cure it; there is a great deal of oppression, we must do our best to eliminate it, and so on. I don't mean to say that there aren't acute problems to which we must bend our efforts, so to speak, and it's perfectly all right to have crusades to eliminate this problem, that problem, this misery, that misery. But the idea that there is a single solution, which therefore any amount of sacrifice is, so to speak – justifies any amount of sacrifice, so that hundreds of thousands of people must be slaughtered in order that hundreds of millions might be happy – about that I feel doubts. I think it was the Russian thinker Herzen, whom I often read, who said: when people say we must kill millions in order that hundreds of millions might be happier, we can't ever be certain about the hundreds of millions, what is certain is the millions are dead. We can certainly slaughter the millions, that's been done.

JAY Yes.

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BERLIN What is less certain is that these hundreds of millions tomorrow are going to be made happier by that, and so far this hasn't happened on a very large scale. You ask me about glamour: yes, I would say that in politics glamour is somewhat dangerous. I think glamorous political causes lead ultimately to some kind of despotism, to some kind of Bonapartism ...

JAY Hysteria.

BERLIN Well, to Bonapartism too, I mean the rising of men on white horses.

JAY Sir Isaiah, I thank you very much indeed for the fascinating statement of the choices which we face as a society. We'll be picking up some of those themes in our final discussion programme, but that's it for tonight. Good night.

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