Some years acquire symbolic status, and one such year is 1968. All over Europe and the United States university students exploded into violent rebellion. Insofar as this would-be revolution had an ideology it was unquestionably Marx-inspired, even if the marxism was not always orthodox. It so happens that in the years 1970-71 I was teaching philosophy at Balliol College, Oxford, and because of Oxford University’s system, almost unique, of individual tuition for undergraduates, this meant I found myself in a continuing one-to-one relationship with bright students who were in the throes of revolutionary fervor.

Arguing with them was enormously illuminating for me. It seemed as if the more intelligent they were the more passionately marxist they were – but also the more affected they were by intellectually serious criticisms of marxism, which usually they were hearing for the first time. It was when they found themselves unable to meet these that they revealed where their fundamental motivation lay. This was not usually a positive one of belief in marxist ideas. Still less was it commitment to communist forms of society, which usually they had been defending without knowing anything about the reality of them. The motivation was usually negative: it was inability or refusal to come to terms with their own society as they saw it. Psychologically, this was nearly always at the root of their attitude.

Basically the chain of cause and effect between their ideas seemed to go something like this. They longed to live in a perfect society. But only too obviously the society in which they found themselves contained serious evils. So this form of society had to be rejected. A particularly interesting point here is the fact that, because what they demanded was perfection, they thought that if anything was seriously wrong then the whole must be rejected. If, say, newspapers reported cases of old and
poor people dying of hypothermia in winter because they had no heating in their homes, the students would say savagely “there’s something sick about a society that lets old people freeze to death in the winter.” If there were reports of students unable to take up university places because of an inability to get grants they would say “there’s something fundamentally rotten about a society that refuses to educate people unless they’ve got money.” It was virtually a formulaic response, of the fixed form “There’s something fundamentally rotten about any society in which x happens,” with x standing for any serious social evil. If anything at all was seriously wrong, the whole of society was sick: unless everything’s perfect everything’s rotten. Such an attitude could rest only on utopian assumptions. And it quite naturally made those who held it receptive to a holistic as well as systematic social critique of the only society they knew. It also led most of them to suppose, erroneously, that there must be something somewhere that was infinitely better: since, plainly, things were not perfect here, they must be perfect somewhere else – or, at least, people somewhere else must be trying. Criticisms of communist reality were nearly always met by the counter-accusation that things were just as bad here, if not worse, and at least the communists were striving to realize a moral ideal, which our cynical and self-interested politicians were not.

These attitudes display several errors of a fundamental character to which intelligent people in general are prone when they think about politics. Instead of starting from what actually exists, and trying to think how to improve it, they start from an ideal of the perfect society, a sort of blueprint in the mind, and then start thinking of how to change society to fit the blueprint. If they cannot see any practicable way of getting from reality to the blueprint they may be tempted then to think in terms of sweeping reality away, in order to start from scratch, in order to realize the blueprint.

Karl Popper’s ideas are a marvellous antidote to such illusions. First of all he is insistent on its being an inescapable fact that wherever you want to go you have to start from where you are. Even the most cataclysmic revolution is an attempt to achieve certain ends, a way of trying to change society as it actually is into a different form of society that is preferred. And as the history of revolutions illustrates, existing society never is swept completely away: huge and important features of it always persist into the successor society, usually to the bafflement and chagrin of the revolutionaries. As a way of achieving desired social change revolution is exceedingly cost ineffective as well as ineffectual. First and foremost, large numbers of people get killed, or are made to