

By Whose Permission?

By E. P. MIDDLETON

JOHN STUART MILL, in his *Essay on Liberty*, said: "If all mankind minus one were of one opinion and only one person were of the contrary opinion, mankind would be no more justified in silencing that one person than he, if he had the power, would be justified in silencing mankind."

This was his restatement of the Socratic expression of the ideal of free enquiry on which, we like to think, our conception of democracy rests. It was Socrates' legacy to Plato who enshrined it, if a little obscurely, in his *Republic*. In later life, however, Plato wrote his *Laws* which have provided the foundation for every type of authoritarian state with which mankind has since been afflicted. Socialists have found it a mine of ceaseless fecundity. The fruits of their delving in it are to be witnessed wherever they have gained influence over the minds of legislators and economists too ignorant or too subservient to the dictates of expediency to oppose them. Marxists, of course, have observed it like woodworms destroying the fabric of society to build their cities of darkness.

An analysis of the *Laws* was given by Renford Bambrough, Fellow of St. John's College, Cambridge, in a recent Third Programme talk for the B.B.C. In this, he showed how the authoritarian principle (government by the paternalistic autocracy of the elite, implicit in the *Republic*) was to be worked out in minutest detail involving controls of the completest kind of every act and condition of the citizens. "It provides explicitly for every department of public and private life, from the burning of rubbish to the building of temples, from the punishment of crime to the picking of wayside fruit, from how the cradles must be rocked to where the grave must be dug." It is "the most elaborate and comprehensive prescription for the conduct of human life that any philosopher has ever devised.

"Nothing that may require legal regulation or that may be the subject of dispute in the courts is too humble to be included. The whole life of every citizen, from morning to night, and on to the next morning, must be planned and directed in such a way that it will minister to the good of the community as a whole.

"Within the wide scope that Plato allows himself in this revised blueprint for human life," says Bambrough, "we find many institutions that have a surprisingly modern ring. Besides the proposals for universal and compulsory primary education and for complete equality of the sexes, already put forward in the *Republic*, he now offers schemes for marriage guidance, ante-natal care, nursery schools and the control of children's games; for

town planning, consumer protection, the limitation of profits, exchange control and the regulation of imports and exports, immigration and emigration." A blueprint we, in Britain, have used to some purpose. "The new city," says Bambrough, "is both totalitarian and a welfare state."

The significance of this inevitable, close association has been lost on our own legislators. Will their eyes be opened before it is too late?

Both Mill and Plato agreed that the physical and moral needs of the individual can be ministered to only if the state has complete power over him. Both see the inseparable connection between the two concepts of welfare and totalitarianism. Mill, in consequence, decides for liberty at the expense of welfare; Plato chooses welfare and accepts the consequence of tyranny. To the latter "the legislator is the physician to the body politic" and thus "required to prescribe everything, great or small, that is necessary for its health, from the regulation of the water supply to the execution of incurable atheists."

To Mill's objection that "this involves the subordination of private to public interest and private judgment to public authority," Plato would answer that "private and public interest are in the end identical, and that private judgment is amateur, ill-informed judgment, while the authority of his rulers is not mere power but expert knowledge of what is right and wrong, good and bad, true and false." This has been written in letters of blood over the courts and legislatures of all the paternalistic tyrannies of history, not least those of the 20th century. It is the very burden of Marxist-Leninist theory, once the hypocrisy of the "Dictatorship of the Proletariat" is scraped off.

A recent article in *The Times*, entitled "Status-seeking in Russia's Factories," January 26, indicates the inevitable reaction to the suppression of individual liberty of action and judgment among its victims, exemplified by the emergence of a class-structure in Russia, despite all the attempts so far to destroy it, even to deny the possibility of its existence. Articles have been appearing in a wide range of Soviet journals openly admitting the existence of class-consciousness and criticising those indulging in it. It is dealt with, however, as a hangover from the not-quite-dead past "slow to evaporate in Soviet society." No Communist dare admit that it is a new phenomenon, inherent in the drive of the human spirit to break out of the depressing egalitarianism of the Communist state.

But the admission is made by the writer of an article in *Kommunist* that material progress alone will not liqui-

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date class differences. "One cannot carry out the task," he says, "without bringing up a new man with an all-round education who embraces in himself harmoniously a spiritual worth, moral purity and physical perfection."

The question is, will this prodigy of perfection be more likely to emerge from the Platonist authoritarianism of communist society than from the libertarian community of Mill? And for us, in the much vaunted free society of the western democracies, the question is, which way are we going — towards freedom or tyranny? We point with horror at the spectacle of whole nations in Eastern Europe and in Asia held down beneath the paralysing hand of communist authoritarianism, while the lamps of liberty go out one by one in our own societies, unnoticed, save by the few, in the false dawn of creeping socialism.

In Britain, today, we pay lip-service to Mill's concept of liberty while the bureaucracy grows from strength to frightening strength, and taxation and the shabby trick of currency inflation eat steadily into the foundations of our economic life. The institution of Parliament, based on an electoral system that is the denial of justice, has become a polite farce — serving a dead tradition, on the one hand, and an only-too-robust system of privilege, on the other.

"The human reason," says Renford Bambrough, "is neither impotent nor infallible, and that is why, in all the spheres of its operation, the individual thinker is neither an island nor a law unto himself but is as dependent on other men as any citizen of Plato's city. But this is also why we must prize the spirit of independence that Mill and Socrates preached and practised; the spirit of the London van-driver who, during the General Strike of 1926 when most vehicles were marked: 'Driven by permission of the T.U.C.' or 'Driven by permission of H.M. Government,' displayed a placard with the words: 'Driven by my own bloody permission.'"

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bours had yachts) or to maintain his reputation as a philanthropist.

Today, government is like this man. It decides on the expenditure it supposes to be necessary, and then raises the revenue any way it can, principally by taxing the rewards of labour and capital. The thief stole to augment his rightful income, but government does not even bother to collect its rightful income.

For all the complexity of money matters in this very complex age, the analysis of Mr. Micawber in "David Copperfield" remains sound:—

"Annual income twenty pounds, annual expenditure nineteen nineteen six, result happiness. Annual income twenty pounds, annual expenditure twenty pounds ought and six, result misery."

A single tax on land values at this moment is theor-

etically impossible. A society that has been doing the wrong things for many years inevitably incurs liabilities which have to be met even when it begins to do the right things. But to say that the land-value tax will not be enough to finance preparations for war is not to say that the single tax is wrong but that the preparations for war should never have become necessary. In practice, mankind will either reach peace or destroy civilisation long before it draws near to the single tax.

The Final Goal

However slow progress may be, and whatever the imperfections that must be endured while that progress is taking place, there should be no losing grasp of the truth that it is essentially unjust to tax wages and interest while the rent of land remains untapped. When once it is established that there is a right way to raise revenue, all else falls into place. There should be no recourse to raising revenue by other means (except in extreme emergency). There is then no escaping the fact that expenditure must be restricted to accord with income. This discipline will not be popular with governments; but it may well be that our descendants will look back on the £6,000 million a year times as times of appalling over-expenditure, and be shocked at the ways in which public money was wasted by people whom they will consider, perhaps, as not only misguided but blind to the economic structure of the society they were trying to serve.

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