

HUMAN ACTION
by Ludwig von Mises
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PART TWO
ACTION WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF SOCIETY
IX. THE ROLE OF IDEAS

1. Human Reason

Reason is man's particular and characteristic feature. There is no need for praxeology to raise the question whether reason is a suitable tool for the cognition of ultimate and absolute truth. It deals with reason only as far as it enables man to act.

All those objects which are the substratum of human sensation, perception, and observation also pass before the senses of animals. But man alone has the faculty of transforming sensuous stimuli into observation and experience. And man alone can arrange his various observations and experiences into a coherent system.

Action is preceded by thinking. Thinking is to deliberate beforehand over future action and to reflect afterwards upon past action. Thinking and acting are inseparable. Every action is always based on a definite idea about causal relations. He who thinks a causal relation thinks a theorem. Action without thinking, practice without theory are unimaginable. The reasoning may be faulty and the theory incorrect; but thinking and theorizing are not lacking in any action. On the other hand thinking is always thinking of a potential action. Even he who thinks of a pure theory assumes that the theory is correct, i.e., that action complying with its content would result in an effect to be expected from its teachings. It is of no relevance for logic whether such action is feasible or not.

It is always the individual who thinks. Society does not think any more than it eats or drinks. The evolution of human reasoning from the naive thinking of primitive man to the more subtle thinking of modern science took place within society. However, thinking itself is always an achievement of individuals. There is joint action, but no joint thinking. There is only tradition which preserves thoughts and communicates them to others as a stimulus to their thinking. However, man has no means of appropriating the thoughts of his precursors other than to think them over again. Then, of course, he is in a position to proceed farther on the basis of his forerunners' thoughts. The foremost vehicle of tradition is the word. Thinking is linked up with language and vice versa. Concepts are embodied in terms. Language is a tool of thinking as it is a tool of social action.

The history of thought and ideas is a discourse carried on from generation to generation. The thinking of later ages grows out of the thinking of earlier ages. Without the aid of this stimulation intellectual progress would have been impossible. The continuity of human evolution, sowing for the offspring and harvesting on land cleared and tilled by the ancestors, manifests itself also in the history of science and ideas. We have inherited from our forefathers not only a stock of products of various orders of goods which is the source of our material wealth; we have no less inherited ideas and thoughts, theories and technologies to which our thinking owes its productivity. But thinking is always a manifestation of individuals.

2. World View and Ideology

The theories directing action are often imperfect and unsatisfactory. They may be contradictory and unfit to be arranged into a comprehensive and coherent system.

If we look at all the theorems and theories guiding the conduct of certain individuals and groups as a coherent complex and try to arrange them as far as is feasible into a system, i.e., a comprehensive body of knowledge, we may speak of it as a world view. A world view is, as a theory, an interpretation of all things, and as a precept for action, an opinion concerning the best means for removing uneasiness as much as possible. A world view is thus, on the one hand, an explanation of all phenomena and, on the other hand, a technology, both these terms being taken in their broadest sense. Religion, metaphysics, and philosophy aim at providing a world view. They interpret the universe and they advise men how to act.

The concept of an ideology is narrower than that of a world view. In speaking of ideology we have in view only human action and social cooperation and disregard the problems of metaphysics, religious dogma, the natural sciences, and the technologies derived from them. Ideology is the totality of our doctrines concerning individual conduct and social relations. Both, world view and ideology, go beyond the limits imposed upon a purely neutral and academic study of things as they are. They are not only scientific theories, but also doctrines about the ought, i.e., about the ultimate ends which man should aim at in his earthly concerns.

Asceticism teaches that the only means open to man for removing pain and for attaining complete quietude, contentment, and happiness is to turn away from earthly concerns and to live without bothering about worldly things. There is no salvation other than to renounce striving after material well-being, to endure submissively the adversities of the earthly pilgrimage and to dedicate oneself exclusively to the preparation for eternal bliss. However, the number of those who consistently and unswervingly comply with the principles of asceticism is so small that it is not easy to instance more than a few names. It seems that the complete passivity advocated by asceticism is contrary to nature. The enticement of life triumphs. The ascetic principles have been adulterated. Even

the most saintly hermits made concessions to life and earthly concerns which did not agree with their rigid principles. But as soon as a man takes into account any earthly concerns, and substitutes for purely vegetative ideals an acknowledgment of worldly things, however conditioned and incompatible with the rest of his professed doctrine, he bridges over the gulf which separated him from those who say yes to the striving after earthly ends. Then he has something in common with everyone else.

Human thoughts about things of which neither pure reasoning nor experience provides any knowledge may differ so radically that no agreement can be reached. In this sphere in which the free reverie of the mind is restricted neither by logical thinking nor by sensory experience man can give vent to his individuality and subjectivity. Nothing is more personal than the notions and images about the transcendent. Linguistic terms are unable to communicate what is said about the transcendent; one can never establish whether the hearer conceives them in the same way as the speaker. With regard to things beyond there can be no agreement. Religious wars are the most terrible wars because they are waged without any prospect of conciliation.

But where earthly things are involved, the natural affinity of all men and the identity of the biological conditions for the preservation of their lives come into play. The higher productivity of cooperation under division of labor makes society the foremost means of every individual for the attainment of his own ends whatever they may be. The maintenance and further intensification of social cooperation become a concern of everybody. Every world view and every ideology which is not entirely and unconditionally committed to the practice of asceticism and to a life in anchoritic reclusion must pay heed to the fact that society is the great means for the attainment of earthly ends. But then a common ground is won to clear the way for an agreement concerning minor social problems and the details of society's organization. However various ideologies

may conflict with one another, they harmonize in one point, in the acknowledgment of life in society.

People fail sometimes to see this fact because in dealing with philosophies and ideologies they look more at what these doctrines assert with regard to transcendent and unknowable things and less at their statements about action in this world. Between various parts of an ideological system there is often an unbridgeable gulf. For acting man only those teachings are of real importance which result in precepts for action, not those doctrines which are purely academic and do not apply to conduct within the frame of social cooperation. We may disregard the philosophy of adamant and consistent asceticism because such a rigid asceticism must ultimately result in the extinction of its supporters. All other ideologies, in approving of the search for the necessities of life, are forced in some measure to take into account the fact that division of labor is more productive than isolated work. They thus admit the need for social cooperation.

Praxeology and economics are not qualified to deal with the transcendent and metaphysical aspects of any doctrine. But, on the other hand, no appeal to any religious or metaphysical dogmas and creeds can invalidate the theorems and theories concerning social cooperation as developed by logically correct praxeological reasoning. If a philosophy has admitted the necessity of societal links between men, it has placed itself, as far as problems of social action come into play, on ground from which there is no escape into personal convictions and professions of faith not liable to a thorough examination by rational methods.

This fundamental fact is often ignored. People believe that differences in world view create irreconcilable conflicts. The basic antagonisms between parties committed to different world views, it is contended, cannot be settled by compromise. They stem from the deepest recesses of the human soul and are expressive of a man's innate communion with supernatural and eternal forces.

There can never be any cooperation between people divided by different world views.

However, if we pass in review the programs of all parties--both the cleverly elaborated and publicized programs and those to which the parties really cling when in power--we can easily discover the fallacy of this interpretation. All present-day political parties strive after the earthly well-being and prosperity of their supporters. They promise that they will render economic conditions more satisfactory to their followers. With regard to this issue there is no difference between the Roman Catholic Church and the various Protestant denominations as far as they intervene in political and social questions, between Christianity and the non-Christian religions, between the advocates of economic freedom and the various brands of Marxian materialism, between nationalists and internationalists, between racists and the friends of interracial peace. It is true that many of these parties believe that their own group cannot prosper except at the expense of other groups, and even go so far as to consider the complete annihilation of other groups or their enslavement as the necessary condition of their own group's prosperity. Yet, extermination or enslavement of others is for them not an ultimate end, but a means for the attainment of what they aim at as an ultimate end: their own group's flowering. If they were to learn that their own designs are guided by spurious theories and would not bring about the beneficial results expected, they would change their programs.

The pompous statements which people make about things unknowable and beyond the power of the human mind, their cosmologies, world views, religions, mysticisms, metaphysics, and conceptual phantasies differ widely from one another. But the practical essence of their ideologies, i.e., their teachings dealing with the ends to be aimed at in earthly life and with the means for the attainment of these ends, show much uniformity. There are, to be sure, differences and antagonisms both with regard to ends and means. Yet the differences with regard to ends are not irreconcilable; they do not hinder cooperation and

amicable arrangements in the sphere of social action. As far as they concern means and ways only, they are of a purely technical character and as such open to examination by rational methods. When in the heat of party conflicts one of the factions declares: "Here we cannot go on in our negotiations with you because we are faced with a question touching upon our world view; on this point we must be adamant and must cling rigidly to our principles whatever may result," one need only scrutinize matters more carefully to realize that such declarations describe the antagonism as more pointed than it really is. In fact, for all parties committed to pursuit of the people's welfare and thus approving social cooperation, questions of social organization and the conduct of social action are not problems of ultimate principles and of world views, but ideological issues. They are technical problems with regard to which some arrangement is always possible. No party would wittingly prefer social disintegration, anarchy, and a return to primitive barbarism to a solution which must be bought at the price of the sacrifice of some ideological points.

In party programs these technical issues are, of course, of primary importance. A party is committed to certain means, it recommends certain methods of political action and rejects utterly all other methods and policies as inappropriate. A party is a body which combines all those eager to employ the same means for common action. The principle which differentiates men and integrates parties is the choice of means. Thus for the party as such the means chosen are essential. A party is doomed if the futility of the means recommended becomes obvious. Party chiefs whose prestige and political career are bound up with the party's program may have ample reasons for withdrawing its principles from unrestricted discussion; they may attribute to them the character of ultimate ends which must not be questioned because they are based on a world view. But for the people as whose mandataries the party chiefs pretend to act, for the voters whom they want to enlist and for whose votes they canvass, things offer another aspect. They have no objection to scrutinizing every point of a party's program.

They look upon such a program only as a recommendation of means for the attainment of their own ends, viz., earthly well-being.

What divides those parties which one calls today world view parties, i.e., parties committed to basic philosophical decisions about ultimate ends, is only seeming disagreement with regard to ultimate ends. Their antagonisms refer either to religious creeds or to problems of international relations or the problem of ownership of the means of production or the problems of political organization. It can be shown that all these controversies concern means and not ultimate ends.

Let us begin with the problems of a nation's political organization. There are supporters of a democratic system of government, of hereditary monarchy, of the rule of a self-styled elite and of Caesarist dictatorship.¹ It is true that these programs are often recommended by reference to divine institutions, to the eternal laws of the universe, to the natural order, to the inevitable trend of historical evolution, and to other objects of transcendent knowledge. But such statements are merely incidental adornment. In appealing to the electorate, the parties advance other arguments. They are eager to show that the system they support will succeed better than those advocated by other parties in realizing those ends which the citizens aim at. They specify the beneficial results achieved in the past or in other countries; they disparage the other parties' programs by relating their failures. They resort both to pure reasoning and to an interpretation of historical experience in order to demonstrate the superiority of their own proposals and the futility of those of their adversaries. Their main argument is always: the political system we support will render you more prosperous and more content.

In the field of society's economic organization there are the liberals advocating private ownership of the means of production, the socialists advocating public

¹ Caesarism is today exemplified by the Bolshevik, Fascist, or Nazi type of dictatorship.

ownership of the means of production, and the interventionists advocating a third system which, they contend, is as far from socialism as it is from capitalism. In the clash of these parties there is again much talk about basic philosophical issues. People speak of true liberty, equality, social justice, the rights of the individual, community, solidarity, and humanitarianism. But each party is intent upon proving by ratiocination and by referring to historical experience that only the system it recommends will make the citizens prosperous and satisfied. They tell the people that realization of their program will raise the standard of living to a higher level than realization of any other party's program. They insist upon the expediency of their plans and upon their utility. It is obvious that they do not differ from one another with regard to ends but only as to means. They all pretend to aim at the highest material welfare for the majority of citizens.

The nationalists stress the point that there is an irreconcilable conflict between the interests of various nations, but that, on the other hand, the rightly understood interests of all the citizens within the nation are harmonious. A nation can prosper only at the expense of other nations; the individual citizen can fare well only if his nation flourishes. The liberals have a different opinion. They believe that the interests of various nations harmonize no less than those of the various groups, classes, and strata of individuals within a nation. They believe that peaceful international cooperation is a more appropriate means than conflict for the attainment of the end which they and the nationalists are both aiming at: their own nation's welfare. They do not, as the nationalists charge, advocate peace and free trade in order to betray their own nation's interests to those of foreigners. On the contrary, they consider peace and free trade the best means to make their own nation wealthy. What separates the free traders from the nationalists are not ends, but the means recommended for attainment of the ends common to both.

Dissension with regard to religious creeds cannot be settled by rational methods. Religious conflicts are essentially implacable and irreconcilable. Yet as soon as a religious community enters the field of political action and tries to deal with problems of social organization, it is bound to take into account earthly concerns, however this may conflict with its dogmas and articles of faith. No religion in its exoteric activities ever ventured to tell people frankly: The realization of our plans for social organization will make you poor and impair your earthly well-being. Those consistently committed to a life of poverty withdrew from the political scene and fled into anchoritic seclusion. But churches and religious communities which have aimed at making converts and at influencing political and social activities of their followers have espoused the principles of secular conduct. In dealing with questions of man's earthly pilgrimage they hardly differ from any other political party. In canvassing, they emphasize, more than bliss in the beyond, the material advantages which they have in store for their brothers in faith.

Only a world view whose supporters renounce any earthly activity whatever could neglect to pay heed to the rational considerations which show that social cooperation is the great means for the attainment of all human ends. Because man is a social animal that can thrive only within society, all ideologies are forced to acknowledge the preeminent importance of social cooperation. They must aim at the most satisfactory organization of society and must approve of man's concern for an improvement of his material well-being. Thus they all place themselves upon a common ground. They are separated from one another not by world views and transcendent issues not subject to reasonable discussion, but by problems of means and ways. Such ideological antagonisms are open to a thorough scrutiny by the scientific methods of praxeology and economics.

The Fight Against Error

A critical examination of the philosophical systems constructed by mankind's great thinkers has very often revealed fissures and flaws in the impressive

structure of those seemingly consistent and coherent bodies of comprehensive thought. Even the genius in drafting a world view sometimes fails to avoid contradictions and fallacious syllogisms.

The ideologies accepted by public opinion are still more infected by the shortcomings of the human mind. They are mostly an eclectic juxtaposition of ideas utterly incompatible with one another. They cannot stand a logical examination of their content. Their inconsistencies are irreparable and defy any attempt to combine their various parts into a system of ideas compatible with one another.

Some authors try to justify the contradictions of generally accepted ideologies by pointing out the alleged advantages of a compromise, however unsatisfactory from the logical point of view, for the smooth functioning of interhuman relations. They refer to the popular fallacy that life and reality are "not logical"; they contend that a contradictory system may prove its expediency or even its truth by working satisfactorily while a logically consistent system would result in disaster. There is no need to refute anew such popular errors. Logical thinking and real life are not two separate orbits. Logic is for man the only means to master the problems of reality. What is contradictory in theory, is no less contradictory in reality. No ideological inconsistency can provide a satisfactory, i.e., working, solution for the problems offered by the facts of the world. The only effect of contradictory ideologies is to conceal the real problems and thus to prevent people from finding in time an appropriate policy for solving them. Inconsistent ideologies may sometimes postpone the emergence of a manifest conflict. But they certainly aggravate the evils which they mask and render a final solution more difficult. They multiply the agonies, they intensify the hatreds, and make peaceful settlement impossible. It is a serious blunder to consider ideological contradictions harmless or even beneficial.

The main objective of praxeology and economics is to substitute consistent correct ideologies for the contradictory tenets of popular eclecticism. There is no other means of preventing social disintegration and of safeguarding the steady improvement of human conditions than those provided by reason. Men must try to think through all the problems involved up to the point beyond which a human mind cannot proceed farther. They must never acquiesce in any solutions conveyed by older generations, they must always question anew every theory and every theorem, they must never relax in their endeavors to brush away fallacies and to find the best possible cognition. They must fight error by unmasking spurious doctrines and by expounding truth.

The problems involved are purely intellectual and must be dealt with as such. It is disastrous to shift them to the moral sphere and to dispose of supporters of opposite ideologies by calling them villains. It is vain to insist that what we are aiming at is good and what our adversaries want is bad. The question to be solved is precisely what is to be considered as good and what as bad. The rigid dogmatism peculiar to religious groups and to Marxism results only in irreconcilable conflict. It condemns beforehand all dissenters as evildoers, it calls into question their good faith, it asks them to surrender unconditionally. No social cooperation is possible where such an attitude prevails.

No better is the propensity, very popular nowadays, to brand supporters of other ideologies as lunatics. Psychiatrists are vague in drawing a line between sanity and insanity. It would be preposterous for laymen to interfere with this fundamental issue of psychiatry. However, it is clear that if the mere fact that a man shares erroneous views and acts according to his errors qualifies him as mentally disabled, it would be very hard to discover an individual to which the epithet sane or normal could be attributed. Then we are bound to call the past generations lunatic because their ideas about the problems of the natural sciences and concomitantly their techniques differed from ours. Coming generations will call us lunatics for the same reason. Man is liable to error. If to

err were the characteristic feature of mental disability, then everybody should be called mentally disabled.

Neither can the fact that a man is at variance with the opinions held by the majority of his contemporaries qualify him as a lunatic. Were Copernicus, Galileo and Lavoisier insane? It is the regular course of history that a man conceives new ideas, contrary to those of other people. Some of these ideas are later embodied in the system of knowledge accepted by public opinion as true. Is it permissible to apply the epithet "sane" only to boors who never had ideas of their own and to deny it to all innovators?

The procedure of some contemporary psychiatrists is really outrageous. They are utterly ignorant of the theories of praxeology and economics. Their familiarity with present-day ideologies is superficial and uncritical. Yet they blithely call the supporters of some ideologies paranoid persons.

There are men who are commonly stigmatized as *monetary cranks*. The monetary crank suggests a method for making everybody prosperous by monetary measures. His plans are illusory. However, they are the consistent application of a monetary ideology entirely approved by contemporary public opinion and espoused by the policies of almost all governments, political parties, and the press.

It is generally believed by those unfamiliar with economic theory that credit expansion and an increase in the quantity of money in circulation are efficacious means for lowering the rate of interest permanently below the height it would attain on a nonmanipulated capital and loan market. This theory is utterly illusory.² But it guides the monetary and credit policy of almost every contemporary government. Now, on the basis of this vicious ideology, no valid objection can be raised against the plans advanced by Pierre Joseph Proudhon,

² Cf. below, Chapter XX.

Ernest Solvay, Clifford Hugh Douglas and a host of other would-be reformers. They are only more consistent than other people are. They want to reduce the rate of interest to zero and thus to abolish altogether the scarcity of "capital." He who wants to refute them must attack the theories underlying the monetary and credit policies of the great nations.

The psychiatrist may object that what characterizes a man as a lunatic is precisely the fact that he lacks moderation and goes to extremes. While normal man is judicious enough to restrain himself, the paranoid person goes beyond all bounds. This is quite an unsatisfactory rejoinder. All the arguments advanced in favor of the thesis that the rate of interest can be reduced by credit expansion from 5 or 4 per cent to 3 or 2 per cent are equally valid for a reduction to zero. The "monetary cranks" are certainly right from the point of view of the monetary fallacies approved by popular opinion.

There are psychiatrists who call the Germans who espoused the principles of Nazism lunatics and want to cure them by therapeutic procedures. Here again we are faced with the same problem. The doctrines of Nazism are vicious, but they do not essentially disagree with the ideologies of socialism and nationalism as approved by other peoples' public opinion. What characterized the Nazis was only the consistent application of these ideologies to the special conditions of Germany. Like all other contemporary nations the Nazis desired government control of business and economic self-sufficiency, i.e., autarky, for their own nation. The distinctive mark of their policy was that they refused to acquiesce in the disadvantages which the acceptance of the same system by other nations would impose upon them. They were not prepared to be forever "imprisoned," as they said, within a comparatively overpopulated area in which physical conditions render the productivity of human effort lower than in other countries. They believed that their nation's great population figures, the strategically propitious geographic situation of their country, and the inborn vigor and gallantry of their armed forces provided them with a good chance to remedy by aggression the evils they deplored.

Now, whoever accepts the ideology of nationalism and socialism as true and as the standard of his own nation's policy, is not in a position to refute the conclusions drawn from them by the Nazis. The only way for a refutation of Nazism left for foreign nations which have espoused these two principles was to defeat the Nazis in war. And as long as the ideology of socialism and nationalism is supreme in the world's public opinion, the Germans or other peoples will try again to succeed by aggression and conquest, should the opportunity ever be offered to them. There is no hope of eradication the aggression mentality if one does not explode entirely the ideological fallacies from which it stems. This is not a task for psychiatrists, but for economists.³ Man has only one tool to fight error: reason.

3. Might

Society is a product of human action. Human action is directed by ideologies. Thus society and any concrete order of social affairs are an outcome of ideologies; ideologies are not, as Marxism asserts, a product of a certain state of social affairs. To be sure, human thoughts and ideas are not the achievement of isolated individuals. Thinking too succeeds only through the cooperation of the thinkers. No individual would make headway in his reasoning if he were under the necessity of starting from the beginning. A man can advance in thinking only because his efforts are aided by those of older generations who have formed the tools of thinking, the concepts and terminologies, and have raised the problems.

Any given social order was thought out and designed before it could be realized. This temporal and logical precedence of the ideological factor does not imply the proposition that people draft a complete plan of a social system as the utopians do. What is and must be thought out in advance is not the concerting of individual actions into an integrated system of social organization, but the

³ Cf. Mises, *Omnipotent Government* (New Haven, 1944), pp. 221-228, 129-131-140.

actions of individuals with regard to their fellow men and of already formed groups of individuals with regard to other groups. Before a man aids his fellow in cutting a tree, such cooperation must be thought out. Before an act of barter takes place, the idea of mutual exchange of goods and services must be conceived. It is not necessary that the individuals concerned become aware of the fact that such mutuality results in the establishment of social bonds and in the emergence of a social system. The individual does not plan and execute actions intended to construct society. His conduct and the corresponding conduct of others generate social bodies.

Any existing state of social affairs is the product of ideologies previously thought out. Within society new ideologies may emerge and may supersede older ideologies and thus transform the social system. However, society is always the creation of ideologies temporally and logically anterior. Action is always directed by ideas; it realizes what previous thinking has designed.

If we hypostatize or anthropomorphize the notion of ideology, we may say that ideologies have might over men. Might is the faculty or power of directing actions. As a rule one says only of a man or of groups of men that they are mighty. Then the definition of might is: might is the power to direct other people's actions. He who is mighty, owes his might to an ideology. Only ideologies can convey to a man the power to influence other people's choices and conduct. One can become a leader only if one is supported by an ideology which makes other people tractable and accommodating. Might is thus not a physical and tangible thing, but a moral and spiritual phenomenon. A king's might rests upon the recognition of the monarchical ideology on the part of his subjects.

He who uses his might to run the state, i.e., the social apparatus of coercion and compulsion, rules. Rule is the exercise of might in the political body. Rule is always based upon might, i.e., the power to direct other people's actions.

Of course, it is possible to establish a government upon the violent oppression of reluctant people. It is the characteristic mark of state and government that they apply violent coercion or the threat of it against those not prepared to yield voluntarily. Yet such violent oppression is no less founded upon ideological might. He who wants to apply violence needs the voluntary cooperation of some people. An individual entirely dependent on himself can never rule by means of physical violence only.⁴ He needs the ideological support of a group in order to subdue other groups. The tyrant must have a retinue of partisans who obey his orders of their own accord. Their spontaneous obedience provides him with the apparatus he needs for the conquest of other people. Whether or not he succeeds in making his sway last depends on the numerical relation of the two groups, those who support him voluntarily and those whom he beats into submission. Though a tyrant may temporarily rule through a minority if this minority is armed and the majority is not, in the long run a minority cannot keep the majority in subservience. The oppressed will rise in rebellion and cast off the yoke of tyranny.

A durable system of government must rest upon an ideology acknowledged by the majority. The "real" factor, the "real forces" that are the foundation of government and convey to the rulers the power to use violence against renitent minority groups are essentially ideological, moral, and spiritual. Rulers who failed to recognize this first principle of government and, relying upon the alleged irresistibility of their armed troops, disdained the spirit and ideas have finally been overthrown by the assault of their adversaries. The interpretation of might as a "real" factor not dependent upon ideologies, quite common to many political and historical books, is erroneous. The term *Realpolitik* makes sense only if used to signify a policy taking account of generally accepted ideologies as contrasted with a policy based upon ideologies not sufficiently acknowledged and therefore unfit to support a durable system of government.

⁴ A gangster may overpower a weaker or unarmed fellow. However, this has nothing to do with life in society. It is an isolated antisocial occurrence.

He who interprets might as physical or "real" power to carry on and considers violent action as the very foundation of government, sees conditions from the narrow point of view of subordinate officers in charge of sections of an army or police force. To these subordinates a definite task within the framework of the ruling ideology is assigned. Their chiefs commit to their care troops which are not only equipped, armed, and organized for combat, but no less imbued with the spirit which makes them obey the orders issued. The commanders of such subdivisions consider this moral factor a matter of course because they themselves are animated by the same spirit and cannot even imagine a different ideology. The power of an ideology consists precisely in the fact that people submit to it without any wavering and scruples.

However, things are different for the head of the government. He must aim at preservation of the morale of the armed forces and of the loyalty of the rest of the population. For these moral factors are the only "real" elements upon which continuance of his mastery rests. His power dwindles if the ideology that supports it loses force.

Minorities too can sometimes conquer by means of superior military skill and can thus establish minority rule. But such an order of things cannot endure. If the victorious conquerors do not succeed in subsequently converting the system of rule by violence into a system of rule by ideological consent on the part of those ruled, they will succumb in new struggles. All victorious minorities who have established a lasting system of government have made their sway durable by means of a belated ideological ascendancy. They have legitimized their own supremacy either by submitting to the ideologies of the defeated or by transforming them. Where neither of these two things took place, the oppressed many dispossessed the oppressing few either by open rebellion or through the silent but steadfast operation of ideological forces.⁵

⁵ Cf. below, pp. 649-650.

Many of the great historical conquests were able to endure because the invaders entered into alliance with those classes of the defeated nation which were supported by the ruling ideology and were thus considered legitimate rulers. This was the system adopted by the Tartars in Russia, by the Turks in the Danube principalities and by and large in Hungary and Transylvania, and by the British and the Dutch in the Indies. A comparatively insignificant number of Britons could rule many hundred millions of Indians because the Indian princes and aristocratic landowners looked upon British rule as a means for the preservation of their privileges and supplied it with the support which the generally acknowledged ideology of India gave to their own supremacy. England's Indian empire was firm as long as public opinion approved of the traditional social order. The Pax Britannica safeguarded the princes' and the landlords' privileges and protected the masses against the agonies of wars between the principalities and of succession wars within them. In our day the infiltration of subversive ideas from abroad has ended British rule and threatens the preservation of the country's age-old social order.

Victorious minorities sometimes owe their success to their technological superiority. This does not alter the case. In the long run it is impossible to withhold the better arms from the members of the majority. Not the equipment of their armed forces, but ideological factors safeguarded the British in India.⁶

A country's public opinion may be ideologically divided in such a way that no group is strong enough to establish a durable government. Then anarchy emerges. Revolutions and civil strife become permanent.

Traditionalism as an Ideology

Traditionalism is an ideology which considers loyalty to valuations, customs, and methods of procedure handed down or allegedly handed down from ancestors both right and expedient. It is not an essential mark of traditionalism

⁶ We are dealing here with the preservation of European minority rule in non-European countries. About the prospects of an Asiatic aggression on the West cf. below, pp. 669-670.

that these forefathers were the ancestors in the biological meaning of the term or can be fairly considered such; they were sometimes only the previous inhabitants of the country concerned or supporters of the same religious creed or only precursors in the exercise of some special task. Who is to be considered an ancestor and what is the content of the body of tradition handed down are determined by the concrete teachings of each variety of traditionalism. The ideology brings into prominence some of the ancestors and relegates others to oblivion; it sometimes calls ancestors people who had nothing to do with the alleged posterity. It often constructs a "traditional" doctrine which is of recent origin and is at variance with the ideologies really held by the ancestors.

Traditionalism tries to justify its tenets by citing the success they secured in the past. Whether this assertion conforms with the facts, is another question. Research could sometimes unmask errors in the historical statements of a traditional belief. However, this did not always explode the traditional doctrine. For the core of traditionalism is not real historical facts, but an opinion about them, however mistaken, and a will to believe things to which the authority of ancient origin is attributed.

4. Meliorism and the Idea of Progress

The notions of progress and retrogression make sense only within a teleological system of thought. In such a framework it is sensible to call approach toward the goal aimed at progress and a movement in the opposite direction retrogression. Without reference to some agent's action and to a definite goal both these notions are empty and void of any meaning.

It was one of the shortcomings of nineteenth-century philosophies to have misinterpreted the meaning of cosmic change and to have smuggled into the theory of biological transformation the idea of progress. Looking backward from any given state of things to the states of the past one can fairly use the terms

development and evolution in a neutral sense. Then evolution signifies the process which led from past conditions to the present. But one must guard against the fatal error of confusing change with improvement and evolution with evolution toward higher forms of life. Neither is it permissible to substitute a pseudoscientific anthropocentrism for the anthropocentrism of religion and the older metaphysical doctrines.

However, there is no need for praxeology to enter into a critique of this philosophy. Its task is to explode the errors implied in current ideologies.

Eighteenth-century social philosophy was convinced that mankind has now finally entered the age of reason. While in the past theological and metaphysical errors were dominant, henceforth reason will be supreme. People will free themselves more and more from the chains of tradition and superstition and will dedicate all their efforts to the continuous improvement of social institutions. Every new generation will contribute its part to this glorious task. With the progress of time society will more and more become the society of free men, aiming at the greatest happiness of the greatest number. Temporary setbacks are, of course, not impossible. But finally the good cause will triumph because it is the cause of reason. People called themselves happy in that they were citizens of an age of enlightenment which through the discovery of the laws of rational conduct paved the way toward a steady amelioration of human affairs. What they lamented was only the fact that they themselves were too old to witness all the beneficial effects of the new philosophy. "I would wish," said Bentham to Philarete Chasles, "to be granted the privilege to live the years which I have still to live, at the end of each of the centuries following my death; thus I could witness the effects of my writing."⁷

All these hopes were founded on the firm conviction, proper to the age, that the masses are both morally good and reasonable. The upper strata, the privileged

⁷ Philarete Chasles, *Etudes sur les hommes et les moeurs du XIX siucle* (Paris, 1849), p. 89.

aristocrats living on the fat of the land, were thought depraved. The common people, especially the peasants and the workers, were glorified in a romantic mood as noble and unerring in their judgment. Thus the philosophers were confident that democracy, government by the people, would bring about social perfection.

This prejudice was the fateful error of the humanitarians, the philosophers, and the liberals. Men are not infallible; they err very often. It is not true that the masses are always right and know the means for attaining the ends aimed at. "Belief in the common man" is no better founded than was belief in the supernatural gifts of kings, priests, and noblemen. Democracy guarantees a system of government in accordance with the wishes and plans of the majority. But it cannot prevent majorities from falling victim to erroneous ideas and from adopting inappropriate policies which not only fail to realize the ends aimed at but result in disaster. Majorities too may err and destroy our civilization. The good cause will not triumph merely on account of its reasonableness and expediency. Only if men are such that they will finally espouse policies reasonable and likely to attain the ultimate ends aimed at, will civilization improve and society and state render men more satisfied, although not happy in a metaphysical sense. Whether or not this condition is given, only the unknown future can reveal.

There is no room within a system of praxeology for meliorism and optimistic fatalism. Man is free in the sense that he must daily choose anew between policies that lead to success and those that lead to disaster, social disintegration, and barbarism.

The term progress is nonsensical when applied to cosmic events or to a comprehensive world view. We have no information about the plans of the prime mover. But it is different with its use in the frame of ideological doctrine. The immense majority strives after a greater and better supply of food, clothes,

homes, and other material amenities. In calling a rise in the masses' standard of living progress and improvement, economists do not espouse a mean materialism. They simply establish the fact that people are motivated by the urge to improve the material conditions of their existence. They judge policies from the point of view of the aims men want to attain. He who disdains the fall in infant mortality and the gradual disappearance of famines and plagues may cast the first stone upon the materialism of the economists.

There is but one yardstick for the appraisal of human action; whether or not it is fit to attain the ends aimed at by acting men.