ISAIAH BERLIN ONLINE

Why Are These Books Neglected?

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Why Are These Books Neglected?

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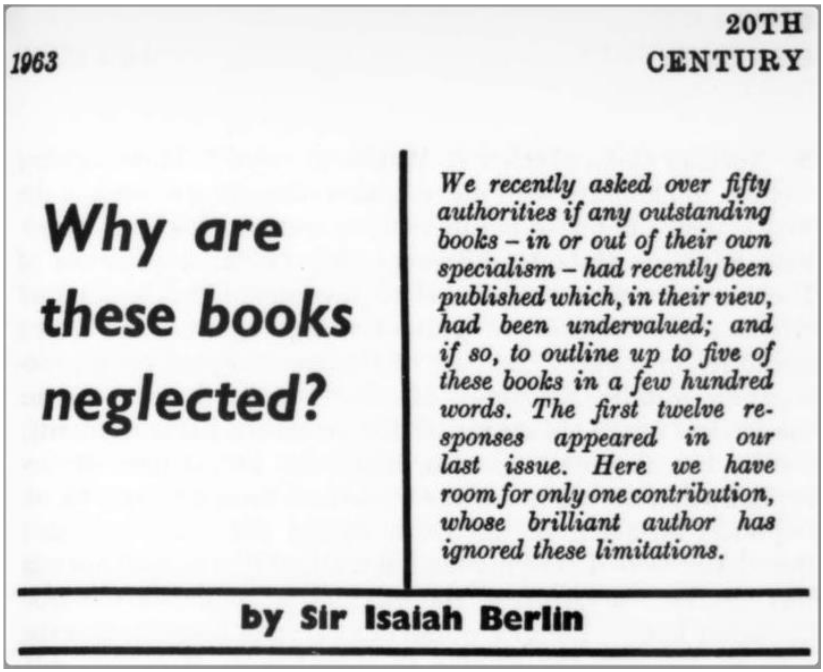


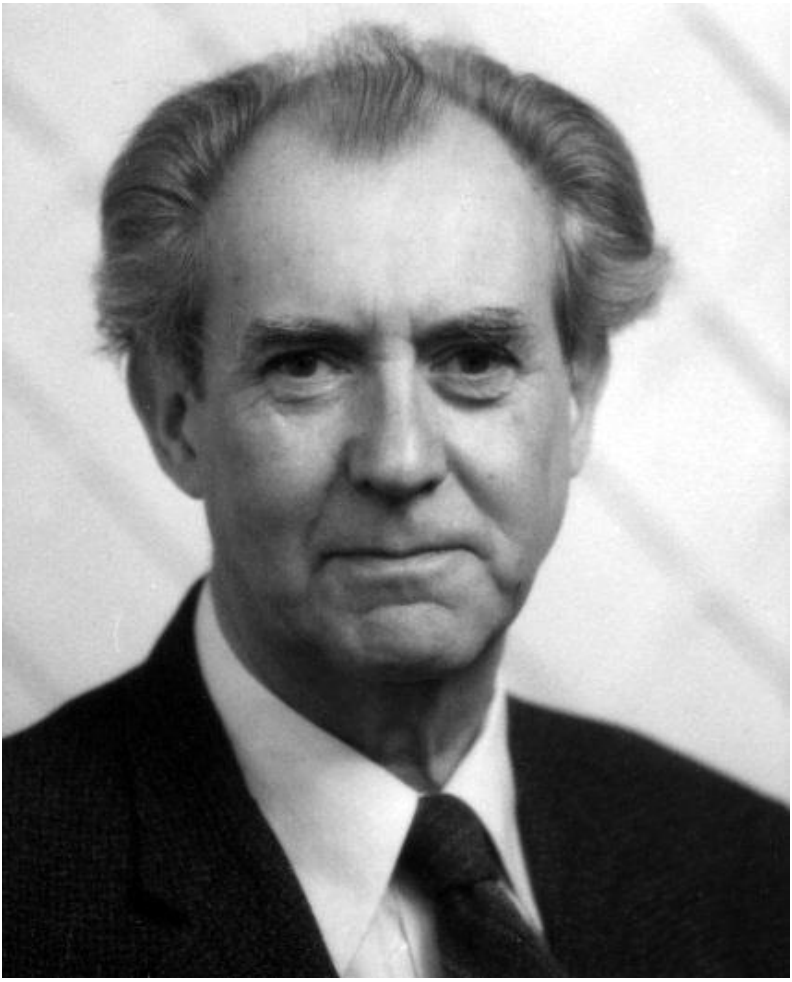
TO A SHOEMAKER there is nothing like leather. In answer to your enquiry, I should therefore like to confine myself to my own professional field, and to draw attention to three books which seem to me not to have had the attention that they deserve. All three deal with politics in a broad sense: that is, discuss ideas as they affect action. They have not met with much response in England. This may be due to the growingly apolitical attitudes noticeable, particularly among the young, almost everywhere today, outside parts of Asia and Africa. Or it may be part of a reaction to the violent, and often obsessive, conflicts of political principles and faiths of the fathers that have fallen into discredit in the world of the children. Moreover, interest in general ideas has not been

favoured in British universities in this century, and lives on amongst us as a by-product of philosophy or literature or history, without the respected and independent status that it has in the universities of America and the European continent. Finally, it may be because the three books of which I wish to speak are written in clear prose and are addressed firmly to reason and not to the passions or to the nerves, and are at the opposite pole to the compounds of free metaphysical association, vast unsupported generalisations and obscurely formulated private neuroses which in both their German and their American forms seem better attuned to the sympathies of our most morally sensitive reviewers.

The first of these books is *In Pursuit of the Millennium*, **[140]** by Norman Cohn.[1] There are few feelings to compare with the sensation of reading a work of the first water: the first-rate differs from even the highest second-rate with an absolute difference. Mr Cohn, a professor of French literature, set himself to investigate the social and religious phenomenon of peasant risings against constituted authority in roughly the part of Europe occupied by Charlemagne's Middle Kingdom. He found a persistent pattern: the leaders of the risings invariably proclaimed that authority, secular but above all spiritual, had fallen into a state of corruption; that the throne of the Pope had been usurped by an imposter, an agent of the Devil or the Devil himself; that the wicked were destroying the faithful and that until there was regeneration – a return to the original principles of the true Christian faith – iniquity would increase and flourish; that the path to the millennium – the thousand years of earthly rule by the Saints that preceded the Second Coming – lay through the most fearful darkness and suffering. The Church would, at first, look with some benevolence upon religious and moral revivalism of this type; but presently the call towards spiritual purification would take on a threatening social and political aspect, and menaced the sources of corruption

[1] London, 1959: Secker & Warburg [also chosen by Stuart Hampshire in his contribution to the previous issue].

and oppression – the lords and the bishops and their servants. Finally, fanatical crusades and mutinies would break out, which were duly repressed by princes both secular and sacred – the story always ended in blood; the great revolt in Münster under the Anabaptist prophet John of Leyden was merely the last and most violent of these.



Gerhard Cohn

Mr Cohn does not merely tell this story and draw careful and arresting analogies between the different manifestations of this phenomenon in the Low Countries, in Alsace, Luxembourg and the Rhineland. He seeks to discover general social causes or conditions of the Messianic movements and arrives at the carefully documented conclusion that it is not poverty, nor oppression, nor any other form of permanent frustration – these can evidently last for centuries without erupting in rebellion – but some social or economic dislocation in the lives of a social group, due, for example, to some technological advance that upsets the equilibrium of traditional forms of life, and generates 'superfluous men' – uprooted figures, no longer able to integrate themselves into the lives of their society because their **[141]** gifts have ceased to be useful. These men, thrown into the middle of the stream, torn away from one bank, unable to reach the other, tend to rationalise (if that is the proper phrase) their alienated state into disruptive political or religious 'ideology'.

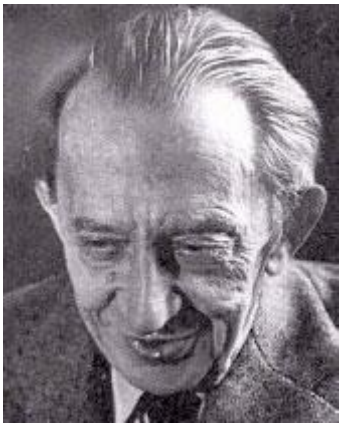
This intelligent and imaginative application of semi-Marxist concepts to carefully studied historical events seems to me to have yielded remarkably illuminating results: sociological history of the best kind. Mr Cohn's book upsets previous tacit assumptions – for example, that it is misery or poverty or other conditions degrading to human beings, too long patently borne, that must finally cause even the humbles worm to turn, because men cannot suffer more than a maximum amount of pain, injustice or degradation. This is evidently not so: slavery, inequality, humiliation can apparently go on for long periods without causing rebellion; this may be discreditable to human nature, but it is the case. What causes revolt is dislocation, change: even a change for the better, provided that it is sharp enough and displaces a large group of persons from their previous types of life and, consequently, ways of thought and feeling. These are the carriers of revolution: from them, dissatisfaction spreads to others and a movement is set in motion which in the end comes into conflict with those whose fortunes are bound up with the status quo.

Mr Cohn says more than this: he seeks to find a common symbolic pattern – a 'myth' which must lie very deep in the 'collective unconscious' of the West (if one may use such Jungian phrases without committing oneself to Jung's theories), for it is clear that the imaginations of these 'primitive rebels' (with whom Mr Hobsbawm has also brilliantly dealt)[2] revolved constantly around the same pattern – the putative usurpation of the throne of God by wicked agencies, the need to destroy disciples of the Devil disguised as true kings or true rulers or true priests, the need to extirpate treason, to restore the rule of the saints of yore, the inevitability of fearful torments and massacres until victory and glory, the 'kingdom of a thousand years', is finally achieved. This is certainly not confined to primitive peasants in parts of north-western Europe. Mr Cohn traces it back to Hebrew and Arabic legends and realises its pertinence to the more irrational manifestations of German and other forms of nationalism and sectarian violence in our times in Europe, Asia and Africa – wherever **[142]** charismatic leaders proclaim a return to a scared past, or to some ideal purity of conduct and belief which enemies without and traitors within seek to destroy.

Mr Cohn's combination of careful factual investigation and sociological and psychological hypotheses of great plausibility and explanatory force seems to me to be of outstanding value. It is not a final explanation, nor does he, of course, claim this. But it is a piece of great originality and power which gains immeasurably when set beside the grander and more pretentious essays in modern historiography – huge, turbid, dark, in which shapeless ideas loom up and melt away like buses in a London fog – at best, a kind of low-grade poetry, at worst, pompous verbiage which cows the impressionable. Mr Cohn's book, even at its most romantic and ambitious, makes statements which, if true, are of

[2] E. J. Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Manchester, 1959: Manchsetser University Press).

decisive importance, and the truth of which can be investigated. It deserves study and emulation.



The second book I wish to praise is *Marxism: An Historical and Critical Study*, by Mr George Lichtheim.[3]

The situation of Marxist scholarship in this country is very peculiar. There was never a time when so much reference to Marx and his views was made in every conceivable connection; nor is this surprising in view of the fact that Marxism is the most influential single body of ideas in the twentieth century. In France, in Germany, in the United States, there is (as one would expect) constant discussion and debate that sometimes rises to violent conflict about the interpretation and validity of Marx's ideas, so that various images of Marx have been constructed – from the semi-Hegelian humanist uncovered (his opponents would say invented) by Lukács and his disciples and dominant in the thought of M. Kojève and left-wing existentialists in Paris, to the orthodox figure familiar in the pages of Plekhanov, Kautsky, Lenin, Trotsky etc., to whom such concepts as alienation and the metabolism of man and nature are remote or altogether unfamiliar concepts.

[3] London, 1961: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

What is odd is that these controversies – for example, the lively exchanges between Professors Hook and Tucker, or the differences of emphasis by Professors Landshut and Fetscher – have to all appearance made so small an impact (with a few notable exceptions) upon scholars and thinkers in the British Isles. This is perhaps a symptom of our swiftly growing provincialism; such remoteness from issues that are clearly of universal cultural and political importance compares **[143]** oddly with the wider horizons and political and intellectual concerns of British students of Marx in the 1920s and 1930s – for all Mr E. H. Carr's contemptuous references to them as a shallow and uninteresting lot.

It is therefore a matter for congratulation when an acute, learned and original book on the subject makes its appearance, and a dismal sign of the times when it is greeted either with faint praise or obvious ignorance of the issues by the majority of critics and reviewers. Mr George Lichtheim's book on Marxism is a notable achievement. I do not myself agree with a good many of his judgements – on Hegel, for example, or on Marx's debt to and attitude towards Hegel, on Marxist economics, on Kautsky's insight and Bernstein's faults; his discounting of personal factors – Marx's jealousy of both Lassalle and Proudhon – his odd notion of Russian populism as tending, on the whole, to elitism; and many other things. But whatever its shortcomings or its controversial theses, this work performs its main purpose with thoroughness and brilliance.

Mr Lichtheim's thesis is that Marx was fundamentally correct in his historical approach to the life and structure of human society; and he has had the original inspiration to subject Marxism itself to Marxist analysis. He considers its doctrines as the fruit of the dynamic movement of the social classes of its own time, that is, to judge it in terms of its growth out of, and applicability to, the conditions of it own age, and asks whether the very correctness of its analysis of social-economic conditions in the nineteenth century has not rendered it obsolete or obsolescent – at any rate in its ossified, orthodox forms – in our own time.

Most writers about Marx have always paid lip-service to the formula that he was a strategist and a tactician, as Lenin was after him, and that therefore his views were to be considered in the concrete 'context' of the situation of his own time, which he was trying to subvert by the only means which his analysis showed him to be practicable and desirable. Mr Lichtheim has tried to test this formula by reference to concrete facts. He is one of the very few writers to give a plausible account of the change in Marx's view of the grand strategy of the proletariat from his elitism of 1847–51 to the belief in the slow and inexorable advance of proletarian social democracy within the framework of liberal democracy (which alone can make such advance possible) that colours his views after 1871. Mr Lichtheim attributes this shift to the development of industrialisation in the West during the relevant years. This enables him to account **[144]** for Lenin's unorthodox return in 1917 to the earlier doctrine by the fact that Russian conditions in 1917 resembled those in Germany in 1848 far more than those of any Western country after, say, 1870 – which explains (and justifies) Lenin's claim to be a faithful Marxist as against the view that he was in practice an opportunist dedicated to the truth only of his own doctrines.

Mr Lichtheim is not a philosopher: his pages on Hegel, Feuerbach, logical positivism, historicism are best ignored; but his account of Marx's theory of the emergence of capitalism out of feudalism, which so puzzled Schumpeter, is novel and convincing; so is his solution of the famous puzzle of the success of Communist revolutions in economically primitive societies and their relative failure in industrially developed ones. He connects this with the fact that Marx's account of exploitation, and the results that he predicted, fit Eastern Europe, even in the twentieth century, far better than the great imperialist-protectionist collectivist complexes of the West.

The only other accounts of the reasons for the notorious failures of Marx's specific prophecies that are at once impartial and

convincing are those latterly provided by Mr John Strachey[4] and Professor Adam Ulam.[5] Mr Lichtheim's account complements theirs. In the pages of these authors, Marx emerges as a more complex, interesting and, indeed, profound thinker than in the stock accounts of the orthodox hacks. Indeed, anyone who thinks of Marx as a rigorous determinist (as indeed I myself used to do) need only read Mr Lichtheim's admirable account of the contradictions of the Marxist dialectic, due to the self-frustrations of men's reason in their free efforts to create a rational world – phenomena not caused by external physical or physiological or other causally determined factors.

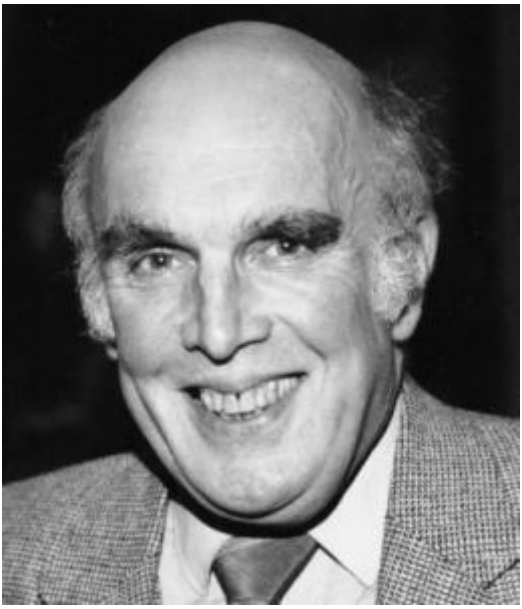
Perhaps Mr Lichtheim somewhat exaggerates the element of voluntarism in Marx, which is present in his earlier more than in his later writings. He does this largely in order to contrast the views of Marx with the cruder determinism of Engels, Kautsky, Plekhanov etc., whose translation of Marxism into a view that a natural science of history can be constructed on the analogy with the physical sciences leads to muddles in theory and a semi-fatalistic dependence in practice on the mills of an impersonal History. Determinist texts can be found in Marx – particularly in his later writings. But Mr Lichtheim is, I am now convinced, right in supposing that the central doctrine, even **[145]** at the price of some inconsistency, optimistically identifies freedom, reason and human self-reliance and initiative.

The account of the relation between judgements of value and fact in Marx is outstanding; so is that of Marx's concept of nature as opposed to that of Engels and the epigoni. The contrast between the wise, sagacious, imaginative Marx and the foolish, dogmatic, unhistorical Engels, whose influence on later Social-Democrats is held to be largely responsible for their philosophical and political absurdities, may be historically unjust but it serves to throw much needed light on what is dead and what is living in Marxism past

[4] John Strachey, *The Strangled Cry* (London, 1962).

[5] Adam Ulam, *The New Face of Soviet Totalitarianism* (Cambridge, Mass., 1963).

and present. Even when one disagrees with Mr Lichtheim most sharply, one is aware that much of what he is saying, particularly on the historical evolution of Marxism, is new, important, true and to be found nowhere else. If I am right in supposing that this is one of the most arresting books on Marx and Marxism to appear in our time, the flat phrases used about it by the majority of our general reviewers have served to conceal the fact completely from the common reader in England.



Victor Patterson

The third book I wish to praise is Mr Bernard Crick's *In Defence of Politics*.[6] This is a horse of a different colour altogether. Bold, well-written, at times perverse and irritating, but uncompromisingly intelligent, it is an arresting discussion of what political theory is and of what it should be. Mr Crick does not regard every theory about social conduct and every form of social practice as being, in

[6] London 1962: Weidenfeld & Nicolson.

his sense of the term, 'political'. Thus, to establish a single set of principles as obligatory on all men and to deduce all political truths and rules from them, and what corresponds to this in practice – the attempt to establish a single pattern of mental and bodily behaviour as binding on the whole of a society and the attempt to impose it on all its members, by soft means or hard – is not in Mr Crick's sense politics at all, but anti-politics.

The only other writer whom I know to have made a somewhat similar point is Professor Wolin,[7] who, in his strikingly original discussion of Plato's politics, stresses Aristotle's essentially political attitude, based on the assumption of the permanent reality of human variety and change, of differences of view and temperament, goals, ends and means, and of differences of forms of government and the virtues and vices bred by them; which leads him to conceive of politics as a natural **[146]** product of these character-istics of the real world, so that it does not occur to him to wonder whether these facts are desirable or undesirable, inevitable or contingent. Wolin contrasts this with Plato, who is obsessed by an essentially unpolitical, metaphysical notion of unity and the single self-contained pattern, fixed and final, timeless, eternal and universal – the One – which he attempts to apply to human society. He is consequently irritated by everything in it that resists this reduction to complete frictionless unity, and tries to dismiss as illusory all that is not deducible from the unitary vision, the single all-inclusive Whole, which is reality and virtue, explanation and justification. When Aristotle condemns Plato's tendency to reduce everything to unison, obliterate differences, what according to Wolin he is attacking is Plato's hatred of politics itself, of the natural and unalterable attributes of social life which his great, frozen, transcendental vision does not fit.

Mr Crick is preoccupied by something similar to this. He assumes that there could be no politics at all is there were no differences about ends or means; that the theory and practice of

[7] Sheldon S. Wolin, *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought* (Boston/London, 1960: Little, Brown).

politics springs from the need of men to invent, maintain, justify and explain forms of social life that rest on the permanent possibility (and reality) of variety and conflict that a minimum degree of human self-expression involves. A group of human beings crushed by violence into conformity is not for him a political society at all, but an unpolitical form of life which destroys the minimum conditions for argument, contemplation of alternatives, choice, without which there can be no political – and scarcely any other – thought.

Mr Crick develops this theme in terms of the actual practice of societies and the ideas of thinkers living and dead in a short book written with verve and brilliance; and although (inevitably) contrasts of politics and anti-politics, or particular arguments, seem to me to be at times overdrawn, unjust, or even specious, the general effect is one of boldness, originality and freshness. Mr Crick has a remarkable capacity for seeing and revealing the basic images of the society in terms of which theorists and practitioners and politics thought and acted. He has written an exceedingly clever and disturbing book on important issues: all that he writes is alive and much of what he says, even when it seems perversely provocative, turns out to be penetrating and serious.

But even if I am mistaken in this, we are surely not so rich in original writers on politics that we can ignore so **[147]** much ability and passion so well expressed. Yet most of the reviews of this book – perhaps because Mr Crick's weapons are disagreeably sharp – were patronising and unjust or contemptuous and hostile. Of these, the most ferocious were by Mr Crossman, for whom politics has for many years been reducible to the crude Leninist formula – where is the power and who holds down whom with it? – and one or two others who have forgotten or never knew that politics is not simply (to quote Mr Marquand) 'about power' but (because it is not divorceable from ethics) about means and goals, rules, priorities and scales of value, and so, in the end, about the nature of man in its social and historical manifestation.

I should like to salute Mr Crick, a serious and very gifted writer with something of his own to say. This last attainment is sufficient-

ly rare in any field: in contemporary political writing it is so scarce that when it appears it should be recognised and treated seriously, and not slapped down because the tone is polemical and occasionally shrill, and the language, which in this case springs from a violent intellectual life, is sometimes wounding and unbalanced. These are faults of virtues, not vice versa.

These three books differ in scope and importance, but all seem to me to be first rate, each in its category, and have not had their due.

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