Chapter Fourteen

Breaking the Chains of Reason

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I am contending for the right of the living, and against their being willed away...by the manuscript-assumed authority of the dead.

(Tom Paine)

There is not much enthusiasm abroad among intellectuals in our time for the day when the last king will be strangled with the entrails of the last priest. It is not just that the liberation of mankind has come to seem an impossibly utopian enterprise. To most present-day British intellectuals, the very concept of commitment to such a cause has become suspect. They are, on the whole, content with what they have; if they want anything else, it is more of the same sort of thing that they have already. An American sociologist has written of them that 'never has an intellectual class found its society and its

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2 Paine 1970, p. 64.
3 The original phrase is: 'All the great ones of the earth and all nobles should be hanged, and strangled with entrails of the priests.' Often ascribed to Voltaire, these words were actually written by Jean Meslier (1664–1729), the parish priest of Etrepigny in the Champagne district of France. They appear in a testament found after he had starved himself to death during a dispute with the feudal superior and which reveal him to have held atheist and, indeed, virtually communist views. Parts of the manuscript were published by Voltaire in 1762 as Extrait des sentiments de Jean Meslier and it is from this publication that the association with him derives. The testament has not been translated into English.
culture so much to its satisfaction’, and has pictured our university teachers in a state of complacent delight, drinking port and reading Jane Austen.\(^4\) Remember the Spitalfields silk-weavers of the 1840s spending their Sunday leisure drinking porter and reading Tom Paine and you have a clue to how far and in what direction our society has travelled. The great-great-grandsons of the Spitalfields weavers are competing for scholarships to sit at the feet of the port-drinkers; their great-great-granddaughters are keen readers of those women’s magazines in which the blue-eyed, fair-haired, six-foot-tall hero is increasingly likely to turn out to be an academic of some sort.

The sweet smell of the academic’s social success helps to explain his unease when presented with images of radical change. He does not seek to be in any sense a prophet of hope; indeed, the very notion seems to him pretentious and vulgar. Those prophets of hope, the great Marxist intellectuals, are treated as the authors of antique texts for commentary and refutation; the idea of ‘left intellectuals’ is such that, when that glittering reflection of the contemporary intellectual scene, Mr. Anthony Crosland, wants to speak of them he has to guard himself by the qualification ‘if one may use the awful phrase’. Small wonder that, when the contemporary intellectual’s preoccupations are translated into terms of imaginative vision, he appears as one without hope. The repeated assurance of Mr. Butler that we can double our standard of living in the next twenty-five years if we only refrain from rocking the boat sounds very thin and unconvincing compared to the threats of what may happen to us if we don’t. The increase in human powers which once seemed the very root of hope is now far more often a source of dread. The fantasies of Orwell, who was obsessed by the danger of the techniques of power getting into the hands of men of bad will, have only been outdone by the fantasies of Huxley, who sees just as dire consequences in the possibility of them getting into the hands of men of good will.

Yet fantasy here as always reflects life. If the intellectual has nightmares of a conformist future, he has only to wake up to find himself in a conformist present with the intellectuals conforming as hard as anyone else. The writers elevate Western values in *Encounter*. The scientists play their part at Hartwell, Aldermaston and Porton. The teachers and the journalists purvey second-

\(^4\) Shils 1972, p. 137.