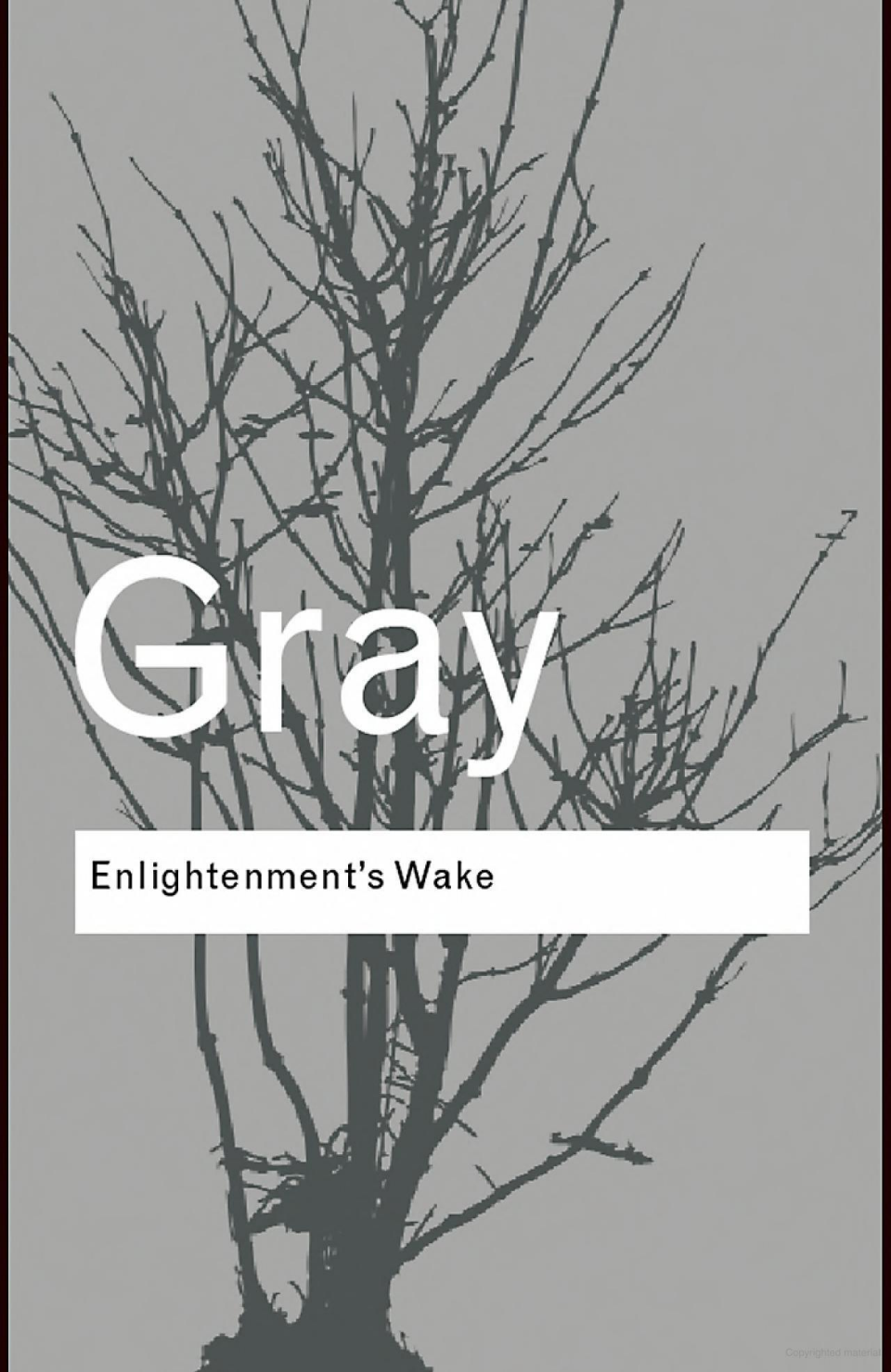
Gray
Enlightenment's Wake

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Politics and culture at the close of the modern age

with an introduction by the author

London and New York

First published 1995 by Routledge

First published in Routledge Classics 2007
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
270 Madison Ave, New York, NY 10016

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2007.

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
A catalog record for this book has been requested

ISBN 0-203-93351-6 Master e-book ISBN

ISBN10: 0–415–42404–6
ISBN13: 978–0–415–42404–2

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Preface

In this book a train of thought developed in my earlier books, *Liberalisms: Essays in Political Philosophy*, *Post-liberalism: Studies in Political Thought* and *Beyond the New Right: Markets, Government and the Common Environment*, is brought to a conclusion. In *Liberalisms*, I considered the search for foundations within liberal thought, examined the various strategies of argument in which that search had been embodied, and concluded that all of them – including those I had myself pursued – ended in failure. *Liberalisms* concluded on a sceptical note, in that it suggested that all foundationalist versions of liberalism were bound to fail, but said little as to what then became of liberalism, or how liberal practice was best to be conceived. In *Post-liberalism*, I tried to remedy this defect, arguing more positively for an historicist understanding of liberal practice in which the central institutions of liberal civil society were theorized as being generally appropriate vehicles for the protection and enhancement of human well-being in the circumstances of the late modern period, but the universalist claims of doctrinal liberalism were firmly rejected. The subject

matter of *Beyond the New Right* was the capture of Western conservatism by a species of paleo-liberalism whose intellectual credentials were slight, and which in political practice was likely to prove self-defeating. In that book, I attacked the political thought of the New Right for its fundamentalist conception of market institutions and its hubristic neglect of the human need for common life. My argument in that book ended with a defence of traditional conservatism, qualified by concerns about environmental stability and integrity suggested by Green thought. The argument of *Beyond the New Right* was a development of that of *Post-liberalism*, in that it suggested that the historic inheritance of liberal institutions and practice was endangered, not as hitherto by left-liberal policy and ideology, but by the market fundamentalism sponsored by the New Right.

In *Enlightenment's Wake* a decade's thinking about liberalism, its grounds, scope and limits, is completed. Against the position adopted at the end of *Beyond the New Right*, I argue here, most comprehensively and systematically in Chapter 7, that the hegemony within conservative thought and policy of neo-liberal ideology is so complete that there is now no historical possibility – political or intellectual – of a return to traditional conservatism. Western conservatism everywhere, but especially in the United States, is now merely a variety of the Enlightenment project of universal emancipation and a universal civilization. Further, contrary to the view I adopted at the close of *Post-liberalism*, the historicist argument for liberal institutions – that they are nearly universally mandated as conditions of human well-being in the late modern period – neglects the variety of institutions within which a *modus vivendi* can be achieved in our time, and unduly privileges variations on Western models. In several sections of the book, but particularly in Chapter 5 on the post-communist countries, I argue that Western liberal institutions not only have no universal claim in theory but also are often flawed in practice; except where their underlying

cultural and political traditions are themselves European, the post-communist countries have good reason to seek to develop new, non-Western institutions of their own. The thesis that the institutions of Western civil society are functionally indispensable to the success of a modern economy, though at first sight plausible, is theoretically and historically groundless. Accordingly, I move forward from the position set out in *Post-liberalism* to defend a pluralist perspective, in which no privileges are accorded to liberal practice, and the animating project is that of framing terms of harmonious coexistence among different cultures and traditions. This position is developed in Chapters 8 and 9, against the background of my criticisms of the dominant schools of Anglo-American liberal fundamentalism, which are set out in Chapter 1.

In the last and longest chapter, which has been written for this volume, I argue that all schools of contemporary political thought are variations on the Enlightenment project, and that that project, though irreversible in its cultural effects, was self-undermining and is now exhausted. Fresh thought is needed on the dilemmas of the late modern age which does not simply run the changes on intellectual traditions whose matrix is that of the Enlightenment. This is so, in part, because some of our dilemmas issue from aspects of the Enlightenment itself – in particular its assault on cultural difference, its embodiment of Western cultural imperialism as the project of a universal civilization, and its humanist conception of humankind's relations with the natural world. This last element of the Enlightenment has been transmitted even to cultures which have modernized without Westernizing, and constitutes the West's only truly universal inheritance to humankind, which is nihilism. Because this condition has its roots in ancient and even primordial Western traditions, there can be no question of curing the disorders of modernity by a return to tradition. Nor does the stance of post-modernism, in which the emancipatory project

of the Enlightenment is asserted incongruously from within the perspective of a critique of its cultural ground in the modern world-view, begin to plumb the depth of our condition. I try to open up a new path of thinking on these questions in the last chapter of this book.

I am grateful to the directors and staff of the Social Philosophy and Policy Center, Bowling Green, Ohio, where part of the work on some of the chapters that make up this book was done, for their support. I am indebted to the Principal and Fellows of my College for periods of sabbatical leave in which I was able to pursue the thoughts about which I have written here.

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Jesus College, Oxford
September 1994

Acknowledgements

Chapter 1 was published as 'Against the New Liberalism', *Times Literary Supplement*, 3 July 1992; Chapter 2 was published as 'Why the Owl Flies Late: The Inadequacies of Academic Liberalism', *Times Literary Supplement*, 15 October 1993; Chapter 3 was published as 'The Failings of Neutrality', *The Responsive Community*, vol. 3, no. 2, Spring 1993; Chapter 4 was published as the concluding chapter of my monograph, *The Strange Death of Perestroika: Causes and Consequences of the Soviet Coup*, by the Institute for European Defence and Strategic Studies, London, September 1991; Chapter 5 was published as *The Post-Communist Societies in Transition: A Social Market Perspective* by the Social Market Foundation, London, February 1994; Chapter 6 was published as 'Agonistic Liberalism', *Social Philosophy and Policy*, vol. 12, no. 1, Winter 1995; Chapter 7 was published as *The Undoing of Conservatism* by the Social Market Foundation, London, June 1994; Chapter 8 was published as 'After the New Liberalism', *Social Research*, vol. 61, Fall 1994, special issue on *Liberalism*; Chapter 9 was published as 'From Post-liberalism to Pluralism', in Ian Shapiro (ed.) *Nomos XXXVIII*,

Political Order, New York: New York University Press, 1995; Chapter 10 is published for the first time in this volume.

Introduction to the Routledge Classics Edition

When *Enlightenment's Wake* first appeared twelve years ago the idea that we inhabit a post-Enlightenment world was received with some scepticism. The claim that we are living in 'an age distinguished by the collapse of the Enlightenment project on a world-historical scale', 'dominated by renascent particularisms, militant religions and resurgent ethnicities' – as I put it at the start of the book's first chapter – seemed to be at odds with the dominant forces of the time. Communism had collapsed, democracy was spreading and globalization was advancing rapidly. Western governments and international institutions framed their policies on the assumption that these trends were irreversible. In the academy liberal political theorists dutifully reproduced the consensus: the process might not be strictly inevitable, but there could be no reasonable doubt that, sooner or later, all of humankind would join the West in accepting Enlightenment values.

Not much more than a decade later this certainty has crumbled into dust. Enlightenment values are now seen as mortally

threatened, while the faith in progress that was affirmed so adamantly just a few years ago has been replaced by a sense of being locked in an apocalyptic struggle with the forces of darkness. A major factor in this shift of mood has been Islamist terrorism – a genuine threat, but far less serious than those of Nazism and communism that were overcome in the last century. Others are the development of a new type of authoritarianism in post-communist Russia, which is using its natural resources to reassert itself as a great power, and the dawning realization that with the emergence of China the global hegemony of Western political values is finally at an end. Again, the revival of religion has shaken the belief that society is bound to become more secular as science advances. If the Enlightenment myth of progress in ethics and politics continues to have a powerful hold, it is more from fear of the consequences of giving it up than from genuine conviction.

The shift of mood from a sense of triumph to moral panic was predictable. One of *Enlightenment's Wake*'s themes is that the collapse of communism was a world-historic defeat for the Enlightenment project. Communism was not a type of oriental despotism, as generations of Western scholars maintained. It was an authentic continuation of a Western revolutionary tradition, and its downfall – after tens of millions of deaths were inflicted in the pursuit of its utopian goals – signalled the start of a process of de-Westernization. Liberal economists may have imagined that in rejecting central planning Russia and China would embrace the free market; but in holding to this reductive faith they showed themselves to be the last Marxists. Having shaken off communism these countries have not adopted another, neoliberal Western ideology. They have resumed their long-term histories, with Russia ambiguously positioned between Europe and Asia, and China borrowing freely from Western countries while standing definitely outside 'the West'. Again, there is nothing surprising in the onward march of fundamentalism in

America, the Middle East and other parts of the world. It is an Enlightenment dogma that the advance of science advances human rationality; but there has never been much to support this article of humanist faith. The fall of communism was the death of an Enlightenment utopia. Its demise was to be welcomed; but it did no more than return us to the normal pattern of human conflict. The growth of knowledge increases human power, otherwise it leaves humans as they have always been – weak, savage and in thrall to every kind of fantasy and delusion.[1]

As in the last century, so at present there are powerful currents of thought that claim to reject the Enlightenment. A spurious kind of Counter-Enlightenment can be found in many areas of religion, politics and the arts; but in nearly all cases it will be found that Enlightenment thinking continues to exercise a formative influence. Fundamentalist religion is not the radical rejection of modernity it imagines itself to be: like Nazism, it is a peculiarly modern phenomenon.[2] Radical Islam sees itself as the enemy of the Enlightenment; but Islamist thought has been deeply shaped by modern Western radical ideologies – such as Jacobinism and Leninism – that seek to realize Enlightenment hopes by the methodical use of violence. Christian fundamentalists may believe they reject the modern world. Yet their flirtation with pseudo-sciences such as Creationism and Intelligent Design shows that they submit to the power of modern science, and like followers of the Enlightenment believe human salvation can be found in an increase of knowledge. Though they reject the Enlightenment, they are unable to escape its spell.

For most of its disciples the appeal of the Enlightenment has always been that of an *ersatz* religion. The Enlightenment was another version of Christian myth more than it was a critique of Christianity, and the evangelical atheism that has staged an anachronistic revival in recent years is significant chiefly as a sign of the unreality of secularization. Yet within the Enlightenment there are thinkers in whom we can find a

genuine critique of transcendental and secular faith. Spinoza's philosophy understands humans as integral parts of the natural world[3] – a view of things developed by Freud, perhaps the twentieth century's greatest Enlightenment thinker. In another Enlightenment tradition the writings of Hobbes and Hume contain an incisive criticism of later conceptions of progress. Yet again Schopenhauer – a more than usually sceptical disciple of Kant, the supreme Enlightenment philosopher – shows how critical thinking pursued to the end subverts Enlightenment humanism. One way or another these are all Enlightenment thinkers. The fact that we can still learn from them shows that we cannot simply reject our Enlightenment inheritance – any more than we can simply reject the religious inheritance of which the Enlightenment was a late and oblique expression.

The Enlightenment is a part of the way we live and think. The point is not to accept or reject it but to understand it. This requires that we view it not as partisans or enemies but from a distance, as if we were excavating a lost religion. In fact, even more than when this book was first published, commentators and politicians are invoking 'Enlightenment values' as an antidote for contemporary ills. If only we return to these pristine verities, they assure us, freedom will be secure and toleration will thrive. Yet Enlightenment values have very often been illiberal, racist or totalitarian. 'Scientific racism' – a spin-off from nineteenth-century Positivism – was used in the twentieth century as a rationale for genocide, and there can be no doubt about the Enlightenment pedigree of Leninism. Just as religious fundamentalists present a severely simplified version of the faith to which they want to return, Enlightenment fundamentalists present a sanitized copy of the tradition they seek to revive. In so doing, they block understanding of the Enlightenment's role in our present difficulties.

Enlightenment thinkers believed they served the cause of civilization. But when the political movements they spawned

adopted terror as an instrument of social engineering – as happened in revolutionary France and communist Russia and China – it was barbarism that ensued, and a similar process is underway today. In a curious turn the world's pre-eminent Enlightenment regime has responded to terrorism by relaxing the prohibition on torture that was one of the Enlightenment's true achievements. Neo-conservatism – which is still, despite its ruinous record, the predominant political tendency in a number of Western countries – may be the last of the Enlightenment ideologies; but it too is ready to use terror to realize its utopian goals. It cannot be long before liberal theory, faithfully following in the track of power, contains theories of justice in which the right to torture is officially recognized.[4] Liberal theorists are less likely to follow the neo-conservative shift towards a chiliastic view of history, if only because the academy – now as in the past obsessively secular – has a blind spot in regard to religion. In America Christian and Enlightenment fundamentalists have joined forces, with the result that belief in progress has been supplanted by a chiliastic view of history. In the US as in Iran, the apocalyptic myths of Western religion, which fuelled the totalitarian movements of the past century, have re-emerged as forces in global conflict. Whereas Enlightenment thinkers believed religion would in future wither away or become politically marginal, at the start of the twenty-first century religion is at the heart of politics and war.[5]

The clamour for a return to the Enlightenment should not distract us from the fact that it has ceased to be a living body of thought. It would be useful to accept that we live in a post-Enlightenment time and do what we can to cope with its dangers. Instead the wake continues, while those who have not been invited to the party turn to other faiths.

NOTES

1 I explore contemporary humanism in *Straw Dogs: Thoughts on Humans and Other Animals*, Granta Books, 2nd edn, 2003.

2 The role of Enlightenment thinking in Nazism and radical Islam is examined in my *Al Qaeda and What It Means To Be Modern*, Faber and Faber, 2nd edn, 2007.

3 I discuss the power of Spinoza's philosophy in my 'Reply to Critics' in John Horton and Glen Newey (eds), *The Political Theory of John Gray*, Routledge, 2007.

4 I present a Swiftian liberal defence of torture in *Heresies: Against Progress and Other Illusions*, Granta Books, 2004, Chapter 15, 'Torture; a modest proposal', pp. 132–8.

5 For the influence of Christian myth on Enlightenment thinking and the re-emergence of apocalyptic beliefs in politics see my book *Black Mass: Apocalyptic Religion and the Death of Utopia*, Penguin Books, 2007.

1

AGAINST THE NEW LIBERALISM

It is a commonplace that political philosophy was reborn in 1971. In the interwar period, and then again for a quarter of a century after the Second World War, we are told, scepticism about the subject itself had inhibited any treatment of its fundamental questions that was systematic and comprehensive and, above all, that issued in rationally compelling principles for the evaluation of political institutions and the guidance of political conduct. The climate of opinion in general philosophy – as expressed in positivist accounts of meaning, emotivism in moral theory and the broader influence of the ordinary language philosophies – seemed to have rendered hopeless the projects of political philosophers working in an older and grander tradition that encompassed Aristotle and John Stuart Mill. It seemed to suggest that the most that could reasonably be hoped for was a succession of exercises in 'the analysis of concepts' – that is to say, armchair investigations of recent and local uses of words which derived whatever interest or authority they possessed

from an appeal to the linguistic and moral intuitions, not of the words' users, but of philosophers in their armchairs – of the sort undertaken in 1965 in Brian Barry's *Political Argument*.[1]

Whatever else may be questionable in the conventional wisdom, it is sound in its judgement that we were spared the dismal prospect of political philosophy coming under the influence of an anachronistic methodology of conceptual analysis by the publication in 1971 of John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*,[2] in which the classical enterprise of the subject was resumed in an uncompromising and architectonic fashion. Nor can it sensibly be denied that political philosophy since the early 1970s has been – at least in the English-speaking world – in very substantial part a commentary on Rawls's work. It remains very doubtful that Rawls's work has revived the enterprise of political philosophy in anything resembling its traditional forms. Indeed, it is arguable that the tradition of liberal theorizing it inaugurated has done little more than articulate the prejudices of an Anglo-American academic class that lacks any understanding of political life in our age – an age distinguished by the collapse of the Enlightenment project on a world-historical scale. Because political philosophy in the Anglo-American mode remains for the most part animated by the hopes of the Enlightenment, above all by the hope that human beings will shed their traditional allegiances and their local identities and unite in a universal civilization grounded in generic humanity and a rational morality, it cannot even begin to grapple with the political dilemmas of an age in which political life is dominated by renascent particularisms, militant religions and resurgent ethnicities. As a result, the main current in political philosophy, which remains wedded to the Enlightenment project in the particularly uncompelling form of a species of eviscerated Kantian liberalism, has condemned itself to political nullity and intellectual sterility. Political philosophy may have been reborn in 1971, but it was a stillbirth.

The common tale of the recent death and miraculous rebirth of political philosophy is in truth a piece of academic folklore. The 1950s and 1960s witnessed a number of seminal contributions to the subject – Berlin on liberty, Hart on law, Hayek on the constitution of a liberal state and Oakeshott on rationalism in politics, to mention only the most distinguished of them. Moreover, what is not often noticed is the peculiar, and for that matter parochial character of the species of political philosophy that Rawls's work exemplifies, and whose hegemony within political philosophy Rawls's work has assured. For Rawls, as for those who follow him in the most essential aspects of his project, such as Ronald Dworkin and Bruce Ackerman, political philosophy is the application to the constitution of the state of the moral point of view, where this is conceived as the impartial or the impersonal point of view. The enterprise of the political philosopher is that of propounding and grounding a political morality – one that is agent-neutral in that it does not rest on particularistic loyalties or conceptions of the good but instead has its foundation in universal principles of justice or rights. For these writers political philosophy is not, as it was for Aristotle and for John Stuart Mill, say, an inquiry into the human good that has as its precondition a theory of human nature. It is an inquiry into the right whose agenda is justice and whose content is given, not by any investigation of human beings as we find them in the world, with their diverse histories and communities, but by an abstract conception of the person that has been voided of any definite cultural identity or specific historical inheritance. It is obvious that this project – the project of deriving principles of justice or right from the nature of the person – is a Kantian project. The oddity of this project, as it is pursued in Rawls and his followers, is that it is conducted without reference to the metaphysical doctrines – about noumenal selfhood, for example – that are the matrix of all of Kant's ethics and political thought.

The Kantian liberalism sponsored by Rawls, which has secured a dominant place for itself in Anglo-American political philosophy, has the dubious distinction of lacking anything like a philosophical anthropology, or any other sort of metaphysical commitment. It takes its bearings, not from an account of human nature or of the more permanent features of the human circumstance, but from a conception of the person that is, avowedly in the work of the later Rawls, a distillation of the conventional wisdom of liberal democratic regimes. In the later Rawls the conventional wisdom is unmistakably that of the liberal establishment in North American universities – which perhaps justifies the description of his project as Kantianism in one country; certainly, it limits the interest of his project for those who do not share the unexamined intuitions of the US academic *nomenklatura*. This new liberalism prides itself in remaining on the surface, philosophically speaking, and in having as its *telos* a practical goal – that of securing agreement on principles of justice that allow for peaceful coexistence in a constitutional democracy of persons having divergent and sometimes incommensurable conceptions of the good life and views of the world. The oddity, and indeed the absurdity, of this new Kantian liberalism – one that has cut itself loose from the traditional concerns of philosophy so as to pursue the political objective of practical agreement – is that it is at the same time elaborated at a vast distance from political life in the real world. The theorists of the new Kantian liberalism speak for no political interest or constituency, even in the liberal democracies to which their reflections are directed; few members of the political classes in their respective countries know what these theorists are thinking, and none cares. Accordingly, the thoughts of the new liberals evoke no political echo in any of the liberal democracies: the project of securing practical agreement on principles of justice among metaphysically and historically neutered Kantian selves arouses little interest, inexplicably, among the political classes, or the voters, of the Western world, or anywhere else.

For the most part, in consequence, contemporary political philosophers of the presently dominant school are reduced to talking with each other, and to no one else, about topics of interest to no one else, least of all in the liberal democracies they are supposed to be addressing. In part, no doubt, the manifest political irrelevance of contemporary political philosophy, exquisitely ironic in view of the declared practical goals of its dominant school, is merely an aspect of the political marginality of the Anglo-American academic class itself. Its self-appointed role as the intellectual voice of an alienated counter-culture, hostile to its own society and enamoured of various exotic regimes – of which it knows, in fact, nothing – has acquired a Monty Pythonish character, as the peoples and even the rulers of these regimes have exposed their failings to a pitiless scrutiny in which the pretensions of their ruling ideologies have been devastatingly deflated. (That the absurdist aspect of contemporary Western academic discourse about economic systems is lost on its practitioners is convincingly confirmed by a 1992 issue of the journal, *Ethics*, in which a motley crew of Western academics gravely discusses various aspects of market socialism – a conception exposed to universal derision in the transitional societies of the post-communist world where it originated decades ago. The contributors to *Ethics* might have done better to discuss the prospects of the restoration of monarchy in Russia – far less of an exercise in anachronism, and just conceivably a topic of some interest to those whose fates it might affect.) The collapse of any political model for the Anglo-American oppositional intelligentsia has done little for its political credibility, already negligible in domestic terms. The political vacuity of much recent political philosophy, especially that of the new Kantian liberalism, may, however, have causes other than, and deeper than, the political risibility of its practitioners. It may be explicable by reference to central features of recent political philosophy, and in particular to the continued hegemony within it of an

Enlightenment project that history has passed by and which is now significant only as the modernist ideology of the liberal academic *nomenklatura* of Western societies that are themselves in evident decline.

Consider, in this regard, the central category of the intellectual tradition spawned by Rawls's work – the category of the person. In Rawls's work, as in that of his followers, this is a cipher, without history or ethnicity, denuded of the special attachments that in the real human world give us the particular identities we have. Emptied of the contingencies that in truth are essential to our identities, this cipher has in the Rawlsian schema only one concern – a concern for its own good, which is not the good of any actual human being, but the good we are all supposed to have in common, which it pursues subject to constraints of justice that are conceived to be those of impartiality. In this conception, the principles of justice are bound to be the same for all. The appearance of a plurality of ciphers in the Rawlsian original position must be delusive, since, having all of them the same beliefs and motives, they are indistinguishable. So it is that, even in its later version, in which it has suffered a sort of Hegelian or Deweyan mutation, Rawls's project remains a universalist one, in that its results are the same for all those to whom it is meant to apply. The basic liberties – apparently a uniquely determinate and finally fixed set of compossible or dovetailing freedoms – will be, then, the same for all, as will the principles of distribution. It will not matter by whom we are governed, so long as governments satisfy common standards of justice and legitimacy.

Now there is in the recent literature a common objection to this Rawlsian project, made most lucidly and judiciously by Thomas Nagel in his *Equality and Partiality*,[3] which captures something of its implausibility and strangeness. Like much else in modern moral and political theory that has been influenced by Kant and by utilitarianism, Rawls's theory of justice equates the

moral point of view with that of impartiality, and thereby denies moral standing to personal projects and attachments, except in so far as they are compatible with impersonal standards of justice. Nagel argues that this account of the ethical life accords an undue privilege to the standpoint of impartiality, whereas any acceptable view of morality must give full recognition to each, while accepting that their demands will never be wholly reconcilable. This is a refreshing departure from the myopic perspective of impartiality, but it is not a fundamental one, since the personal point of view which Nagel seeks to rehabilitate remains that of the Kantian cipher. In the real world, human beings think of themselves, not as essentially persons having a diversity of contingent relationships and attachments, but as being constituted by their histories and their communities, with all their conflicting demands. It is a fact of fundamental importance that the subjects of the former Soviet Union asserted themselves against its power not as persons, but as peoples. Nor is the disposition of human beings to constitute for themselves particular and exclusive identities, and to link the legitimacy of governments with their recognition, a phenomenon of modern times alone; it is as perennial and universal as the diversity of natural languages, and as distinctively human. It is wholly characteristic of recent liberal theory that, while prepared to acknowledge that political morality cannot be entirely agent-neutral, Nagel refuses to allow that the subject of agent-relative moralities is often collective, not personal: persons may be thwarted if they lack opportunities for expressing the identities they have as members of groups, he tells us,[4] but communities or peoples have no irreducible right to self-determination. The subject matter of justice cannot, except indirectly, be found in the histories of peoples, and their often tragically conflicting claims; it must be always a matter of individual rights. It is obvious that this liberal position cannot address, save as an inconvenient datum of human psychology, the sense of injustice arising from belonging to an

oppressed community that, in the shape of nationalism, is the strongest political force of our century. It is not surprising, then, that the truth that human beings individuate themselves as members of historic communities having memories that cross the generations, not as specimens of generic humanity or personhood having a history only by accident, rarely figures in recent work, Stuart Hampshire's *Innocence and Experience* being a noteworthy exception.[5] Nor, given the unreflectively individualist bias of contemporary Anglo-American political philosophy, is it in the least anomalous that there should be only one comprehensive study of the philosophical dilemmas generated by principles of national self-determination, Allen Buchanan's *Secession* – a profound investigation of the subject that is further enriched by its illuminating use of actual historical examples.[6]

The great distance from political life of most political philosophy is partly a result of the abstract individualism by which it is animated. It is far from being confined to works which defend an individualist minimum of government. Individualist assumptions are present, in a wholly unselfcritical fashion, in Robert Nozick's *Anarchy, State and Utopia*,[7] and they are invoked in an incomparably more persuasive, if also ultimately unsuccessful way, in Loren Lomasky's unjustly neglected *Persons, Rights and the Moral Community*.[8] Abstract individualism permeates Ronald Dworkin and Bruce Ackerman's work, where it is harnessed to an egalitarian political morality. It is present (though in a far more reflective and historically self-conscious fashion than in Rawls) in David Gauthier's *Morals by Agreement*.[9] What all these have in common with Rawls's work is the deployment of an unhistorical and abstract individualism in the service of a legalist or jurisprudential paradigm of political philosophy. The task of political philosophy is conceived as one of deriving the ideal constitution – assumed, at least in principle, to be everywhere the same. This is so, whether its upshot be Rawls's basic liberties, Nozick's side-constraints, or Dworkin's rights-as-trumps. The

presupposition is always that the bottom line in political morality is the claims of individuals, and that these are to be spelt out in terms of the demands of justice or rights. The consequence is that the diverse claims of historic communities, if they are ever admitted, are always overwhelmed by the supposed rights of individuals. The notion that different communities might legitimately have different legal regimes for abortion or pornography, for example, is hardly considered. Indeed, it becomes difficult to state such a proposition intelligibly, as the discourse of rights increasingly drives out all others from political life. If the theoretical goal of the new liberalism is the supplanting of politics by law, its practical result – especially in the United States, where rights discourse is already the only public discourse that retains any legitimacy – has been the emptying of political life of substantive argument and the political corruption of law. Issues, such as abortion, that in many other countries have been resolved by a legislative settlement that involves compromises and which is known to be politically renegotiable, are in the legalist culture of the United States matters of fundamental rights that are intractably contested and which threaten to become enemies of civil peace. The new liberalism that dominates Anglo-American political philosophy is a faithful image of the political culture that gave it birth.

It is not denied here that recent work contains some trenchant criticisms of the dominant school. In Joel Feinberg's four-volume *The Moral Limits of the Criminal Law*,[10] an older and wiser Millian tradition is revived in which the political philosopher, rather than posing as a constitution-maker, addresses the ideal legislator, who perceives the necessity of trade-offs among conflicting interests and values. A number of communitarian theorists have illuminated the questionable conceptions of the subject and the subject's relations with common forms of life which underpin fashionable liberal ideals of the priority of justice over other political virtues and of the neutrality of justice with regard to

rival conceptions of the good. Michael Sandel's *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*,[11] in which Rawlsian theory is characterized as a theory appropriate to a society of strangers lacking any deep or rich common culture, is usually considered the first of these communitarian critiques. However, in Alasdair MacIntyre's earlier and brilliantly destructive *After Virtue*,[12] the sources of latter-day liberalism in a fragmented moral vocabulary embodying no coherent conception of the human good are exposed, while in his *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*,[13] a no less interesting, if less successful attempt is made to combine the denial of any conception of rationality that tries to transcend the dependency of all reasoning on the authority of tradition with the thesis that the account of the good found in one tradition – the Thomistic-Aristotelian tradition – nevertheless has a superior claim on reason. A similar argument, focusing on the etiolated conception of the self that suffuses liberal thought, is pursued at instructive length in the work of Charles Taylor. It is in Michael Walzer's *Spheres of Justice*[14] that the most ambitious attempt is made at developing an alternative to the spurious universality of liberal justice – one that forswears the standpoint of externality on our practices affected in Rawls and Dworkin in favour of a method of immanent criticism. Walzer's book is arresting in its insistence that elucidating ideas of justice is a sort of social and historical phenomenology, not the statement of timeless verities; and it is welcome in its pluralist insight that justice is complex not simple, with different distributive principles being applicable to different goods according to the meanings those goods have in various social contexts. This phenomenological approach to justice is helpful, in that it turns us away from the hallucinatory perspectives of Kantian liberalism to the real world of human practices and forms of life – families, schools, workplaces, nation-states, and so on. Like other communitarian thinkers, however, Walzer is reluctant to accept that abandoning the universalist standpoint of doctrinal liberalism leaves liberal practice without

privileges, as only one form of life among many. He will not see that the method of immanent criticism he advocates by no means guarantees outcomes congenial to liberal sensibilities – that it may well be subversive of liberal practice. This blindness in Walzer is one he shares with virtually all of the communitarian critics of liberalism, and it has the same root. The community invoked by these writers is not one that anyone has ever lived in, an historic human settlement with its distinctive exclusivities, hierarchies and bigotries, but an ideal community, in its way as much of a cipher as the disembodied Kantian self the communitarians delight in deflating. In our world – the only one we know – the shadow cast by community is enmity, and the boundaries of communities must often be settled by war. This is the lesson of history, including the latest history of the post-communist states. It is typical of recent political philosophy, even in its communitarian variants, that it should be so far removed from the actual practices of common life as it is found everywhere. Communitarian thought still harbours the aspiration expressed in those forms of the Enlightenment project, such as Marxism, that are most critical of liberalism – that of creating a form of communal life from which are absent the practices of exclusion and subordination that are constitutive of every community human beings have ever lived in. There is another irony here – in the fact that, whereas it remains committed to the Enlightenment project in one of its most primitive forms, the main current in recent political philosophy seems to be wholly untouched by the disillusioned sociological vision of Weber and Durkheim, who must be among the Enlightenment's most gifted children.

The most profound and subtle critique of liberalism comes not from a communitarian but from Joseph Raz, in whose *The Morality of Freedom*[15] liberalism itself takes a communitarian turn. Raz's critique is of the utmost importance, partly because it is in considerable measure an immanent criticism of recent

liberalism – and all the more devastating for that – and partly because it encompasses a restatement of liberalism in which its dependency on individualism is removed. Raz argues, so far as I can see demonstratively, that no political morality can be rights-based, so that the Kantian project of a purely deontic political morality is broken-backed; that principles of justice and distribution can never be foundational in ethics; that egalitarian and libertarian political principles have no claim on reason; and that utilitarianism, in political morality as elsewhere, runs aground on the reef of incommensurabilities among (and doubtless within) ultimate values. Raz's liberalism seeks to ground rights in their contribution to individual well-being, and affirms that such a derivation of rights will support positive welfare rights as well as the rights that protect the immunities and negative liberties of classical liberalism. Among us, autonomy is a vital condition of well-being, and will support both sorts of rights. Autonomous choice has value, however, only in an environment that is rich in choice-worthy options. Intrinsically valuable forms of common life enter into the value of autonomy itself, accordingly: the life of an autonomous person will have value only if it is lived in a cultural environment containing a decent array of inherently public goods – goods that are constitutive parts of worthwhile forms of life. A liberal state, according to Raz, cannot be a state that is neutral about the good life, if only because liberal freedoms take their value from their contribution to the good life. Its animating virtue will be toleration, not neutrality. Standing solidly within the tradition of analytical philosophy, Raz's book nevertheless diverges from the dominant school in recent political philosophy in three ways that are exemplary. It differs, first, in the conception of philosophical method that informs it. Unlike Rawls's, Raz's liberalism does not harbour the absurdly hubristic aspiration of formulating a definitive list of basic liberties or rights. Instead, it recognizes explicitly that the structure of rights that best

promotes autonomy, say, is necessarily indeterminate, and significantly variable. Nor, second, does Raz seek to write our own preoccupation with autonomy into the fabric of human nature. He recognizes that the conditions which make autonomy a vital condition of human well-being do not hold in all human societies, even if they are present in ours. Indeed – and this is, of course, anathema to the parochial dogmas of much liberal theory – Raz denies that an autonomous life is necessarily the best life for human beings: there may be forms of human flourishing, perhaps incommensurable in their value as against our form of life, in which autonomous choice has no part. Lastly, Raz shares with Isaiah Berlin the subversive insight – restated by Berlin in his invaluable *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*[16] – that incommensurabilities among ultimate values set a limit to the ambitions of theory in both ethics and politics. This insight – whose applications in ethics have been best explored in the work of Bernard Williams – has the inestimable value of returning us to the realities of political life, which have to do with balancing competing claims of similar validity, finding a *modus vivendi* among forms of life that are irreconcilable, and mediating conflicts that can never be resolved. This view of political life as being permanently intractable to rational reconstruction strikes a death-blow to one of the central supports of the Enlightenment project. It is, perhaps, because it humbles the ambitions of theoretical reason that the conception of the scope and limits of political philosophy exemplified in the work of Raz and Berlin is at odds with its main current now and in the past.

In a review of Nagel's *Equality and Partiality*, G. A. Cohen makes a comment on the book's blurb that aptly illustrates the limitations of the conventional mainstream of academic political philosophy.[17] He objects to the claim, made in the blurb, that 'Egalitarian communism has clearly failed'. He does not mean to deny that what he calls – with delightfully oxymoronic *naïveté*

– 'Soviet civilisation' has failed. He accepts – as who has not, since we were told it by the Soviets themselves? – that 'Soviet civilisation' failed to create not only a classless, egalitarian society, but even a humanly decent one. And he has noticed that 'Soviet civilisation' has failed in an even more comprehensive sense – that is to say, it has disintegrated, collapsed and disappeared. Despite acknowledging these important truths, Cohen is indignant at the blurb's assumption that the Soviet collapse tells us anything about the feasibility of 'egalitarian communism' as a form of life, and he recommends that we turn to page 28 of Nagel's book, where a more 'nuanced' account of the Soviet collapse is offered. The reader who follows Cohen's advice will be surprised to find only one sentence on the page in question that even mentions the Soviet collapse, in which Nagel tells us that 'twentieth century communism . . . was probably worse than it had to be'. Now this is undoubtedly sage stuff; but where is the nuance – in the 'probably', perhaps?

It is, of course, true enough that the Soviet collapse does not show egalitarian communism to be a logical impossibility of some sort: how could it? The proposition that it tells us nothing as to the achievability of an egalitarian society is none the less a piece of silliness. We know – from the Soviet *glasnost*, from all the countries of Eastern Europe, and from China during its recent period of liberalization – that every twentieth-century communist state has contained inequalities in the basic goods of life – education, housing, medical care, even food – that are vast, and sometimes greater than those found in capitalist countries. We know that socialist central planning of the economy – presumably a feature of a communist form of life in any of its varieties – has in every communist state resulted in catastrophic waste, corrupt malinvestment and popular poverty, and in an almost apocalyptic degradation of the environment, such that basic human needs are everywhere frustrated. We know that these features of communist systems are accounted for, almost

invariably, by those who have experienced them, by reference to the destruction of normal incentives that goes with the suppression of a market economy. (And let us not forget the evidence of the indispensable importance of incentives in a modern economy, and of the limits incentives place on egalitarian redistribution, that has come from the collapse of Swedish social democracy.) What more do we need to know to be convinced of the unachievability of egalitarian communism? We even possess *theories* – such as the Austrian theory, formulated by Mises and Hayek, of the epistemic functions of market institutions and the impossibility of rational economic calculation under socialist institutions – which appear to be corroborated by the revelations of *glasnost*. What more could anyone – even a contemporary analytical Marxist – want?

There was a time when political philosophers were also political economists, historians and social theorists, concerned – as were Smith, Hume and John Stuart Mill, for example – with what history and theory had to teach us about the comparative performance of different institutions and the constraints of feasibility imposed on human institutions of all sorts by the circumstances of any realistically imaginable world. When these political philosophers of an older tradition were liberals, they were deeply concerned with the cultural and institutional preconditions of liberal civil society, preoccupied with threats to its stability and anxious to understand the deeper significance of the major political developments of their time. The strange death of this older tradition has gone oddly unlamented, as political philosophy has come to be dominated by a school that prides itself on its insulation from other disciplines and whose intellectual agenda is shaped by a variety of liberalism that at no point touches the real dilemmas of liberal society. It is a measure of the distance from human life of the main current in recent political philosophy, of its innocence of history and its ignorance of social-scientific theory, and of its

character as a degenerate research programme in political thought, that it is certain to treat the greatest world-historical transformation of our age, the fall of communism, as irrelevant to its concerns and a matter of indifference for the ruling liberal ideal of equality.

2

NOTES TOWARD A DEFINITION OF THE POLITICAL THOUGHT OF TLÖN

In his celebrated fiction, *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*, Jorge Luis Borges tells of the discovery of an encyclopaedia of an illusory world, *The First Encyclopaedia of Tlön*. The fantastic world of Tlön was, he tells us, congenitally Idealist in its philosophy. For the peoples of the planet of Tlön, as for Bishop Berkeley, to be is to be perceived; the world is not a manifold of objects in space, but a series of mental events. In such a world, causal connections are only associations of ideas, and the idea of a continuous universe that exists independently of our momentary states of consciousness is unknown except as a *jeu d'esprit* of metaphysical speculation. The doctrine of materialism has indeed been formulated, but as a paradox or a conceit; however ingenious the arguments in its favour, they do not convince the inhabitants of Tlön. It might be supposed that a world consisting only of successive and irreducible states of mind would be a world without science

and philosophy; but this, Borges tells us, would be a mistake. The world of Tlön abounds in sciences, countless in number, as it does in metaphysical systems; all are treated as dialectical games, or branches of fantastic literature, from which is sought not conviction, but astonishment. It is to the description of this illusory world, its languages, religions, numismatics, 'its emperors and its oceans, its architecture and its playing cards', amounting to a complete history of an unknown planet, that *The First Encyclopaedia of Tlön* is devoted.

By an association of ideas that is natural and perhaps inevitable, Borges's elegant story suggests to the reader the idea of a *Companion to Contemporary Political Philosophy* whose subject matter is the political thought of a fictitious world, a world of human beings like ourselves, but having histories and conceptions of themselves very different from those surveyed in Robert Goodin and Philip Pettit's *Companion to Contemporary Political Philosophy*.[1] In this exercise in fantasy, the topics treated encompass nationality and monarchy, ethnicity and political theology; the systems of ideas include legitimism and theocracy, nationalism and Byzantinism. This alternative *Companion* devotes much space, also, to the political philosophy of contemporary Western liberalism. It gives coverage to the question, debated in the notorious *Anti-Sombart*, why in the late twentieth century socialism existed as an intellectual movement only in the United States; to the heroic effort of the foremost contemporary theorist of justice at a transcendental deduction of the British Labour Party as it was in the 1950s; to the ingenious neo-Hegelian interpretation of history, which appears to have governed US foreign policy during the post-communist period in which national or else ethnic allegiances were the only remaining sources of political legitimacy in much of the world, and which affirmed that ethnicity and nationality were spent political forces; to the powerful school of Anglo-American jurisprudence in which all political questions are resolved by appeal to the demands of a single

fundamental right, the right to meaning; and cognate topics in contemporary liberal theory. At the same time the fictitious *Companion* does not confine itself to liberal theory, or indeed to Western thought. It treats also the neo-Confucian political ideas of the East Asian peoples, the varieties of Islamic political theory, and the ambiguities of Orthodoxy in recent Russian theorizing. If it deals only in passing with the idea of a secular civil society, focusing principally on the theoretical and political inheritances of Ataturkism, that is because it seeks to understand the thought of countries, such as India, whose emerging political cultures seem to confirm the editors' belief that secularism is in most parts of the world an ephemeral episode. In this imaginary *Companion*, then, Western liberal thought is not neglected; but it is treated as only one trend among many, and not that which has the greatest political resonance in the illusory world it surveys.

Goodin and Pettit's *Companion to Contemporary Political Philosophy* has a coverage and subject matter that are incommensurable with those of its fictitious rival. Nevertheless, particularly if its editors' statement of its intended coverage is taken as authoritative, it is itself best understood as belonging to a sub-genre in fantastic literature, by comparison with which the fictitious *Companion* seems a laboured exercise in realism. Their book is divided into three broad parts, with the first treating the contributions of different disciplines – analytical philosophy, sociology, law, economics and so on – to contemporary political philosophy, the second discussing the major ideologies that have figured in the subject, and the third consisting of shorter treatments of a variety of particular topics. In the introduction, the editors give their reasons for treating the ideologies chosen for discussion in the book's second part:

> In selecting the ideologies to be covered in the second part, we tried to identify those principled world-views that have a

> substantial impact in contemporary life as well as an impact on philosophical thinking.

They go on:

> Nationalism – still less racism, sexism or ageism – does not figure, on the grounds that it hardly counts as a principled way of thinking about things . . . Yet other ideologies – like theism, monarchism, fascism – are omitted on the grounds that, whatever impact they once had on public life, they would seem to play only a marginal role in the contemporary world.

These remarks imply that nationalism, easily the most powerful political phenomenon in the contemporary world, not only has no defence in principled thought, but never did; that the reflections of Hegel on the nation-state, and of Herder on national culture, do not count, and presumably never counted, as exercises in principled thought; and they invite the question, if only as a move in a dialectical game: by what standards are these theorists of nationality to be excluded from the canon of principled thinking?

The editors' observation that theism plays only a marginal role in the contemporary world will evoke in many readers – Salman Rushdie, perhaps, or the beleaguered secular intelligentsia of contemporary Egypt – astonishment rather than conviction, at least to begin with. For such readers, whether they be in Algeria or India, Turkey or Pakistan, the claim that theistic ideologies have little impact on contemporary public life may have an air of paradox, if not unreality: their societies may seem to them to be convulsed by a life-or-death struggle between secularism and theocracy. True, with regard to the many parts of their readers' world that are ravaged by conflicts between adherents of different religions – Bosnia, Lebanon, Nagorno-Karabakh, and unnumbered others – the editors might maintain that these countries