

## Review Articles

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*Utopia and Reform in the Enlightenment.* By Franco Venturi. Cambridge University Press, 1971. vi, 160 pp. U.K. price: £2.60.

THE FIRST thing that must be said about this slim but very dense volume is that it is a book for specialists. The written version of a series of George Macaulay Trevelyan lectures, it has been composed on a level aimed at Franco Venturi's very well-informed fellow scholars of the eighteenth century and its philosophy. Thus, to quote an extreme example, at one point the reader is addressed like this, 'You will recall that Robert Molesworth's son was the British representative at the court of Turin at the same time as Radicati was preparing for his religious and political rebellion and his subsequent exile.' (p. 67). The esoteric quality of the knowledge assumed is surely apparent here. Moreover, the passage is overt evidence for what is implicit in the density of the whole work; that there is an immense amount of similarly relevant and interesting information which Venturi was forced by the requirements of a lecture series to assume known. If he had only added it and expanded the lectures into a fuller book instead of a very short monograph, he could have made his scholarship vastly more accessible to others besides specialists in the history of Enlightenment thought.

It is with regret that the above observation is made, since *Utopia and Reform* contains an important conception of the Enlightenment, and may be seen as a kind of antidote to the recent direction taken in Enlightenment historiography. The book's central aim is to avoid the separation so often made between intellectual history, and social, political and economic history. Venturi rejects vehemently the notion that philosophers, especially political, legal and social theorists, have ever managed to isolate themselves from the political, legal and social realities around them — from the world in which they live and work. His principal preoccupation, then, is to remarry eighteenth-century thought to eighteenth-century reality. The title of the book is a shorthand way of expressing this central thesis. The radical and Utopian speculations of the eighteenth-century *philosophes*, Venturi argues, cannot be conceived of or understood in isolation from the eighteenth century's specific problems and needs for reform. Their works were very frequently written in response to particular problems, or as commentaries on contemporary situations. In addition, to attempt to divorce the history of ideas from the rest of history ignores or at least plays down the influence of new ideas on policies subsequently adopted. Thus Venturi is also concerned to point out how reforms that were attempted during the latter part of the eighteenth century can frequently be seen to have had their inspiration in the ideas of the Enlightenment. This two-way relationship between what was going on in the minds of the *philosophes* and what was going on in the practical world of politics, law, trade and

administration, is a recurrent and fruitful theme of the book.

In the introductory chapter, in which his ideas are concentrated to the point of obscurity, Venturi contrasts his own intended approach with that of a number of previous historians of the Enlightenment, whom he considers to have erred in at least one of two ways. Virtually all, except the Marxists, with whom he takes issue on other counts, he criticizes as having been too narrowly historians of *ideas*. And, largely because of their consequent bias away from contemporary political and other events and towards what was going on in the minds of professional thinkers, most previous writers on the period have vastly overstressed those aspects of Enlightenment thought that owed much to thinkers of the past, and have chronically neglected what was new and original about it. He objects particularly to Carl Becker's approach,<sup>1</sup> nowadays generally under attack, which depicts the whole of Enlightenment thought as a restatement in more secular terms of the medieval Christian world-picture, with its heaven replaced by the *philosophes'* conception of the perfectly rational society of the future. He also takes exception to Peter Gay's emphasis:<sup>2</sup> the latter's strong stress on the influence of classical Greek and Roman thinkers on the ideas of the eighteenth century is seen by Venturi, in spite of some regard for its originality, as paying scant heed to the fact that eighteenth-century Europe was an entirely different world from classical Greece and Rome, and a world of whose particular problems and irrationalities the *philosophes* were very much aware.

Venturi centres his re-examination of Enlightenment thought around two particular current themes, the discussion of the virtues of the republican as opposed to other forms of government, and the question of society's right to punish criminals. He sets out to relate the political and legal realities of eighteenth-century Europe, as far as these matters were concerned, to what was being thought and written about them. He demonstrates convincingly that the republican ideas which flourished were often much more inspired by European city states and republics of modern times such as the Italian examples, Geneva and England, than they were by the republics of the ancient world. We should consider what the Enlightenment's advocates of republicanism wrote in the light of the then existing republics and the special problems they were encountering in an age of increasing absolutism. Many important Enlightenment writings, including Rousseau's *Contrat Social* and *Lettres écrites de la Montagne*, and Montesquieu's *Esprit des Lois*, will yield far more to the modern reader who is familiar with the politics and problems of the states which inspired them. Thus Rousseau's concern with the social advantages and moral virtues of the republican form of government cannot be comprehended in an abstract kind of way, nor by reference to the influence of classical thought, for they were not conceived in abstraction or in deference to the ancient republics, but primarily in response to the very real current problems of the Genevan republic. It may be a sad commentary on the byways into which intellectual historians are sometimes diverted that Venturi should have found it necessary to reinstate what seems rather an obvious fact: that Enlightenment

<sup>1</sup> Carl Becker, *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth Century Philosophers*, New Haven, 1932.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation*, New York, 1967 and 1969.

ideas about republicanism had a great deal to do with contemporary examples of the republican form of government.

The pivot of the work, in which the central idea expressed in the title becomes most explicit, is the chapter entitled 'The Right to Punish'. Here the connection, and also the tension, between Utopian ideas and hopes of making a perfect society, and the realities which a reformer must face, are most clearly brought out. It is also a chapter of great relevance at a time when there is once again much questioning of current methods of punishing crime; when we are asking whether punishment should be basically reformatory or basically retributive, and trying to determine the justifications for and relative success of harsher or more lenient punitive procedures.

Venturi's account of the eighteenth-century controversy about such issues focuses on Beccaria's *Dei Delitti e delle Pene*, published in 1764. Beccaria took a very radical approach to the whole issue of criminal behaviour and its punishment; he was convinced that criminals are not born, but made by society, and that a society whose laws constitute privilege for the few and hopelessness for the many has no right to inflict harsh and retributive penalties on those who infringe these laws. Venturi's discussion of this eighteenth-century radical made a great impression on me because I read it the day after George Jackson was shot. This young man died, after twelve years in prison and by means of a slightly disguised use of the death penalty, on account of his blackness, his rebelliousness, his political convictions and his dignity, as well as of his 'crime' — the supposed theft of \$70 at the age of eighteen. Committed to the necessity for revolutionary change, he too questioned the justice of punishment for the infringement of property laws by a society whose ideals and institutions are wholeheartedly devoted to perpetuating enormous disparities between rich and poor. The continuing relevance of the questions that Beccaria asked in 1764 can best be demonstrated by quoting a little from both his book and George Jackson's. Beccaria's condemned criminal argues for revolt against all oppressive laws: 'What are these laws I must respect, that they leave such a huge gap between me and the rich? Who made these laws? Rich and powerful men . . . let us break these fatal connections . . . let us attack injustice at its source.'<sup>3</sup> George Jackson, considering the causes of his crimes to be at the very centre of American political and economic reality and the 'neoslavery' of the black people, speaks thus, 'I didn't create this impasse. I had nothing to do with the arrival of matters at this destructive end. . . . Did I colonize, kidnap, . . . enslave myself, use myself, and neglect myself, steal myself and then, being reduced to nothing, invent a competitive economy knowing that I cannot compete . . . ? I am [a] victim, born innocent, a total product of my surroundings. Everything that I am, I developed into because of circumstantial and situational pressures. I was born knowing nothing; necessity and environment formed me, and everyone like me.'<sup>4</sup> Thus so many of the same insistent questions continue to lead to broader questions, now in the twentieth century as much as in the eighteenth century. The initially practical, later moral, questions involved

<sup>3</sup> Quoted by Venturi, p. 101.

<sup>4</sup> Soledad Brother. *The Prison Letters of George Jackson*, N.Y., 1970, pp. 102-3.

in trying to cope with anti-social behaviour lead to the examination of freedom and of the degree of equality of opportunity in the relevant society, and of the extent to which the privileges of large-scale and hereditary property-ownership make these impossible to achieve. Now, as then, the issues involved in much needed reform often prompt one to question more deeply the fundamental values and goals of society.

In conclusion, Franco Venturi points out the directions which should be taken by historians of the Enlightenment if they are convinced of the need to remarry ideas to reality. Taking a brief look at the period as a whole, he considers that much more work needs to be done on the economic curves and trade cycle of the eighteenth century, but that even on the basis of present evidence 'it is clear that all society, and not just the movement of ideas and politics, is expanding at the beginning of the century, reaches a crisis in the thirties and reaches its peak in the fifties and sixties, while the last twenty-five years of the eighteenth century witness a period of profound disturbance. It is the curve of the eighteenth century and also of the Enlightenment' (p. 118). As I mentioned earlier, however, the fact that the two curves run parallel is not due solely to the influence of the contemporary world on thinkers, but also to the influences of these thinkers on the world. Whereas for most of the book, Venturi has concentrated on influences of the former type, the remainder of the last chapter is devoted to an examination of some of the ways in which the *philosophes'* ideas were put into practice in the spheres of technology and trade, science, law and politics. Pointing out that the famous *Encyclopédie* was a technological and business manual as well as a treatise of moral and political theory, Venturi shows how it formed an important bridge between the Parisian *philosophes* and the rest of Europe, and was referred to by rulers and policy-makers who had problems concerning tariffs and trade, law, and technology. This is not to imply, of course, that the administrators who sifted useful ideas from the *Encyclopédie* or other works of the *philosophes* were necessarily at all sympathetic with the extremely radical political philosophies of their authors. Rather they took what was useful to them, often without worrying about the logical extensions that might follow from such moves.

Venturi's greatest contribution in *Utopia and Reform in the Enlightenment* is this: by getting away from a too exclusive concentration on the *ideas* of the period, he demonstrates that the Enlightenment *was* a period, not only in what men thought but in many ways also in what they did, of increasing attempts at rationality and experimentation, and of increasing insistence on empirical evidence. This was a time of rapid and significant steps away from reliance on revelation and the mysterious ways of God, and towards a greater use of the reasoning and creative powers of man. Franco Venturi's book is a very thought-provoking account of some aspects of these changes, albeit a rather dense and difficult one.

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