

Reading Notes, Autumn 1985

Materialism, Where is they Sting? – How
to Study Modern Politics – Churchill:
*tel qu'en lui-même enfin l'éternité le
change*

MATERIALISM, WHERE IS THY STING?

London and Moscow are the two capitals which exhibit the corpse of a political writer, leader and ideologist, embalmed, made-up and dressed so as presumably to give an equivocal proof of his immortality to subsequent generations of ideological followers. The upper and lower classes of Victorian society used to stuff their big game or their pets in a similar manner; but it was animals they stuffed and they did it on their own account. And one can be sure that they had no ideological object.

But there was, and there continues to be a faint ideological purpose in the exhibition of the embalmed Jeremy Bentham at University College, Gower St. London W.C.1., one of the most venerable and respected institutions of learning in London. It was on the occasion of a recent celebration that *The Times* reproduced, with questionable taste, the well-known picture of Bentham's corpse, sitting upright in an armchair, with his hat on his head, thus giving rise to these remarks. In the case of the embalming and exhibition of the corpse of Vladimir Ilich Lenin in Red Square in Moscow, before which, for more than sixty years now queues of people constrained to visit it, line up, the purpose is exclusively and manifestly ideological.

The ideological purpose is twofold. The immediate object is to make people, generation after generation, pay their respects to these historical personalities. But the indirect one is subtler and goes deeper. Insofar as both Benthamite utilitarianism and Leninist Marxism are two professed materialist and atheist ideologies, the display before the masses of these embalmed

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cadavers was, and still is, portrayed as a 'scientific miracle', as the rationalistic hocus-pocus of immortality. What need of the immortality of the soul, the experiment seems to ask, when look, *he* is there, defying death in his glass box? Since both ideologies descend from Helvetius's crude materialist philosophy (Benthamism directly, Lenin in a much more explicitly materialistic atheistic manner, via Marx/Feuerbach) which treats Spirit as a *physical sensibility*,¹ as something which originates in matter, that is in the human body, and disappears with it, their disciples should have accepted, as Socrates's did, the death of their Masters and put their bodies to rest.

But they were hoist with the petard of their materialistic philosophy. In the light of that philosophy the dissolution of the flesh of the body that had once been Bentham or Lenin signified their final extinction. So, taken by a sort of metaphysical despair, they have tried to defend their masters against this total extinction. But because of the tenets of their materialist belief, they could have no recourse either to the Socratic belief in the separate life and immortality of the soul, nor (even less permissible) to the Christian belief in the soul's true life after death. They were thus bound to fall into the gravest contradiction of materialist philosophy. They tried to give their Masters at least a semblance of immortality, but as they recognised only *matter*, they tried to keep the *matter*, that of their dead leaders, from decay, assembled, stuffed, and treated. The result is this unappetizing revival in the age of, and under the aegis of, science, of primitive customs, long since abandoned in the civilized world.

It cannot be only coincidental that these fetishist methods have been used only in the cases of the leaders of the two major schools of scientific materialism in the whole history of philosophy.

HOW TO STUDY MODERN POLITICS

Although one swallow does not make a summer, nor even two, I was happily surprised by the coincidence which led me to read successively two books which bear all the promising marks of modern political analysis or, to put it more precisely, of the

¹ Helvetius, *De l'Esprit*, London, 1781, Vol. I, p. 3, italics in the text.

analysis of modern politics. For, by now, analyses of *major* national policies and of their decisional processes, diligently quantified as they may be in most cases, not only do not inform people of their real context, but risk misinforming them. And what is true for the theory is even truer for the practice of policy-making.

This being said, let me quickly add that the first of these two exemplary books *Interdependence in the Post-Multilateral Era*² consists of three studies in international economics: Stephen Woolcock's *The Steel Industry: a Codification of National Norms*, Jeffrey Hart's *The Case of the Automobile Industry* and Hans Van der Ven's *Developments in Telematics and their Impact on US-European Trade Relations*, together with a very intelligent prefatory discussion on *The Decline of Multilateralism* (presumably a joint effort) and a brief but sharp preface by Roger D. Putnam, who, together with Robert Keohane, conducts the Centre for International Affairs of Harvard University where this work was prepared. So the book could not be described as a 'political study' in the old sense of the word. But as Roger Putnam puts it:

At the core of this research is a simple observation: Western markets have become increasingly internationalized, but Western politics remain overwhelmingly domestic. This clash between international economics and national politics has begun to erase the traditional distinction between domestic affairs . . . The longer-term consequences of this increasing entanglement of foreign and domestic politics are not yet adequately understood either by scholars or (what is more important) by practical policy-makers.

Moreover, the main common object of the three studies is to draw attention to the fact that the implications of the increased trade competition between the United States and Europe 'were not assimilated into the countries' political processes' until the breakdown in the 1970s of the previously oligopolistic market structures in a number of major industries.

The three industries analysed represent three phases of this breakdown: the steel industry has now been *readjusted* in

² Stephen Woolcock, Jeffrey Hart, and Hans Van der Ven, *Interdependence in the Post Multilateral Era, Trends in US-European Trade Relations*, Harvard and University Press of America, 1985.

Europe, and to a lesser extent in the United States, by big cuts in production on both sides so as to reduce the competitiveness between the two Atlantic partners. For both had been upset by a lot of negative factors, among which the speedy growth in steel production in developing countries (in 1979 the EC, United States and Japan accounted for 57 per cent of world steel production, against 4 per cent for the developing countries. By 1983 the respective figures were 43 per cent and 10 per cent). The 'case of the automobile industry' is a study in the world-interpenetration now taking place and which might damp down the present tripartite conflict (EC-US-Japan) over trade and investment in the car industry. As Hart puts it, 'The direct presence of foreign firms in the form of subsidiaries or joint ventures seems to mollify . . . political concern about the fairness of outcomes in the international economy' while regarding the 'developments in telematics' (developments meaning here that this problem is now still only at its very beginning with unforeseeable consequences for the near and distant future) Van der Ven concludes that 'Even if Europe does not open its markets significantly, American export dependence in telematics . . . will act as a restraint on overt US pressure. But the European industry is equally dependent on US technology and access to the US market if it is to retain international competitiveness'.

The study of the steel industry is, at least quantitatively, the most developed. It is also now terribly timely because the 1977 Agreement between the US and the European Community expires at the end of the year. Moreover, the differences in interpretation between the viewpoints of both continents seemed at the time of writing to lead to new difficulties.

The steel study is also privileged in that we can look back on the sad futility of the political and social agitations fostered in France, Germany, Belgium and last but not least in Great Britain. The imperious demands of a world change in technological and economic conditions cannot be solved by nationalistic ideas of protectionism or by social strikes. The fact that after four years of severe discipline, under the aegis of the European Community, the European steel industry as a whole has recovered and is showing signs of renewed productivity, proves the advantages of transnational policy-making. Think of the social manifestations of social despair and anger when

the plans had to be implemented in Lorraine, in the Ruhr, in Wales and Scotland. Think of the venom that extreme political parties, of the nationalist Right and of the revolutionary Left, have been able to inject – *via* the all-inquisitive media – in the general political atmosphere, and of the passionate but somehow useless parliamentary and governmental debates so provoked.

That does not mean that we should be inspired by a new economic determinism, not even if this time it were, unlike Marxist ideological determinism, a proper scholarly economic determinism. On the contrary what it means is that if political circles and policy-makers were better informed, and in consequence took a more comprehensive view of the overall developments than their present narrow, national ideological perspective, they would be able to propose policies sufficiently timely, adequate, and efficacious to be successfully implemented. Only proper information, open views and non-ideological judgment can give to modern political decision the voluntaristic, anti-deterministic character which should characterize it. But ill-informed and ideologically biased political actors will inevitably always be caught unprepared and will explain their failures because of unpredictable events. The oil crisis of 1972–4, which according to all European politicians caught them by surprise and, in the exercise, caused the economic crisis in which we are still floundering, was not only predictable, *but predicted* by such institutions as the OECD and the European Commission. It could easily have been avoided. But the short-sightedness of governments allowed it to hit them, all of them, as a fast ball hits the frail skittles. Only vulgar Marxists can explain this typical case of political myopia on grounds of economic determinism.

The second book is, as it were, the obverse of the first. While the first book examined the transnational causes of domestic consequences, the second, *Controversies at Home: Domestic Factors in the Foreign Policy of the Netherlands*,³ looks, as its title shows, to the effects internal politics have on external developments. I am certain that the idea will soon be emulated

³ Ph.P. Everts, *Controversies at Home: Domestic Factors in the Foreign Policy of the Netherlands*, Dordrecht, Nijhoff, 1985.

in the political literature of most West European countries. In the Dutch case the subject is also very timely as great attention has been paid in recent years to the equivocations of the Dutch government over the deployment of cruise missiles on its territory. Moreover, in the Dutch case the national psychology of a once imperial state, now shrunk to a small member-state of the European Community, oddly magnifies the interest of public opinion in foreign affairs. (According to the authors, while 61 per cent of a poll recognised that the Netherlands is a small country, 78 per cent of the same group maintained that it could influence international affairs.) Also characteristic of present Dutch politics is the fact that although the old parties, Christian and Labour, are now deeply divided on problems of morality in international politics, they are gradually being deserted by their members and voters in favour of the *single issue groups* (mostly external indeed 'Thirdworldistic', and environmental, or both, issues) which lead to the new political agitation on the question of policy goals.

Yet, in spite of all this new interest, justified or not, ideological or not, in international events of all sorts – which Walter Lacqueur described too sarcastically and too exclusively as 'Hollanditis' – the authors conclude that out of sixteen case-studies examined which were submitted to a rigorously scholarly, if somewhat stereotyped, analysis, seven were not successful – that is they did not affect the government's policy; four were 'moderately successful', among which the case of 'no cruise missiles in the Netherlands' still described here as 'uncertain'; and five were successful, i.e. the campaigns on: 1) no submarines for Taiwan. 2) action to restore democracy in Greece, 3) higher agricultural prices, 4) support Israel, resist Arab pressures and 5) stop the introduction of the neutron bomb. Of the five, the fifth and last was, of course, the most relevant insofar as both the religious and the Left parties were tormented by the issue of the attitude to be taken by the Dutch government toward President Carter's hesitating intentions of building and deploying the ERBB weapon in Europe – and insofar as the *Stop de neutronen bomb* group – 'set-up at the initiative of the Communist party . . . part of an international campaign in which the Soviet-oriented World Peace Council played the major coordinating role' (p. 126) formed a vast movement in which two prominent Christian

organizations joined in. But it is somewhat surprising to find that the authors conclude that even in this successful and more important case 'the success of the opposition was to obtain a temporary delay of the production process' but that when President Reagan decided to proceed with the production of the weapon in August 1981, 'the public outcry against this decision can hardly be compared to that of 1977/8' (Carter years).

Obviously what is not sufficiently demonstrated, in this otherwise very useful analysis of the domestic-international interplay of politics, is how and how much the domestic factor influenced and changed the major transnational development. If future authors, inspired by this book, attempt to produce similar analyses of, for instance, the influence of British domestic policy on international developments, they should make sure that that ultimate, and ultimately relevant, aspect of the analysis is explored (for the states of the European Community the analysis of the constant interfaces *via* the Political Co-operation would make the study even more fascinating).

CHURCHILL: TEL QU'EN LUI-MÊME ENFIN L'ÉTERNITÉ
LE CHANGE

When Sir John Colville took the decision not to publish his Boswellian *Downing Street Diaries 1939-1945*⁴ until at least thirty years after he had finished them, he obviously ran a double risk. After thirty years of satiation with *Churchilliana*, readers might not take more of the same. And the diaries themselves would have little to add to what had already been said in the thousands of books on Churchill and Britain during the Second World War, notably after the publication of his own memoirs, and Martin Gilbert's monumental biography. Both apprehensions now prove to be groundless. Not only had we had enough of stories on 'the finest hour' of the history of Britain, but, even if only by a natural escapism from the tedium of the parochial and chaffering public debates of today and from the surprise aroused by the trend dominant in public

⁴ John Colville, *The Fringes of Power; Downing Street Diaries 1939-1945*, London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1985.

opinion to idolize such heroes as Elvis Presley, Arthur Scargill and rival football stars, to the accompaniment of the same chant of 'Here we go', that when somebody opens a new window on the British hero and on the truly heroic British society, we feel an invigorating breath of fresh air.

Moreover the danger of repetitiveness, of the previous exhaustion of Churchillian material, is effectively avoided in the Colville *Diaries* by the use of the Isherwoodian 'I am a camera' technique. The *Diaries* are composed of brief notes, indeed snapshots of the hero, inevitably caught in endlessly changing moods and attitudes. They are so frequent — and some so terribly funny — and the camera is so closely focused that it produces a far more complete album of real pictures, almost a video of the statesman in action, than has appeared so far. The reader can observe him every day, on his good days or on his bad days, and grasp directly his qualities, his defects and the qualities of his defects. Moreover the reader is able to see through the physiological description of this statesman what the classic type of statesman is made of. We knew that Churchill was one of the greatest statesmen in history. But the Colville *Diaries* help us to see how completely he answers to the classical prerequisites.

The first condition of a Statesman, said Plato, is that he should be guided only by his conscience. Now listen to Churchill, in public, in his funeral oration for, of all men, Neville Chamberlain: 'The only guide to man is his conscience. The only shield to his memory is the rectitude and sincerity of his actions. It is very imprudent to walk through life without this shield, because we are so often mocked by the failure of our hopes and the upsetting of our calculations; but with this shield however the fates may play, we march always in the rank of honour', and in private, in this note by Colville of 27 August 1940: '. . . at about 9.30 the sirens began . . . Winston to his obvious regret, refused brandy and demanded iced soda-water, saying that he was ashamed of the easy life he led and had never before lived in such luxury . . . W. went on to declare that his object was to preserve "the maximum initiative-energy". "Every night" he said, "I try myself by court martial to see if I have done anything effective during the day. I don't mean just pawing the ground; anyone can go through the motion; but something really effective"'. This was tinged also with his *sui generis*

religious attitude: 'He seldom went to church and, curiously enough, only enjoyed christenings; but he unquestionably developed in his later years a conviction that this life was not the end . . . He went on to say he could not help wondering whether the government above might not be a constitutional monarchy, in which case there was always a possibility that the Almighty might have occasion to "send for him" '.

Pure and scrutinized conscience leads to the second quality of the statesman: fortitude. Churchill admired courage above all other human qualities, and he himself acted first in the dimension of courage. When, as early as 1 June 1940 he was asked the somewhat peripheral question whether the pictures in the National Gallery should be evacuated to Canada, he wrote on the minute: 'No, bury them in caves and cellars. None must go. We are going to beat them'. Then when the drama really began, during the collapse of France, on 15 June 1940, 'Churchill was very depressed by the news'. But after a long and silent dinner: "The war is bound to become a bloody one for us now", he said, "but I hope our people will stand up to bombing and the Huns aren't liking what we are giving them. But what a tragedy that our victory in the last war should have been snatched from us by a lot of softies"'. And speaking to Harry Hopkins on 10 January 1941, he recognised that 'when at the time of Dunkirk he had addressed a meeting of Ministers "below the line" he had realised that there was only one thing they wanted him to say: that whatever happened to our army we should still go on. He had said it'. And he had said it to the whole and admirable British people on 4 June: 'We shall fight on the beaches. We shall fight on the landing grounds. We shall fight in the fields and the streets. We shall fight in the hills. We shall never surrender'.

The same personal courage also inspired his decisions. The diarist notes that Churchill's decisions 'were entirely unpredictable'. 'This was due to some strange intuitive power which he held and which might induce him to take a line contrary, as it appeared to logic and contrary to the normal mental workings of everybody else . . . He always retained unswerving independence of thought . . . and was the least liable to be swayed by the views of even his most intimate counsellors'. An excellent example is the decision on the collaboration with Russia when Hitler attacked it – which was a difficult moral dilemma for

Churchill: 'Sunday June 22nd. The PM's broadcast was not ready till twenty minutes before he was due to deliver it and it gave me great anxiety, but even more so to Eden who wanted to vet the text and couldn't. But when it was made it impressed us all: it was dramatic and gave a clear decision of policy-support for Russia'.

Rhetoric, which in the best cases derives from conscience and fortitude, is a gift from the gods – and they had been particularly generous to Churchill. But as the diarist frequently notes, Churchill worked hard and long at his speeches: 'Sunday November 3rd . . . the PM thought out the speech he is to make in the House on Tuesday to the accompaniment of Strauss waltzes on Mary's gramophone. Having received sufficient inspiration, he went into the Hawtrey room to dictate the speech to Mrs Hill'.

Plato and Aristotle both show that rhetoric is the prerequisite of the art of politics – the art of persuading people to take a prescribed course of action. Spellbound by his speeches, the British people followed Churchill's course of action – one of the most difficult, sacrificial and lonely, yet glorious courses of action taken by any people in history, in a full parliamentary democracy, suffering from very minor limitations. But the course was just and so was the statesman's political judgment.

The political judgment was directly linked with the action it proposed. There is a most revealing note on a conversation between Alexis Léger, the long time head of the Quai d'Orsay, then a refugee in Britain (whom incidentally the diarist fails to describe as the great French poet St John Perse) and Churchill at Chequers on 28 June 1940. Asked by Churchill to speak frankly in that *cercle sacré* (himself, Vansittart and Léger) the latter insisted on the need for propaganda and diplomacy towards France and the United States. 'Winston would have none of this . . . he maintains it is entirely a waste of time. "Propaganda is very well", he said to Léger, "but it is events that move the world. If we smash the Huns here we shall need no propaganda in the United States. . . . It was" he said, "the night before the battle. It may be long; now we must live; next year we shall be winning; the year after we shall triumph".' This is almost a symbolic conversation between the Poet and the Statesman.

As long as Britain was in sole command of the war, Churchill's

statesmanship was firm, balanced and instinctively optimistic. His thinking about Germany is characteristic from this point of view. Although he confessed that he hated nobody, 'apart from the Huns', such feelings did not obscure his statesmanship. On December 10: 'The PM reverted in some detail to his ideas for the future . . . "Germany existed before the Gestapo". When we had won he visualised five great European nations: England, France, Italy, Spain and Prussia'. Later, on 6 January 1941, he wrote on a violently anti-German minute by Vansittart: 'I contemplate a reunited European family in which Germans will have a great place. We must not let our vision be darkened by hate or obscured by sentiment'.

But soon after the entry of the USSR and the USA into the war a new nuance creeps in and colours the attitude of the statesman. The more certain he is of final victory over Hitler, the nearer he comes to the triumph which he had so boldly predicted in the darkest hours, the less confident he seems to be of the future outcome. To be more precise, the break seems to have occurred at the time of the serious illness (pneumonia) he suffered in Teheran after the conference. The diarist, who had decided to leave his sheltered, albeit supremely important, position was serving in the Forces and was no longer with him. He was recalled only after Churchill's illness, so that we miss his observations on the historical events of 3-5 December 1943.⁵

But in his later entries a more sombre note appears. 'March 4, 1944: The PM in benevolent but sombre mood. He is disturbed by the attitude of Russia - Stalin refuses to be moderate about the Poles - and many other matters, political and strategic. He said that he felt like telling the Russians: "Personally I fight tyranny whatever uniform it wears or slogans it utters".' (He repeated that statement in public on 15 March 1945). '23rd January 1945: When going to bed the PM said to me: "Make no mistake, all the Balkans except Greece are going to be Bolshevized; and there is nothing I can do to prevent it. There is nothing I can do for poor Poland".' '7 March 1945: During dinner I showed the PM a telegram from Roumania . . . It seems that we may be heading for a show-down with the Russians who

⁵ See G. Ionescu, 'Reading Notes, Winter 1985', *Government and Opposition*, Vol. 20, no. 2, Spring 1985, pp. 237-9.

are showing every sign of going back on the Yalta agreement over Poland and of enforcing aggressive Communism on an unwilling Roumania. The PM and Eden both fear that our willingness to trust our Russian allies may have been vain and they look with despondency to the future.' And two days after VE day, on 10 May 1945: 'The PM looks tired and has to fight for the energy to deal with the problems confronting him. These include the settlement of Europe, the last round of the war in the East, an election on the way and the dark cloud of Russian imponderability'.

The diary continues not only during Churchill's first premiership but also throughout the second in 1951-55, and is as authentic and original as ever. But by then the positions were clear and Churchill's initial intuitions had been fully confirmed. His statesmanship had kept him ahead of events. Perhaps the last and most dramatic of the remarks quoted by the diarist sums up that statesmanship best: at the end of the Suez crisis, on 29 November 1957, Colville asked Churchill 'if he would have acted as Eden had if he had still been Prime Minister. He replied: "I would never have dared; and if I had dared, I would certainly never have dared to stop"'.