

is up to us. We must not confuse efficiency in providing means with the purposes which they serve. A society which has no other standard than efficiency will indeed waste that efficiency. If men are to be free to use their talents to provide us with the means we want, we must remunerate them in accordance with the value these means have to us. Nevertheless, we ought to esteem them only in accordance with the use they make of the means at their disposal.

Let us encourage usefulness to one's fellows by all means, but let us not confuse it with the importance of the ends which men ultimately serve. It is the glory of the free enterprise system that it makes it at least possible that each individual, while serving his fellows, can do so for his own ends. But the system is itself only a means, and its infinite possibilities must be used in the service of ends which exist apart.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

What is 'Social'?—What Does it Mean?*

Except in the fields of philology and logic, there are probably few cases in which one would be justified in devoting a whole article to the meaning of a single word. Sometimes, however, such a little word not only throws light upon the process of the evolution of ideas and the story of human error, but often also exercises an irrational power which becomes apparent only when, by analysis, we lay bare its true meaning. I doubt whether there exists a better example of the little understood influence that may be exercised by a single word than that afforded by the role which for a hundred years the word 'social' has played in the whole sphere of political problems—and is still playing. We are so familiar with it, we accept it so much as a matter of course, that we are hardly conscious of any problem regarding its meaning. We have accepted it for so long as the natural description of good behaviour and sincere thinking, that it seems almost sacrilege even to ask what this word really means which so many men consider as the guiding star of their moral aspirations. Indeed, I rather suspect that the majority of my readers, though they may not be quite sure what 'social' means, nevertheless have little doubt that it does indicate an ideal by which all good men should regulate their conduct, and that they will hope that I shall now tell them exactly what it does mean. Let me say at once that in this respect I shall disappoint them; for the primary conclusion to which a meticulous scrutiny of the word and its meaning has led me is that even so exceptionally potent a word as this

* First published in German in *Masse und Demokratie* (ed. A. Hunold), Zürich, 1937 and then in an unauthorized translation in *Freedom and Servitude* (ed. A. Hunold), Dordrecht, 1961. The present reprint is a revised version of that translation which in parts gravely misrepresented the meaning of the original.

can be incredibly empty of meaning and offer us no answer to our question.

Generally speaking, I am no friend of the new sport of semantics which derives particular satisfaction from dissecting the meaning of words that are familiar to us all. Equally I have no desire to turn the tables and, for once, to employ against the concepts of the radical reformers the technique which has hitherto been used almost exclusively against the traditional values of the free world. Nevertheless, I see in the ambiguity of the word and the slovenly manner in which it is normally used a very real danger to any clear thinking, to any possibility of reasoned discussion with regard to a great number of our most serious problems. It is, I admit, no pleasant task to have to brush aside the roseate veil in which such a 'good' word has been able to envelop all our discussions on problems of internal policy; but it is a very important task, and one that must be undertaken. The fact that for three or four generations it has been regarded almost as the hall-mark of good men that they make constant use of it, must not be allowed to disguise the other fact that very soon avoidance of its use will inevitably come to be regarded as the hall-mark of clear thinking.

Perhaps it would be as well if, at this juncture, I explained how it came about that, as far as I myself am concerned, a certain *malaise* regarding the use of the word 'social' was transformed into open hostility that caused me to regard it as a real danger. It was the fact that not only did many of my friends in Germany deem it appropriate and desirable to qualify the term 'free market economy' by calling it 'social market economy', but that even the constitution of the Federal German Republic, instead of adhering to the clear and traditional conception of a *Rechtsstaat*, used the new and ambiguous phrase 'a social *Rechtsstaat*'. I doubt very much whether anyone could really explain what the addition of this adjectival frill is supposed to denote. But in any case, it gave me a great deal to think about, and the second of the two instances I have quoted will furnish lawyers in the future with plenty of hard nuts to crack.

Be that as it may, the final conclusion emerging from my deliberations has been that the word 'social' has become an adjective which robs of its clear meaning every phrase it qualifies and transforms it into a phrase of unlimited elasticity, the implications of which can always be distorted if they are unacceptable, and the use of which, as a general rule, serves merely to conceal the lack of real agreement between men regarding a formula upon which, in appearance, they are supposed to be agreed. To a large extent it seems to me that it is to the result of this attempt to dress

up political slogans in a guise acceptable to all tastes that phrases like 'social market economy' and the like owe their existence. When we all use a word which always confuses and never clarifies the issue, which pretends to give an answer where no answer exists and, even worse, which is so often used as camouflage for aspirations that certainly have nothing to do with the common interest, then the time has obviously come for a radical operation which will free us from the confusing influence of this magical incantation.

Nothing brings more clearly to light the role played in our thinking by our interpretation of the meaning of 'social' than the significant fact that in the course of the last few decades the word has, in all languages known to me, to an ever increasing degree taken the place of the word 'moral' or simply 'good'. An interesting light is thrown on the whole issue if we ask ourselves what, exactly, does it mean when we speak of 'social' feeling or conduct, where our grandparents or great-grand-parents would simply have said that a man was a good man or that his conduct was ethical? Once upon a time a man was good if he obeyed the ethical rules, or was a good citizen when he acted faithfully according to the laws of his country. What, then, was implied in this new demand, which the freshly awakened 'social conscience' made of us and which has led to a distinction being drawn between 'mere' morality and a 'social' sense?

Primarily, it was doubtless a praiseworthy appeal that we should carry our thinking further than we had been in the habit of doing, that in our actions and our attitude we should take into consideration the situation and the problems of *all* the members of our society. In order, however, fully to understand what was meant by this, we must go back to the situation as it was when the 'social question' first became the subject of public discussion. This, in the middle of the last century, was, roughly speaking, a situation in which both political discussion and the taking of political decisions were confined to a small upper class; and there were good grounds for reminding this upper class that they were responsible for the fate of 'the most numerous and poorest' sections of the community, who themselves had little or no part in the government of the country. It was at that time—when the civilized world had discovered that there existed an 'underworld', which it felt itself called upon to 'raise', if it were not to be engulfed by it, and before the era of modern democracy and universal suffrage—that 'social' came to assume the meaning of the taking care of those who were incapable of grasping where their own interests lay—a concept which seems somewhat of an anachronism in an age when it is the masses who wield political power.

Side by side with this challenge to deal with problems of whose existence many had until then been unaware, there was, however, another, though kindred, school of thought, which drew a distinction between the necessity for 'social' thinking and conduct and the demands of the traditionally accepted ethical standards. The rules of the latter referred to the concrete and recognized situation in which a man found himself, and prescribed the things he should in bounden duty do or refrain from doing, regardless of the consequences. (A man, for example, did not lie or cheat, even though it might be to his or someone else's advantage that he should do so.) But the demand for 'social' thinking contained also the demand that we should consciously take into consideration even the very remote consequences of our actions and should order our conduct accordingly.

In this respect the demand for social conduct differed fundamentally from the traditionally accepted tenets of morality and justice, which, on principle, expect a man to give due consideration only to those consequences of his actions which in normal circumstances would be readily apparent to him; from this it easily followed that a man came to regard it as desirable that he should be instructed as to what he should or could do in any given case by someone endowed with greater knowledge and judgment than himself. This whole conception of social conduct is most closely linked, therefore, with a desire for a comprehensive blueprint of the social scene as a whole and a code of social conduct based upon it in accordance with a uniform and orderly plan. Implicit in this conception is also the desire to see all individual activity directed towards defined 'social' aims and tasks and subordinated to the interests of the 'community'. These tasks and aims may or may not be recognizable to the individual, but they will not, in any case, be achieved if the individual, even though his actions may consistently be governed by the traditional rules of conduct and justice, devotes his activities solely to the promotion of his own aspirations.

As long as forty years ago, the Cologne sociologist, Leopold von Wiese, drew attention to this somewhat peculiar interpretation of the social idea. In an essay published in January 1919¹ he remarked: 'Only those who were young men in the "social age"—the decades immediately before the war—can appreciate how strong was the inclination to regard the social sphere as a substitute for the religious. In those days there existed a dramatic manifestation—the social pastors. Even the philosophers fell under their spell. One particularly loquacious gentleman wrote a voluminous book, entitled *The Social Question in the Light of*

¹ *Der Liberalismus in Vergangenheit und Zukunft*, Berlin, 1917, p. 115.

Philosophy. . . In the meanwhile, throughout Europe, and particularly in Germany, social work had been crowned with a halo. Rationally assessed, the relative value of all social policies and charitable activities is very considerable; but their limitations must be very clearly recognized. To be "social" is not the same as being good or "righteous in the eyes of the Lord".

That this use of the word 'social' instead of simply saying 'moral' constitutes a complete change, indeed, almost a complete reversal, of its original meaning becomes apparent only when we go back some two hundred years to the era in which the concept of society was first discovered—or at any rate first became the subject of scientific discussion—and ask ourselves what, exactly, it was supposed to denote. It was, of course, introduced to describe that order of human relationships which had developed spontaneously, as distinct from the deliberate organization of the State. We still use the word in its original sense when we talk about 'social forces' or 'social structures', such as language and customs, or rights that have gradually come to be recognized in contrast to rights that have been deliberately granted; and the object thereof was to show that these things were not the creations of an individual will, but the unforeseen results of the haphazard activities of countless individuals and generations. The truly social in this sense is, of its very nature, anonymous, non-rational and not the result of logical reasoning, but the outcome of a supra-individual process of evolution and selection, to which the individual, admittedly, makes his contribution, but the component parts of which cannot be mastered by any one single intelligence.

It came to be realized that there existed forces working quite independently of the aspirations of mankind, and that the combination of their activities gave birth to structures which furthered the endeavours of the individual, even though they had not been designed for the purpose; and it was this realization that led to the introduction of the concept of society, as distinct from the deliberately created and directed State.

How quickly the meaning of the word has changed until it has been transformed almost into the very opposite of its original meaning, becomes clear when we consider what it denotes in the very frequently used phrase, 'the social order'. This phrase *can*, of course, be used exclusively in the sense of something created spontaneously *by* society itself. Mostly, however, the word 'social' in this connection denotes nothing more than something or other *connected with* the community, if not, indeed, primarily the only sort of order which so many people are capable of envisaging, namely, a social structure which has been forcibly

imposed, as it were, on the community from without. How few there are today who understand Ortega y Gasset's dictum that 'order is not a pressure imposed upon society from without, but an equilibrium which is set up from within'.

If we are content to designate as social not only those co-ordinating forces which come into being as the result of the independent activities of the individual in the community, but also everything else which has in any way anything to do with the community, then the whole essential difference becomes completely obliterated. There then remains little or nothing in life which is not 'social' in one sense or another, and the word becomes, to all practical intents, meaningless. It is therefore high time that these various meanings were sorted out. Let us for the moment adhere to the meaning 'peculiar to society' or 'arising out of a specifically social process'—the sense in which we use it when speaking of social structures and social forces. This is a sense in which we have urgent need of the word, and the true sense, which I should like to see reserved for it. It is obviously quite different from the sense in which we use it in such phrases as 'social awareness', 'social conscience', 'social responsibility', 'social activities', 'social welfare', 'social policy', 'social legislation' or 'social justice', or from the other sense implicit in the terms 'social insurance', 'social rights' or 'social control'. One of the most astonishing, albeit most familiar, combinations of this kind is 'social democracy'—I should very much like to know what aims of a democracy can be said to be not social, and why! That, however, is by the way.

The really important point is, that all these combinations have but little to do with the specific character of social forces, and that, in particular, the difference between that which has developed spontaneously and that which has been deliberately organized by the State has completely disappeared. In so far as 'social' is not taken to mean merely 'communal', the word, obviously, should mean either 'in the interest of society' or 'in accordance with the will of society', i.e., of the majority, or sometimes perhaps 'an obligation on society' as such, *vis-à-vis* the relatively less fortunate minority. I do not propose here to discuss the question why the rather indefinite word 'society' should be preferred to such precise and concrete terms as 'the people', 'the nation' or 'the citizens of a State', although it is these latter that are meant. The important thing, to me, is that in all these uses the word 'social' *presupposes* the existence of known and common aims behind the activities of a community, *but does not define them*. It is simply assumed that 'society' has certain concrete tasks that are known to all and are acknowledged by all, and that 'society' should direct the endeavours of its individual members

to the accomplishment of these tasks. 'Society' thus assumes a dual personality: it is firstly a thinking, collective entity with aspirations of its own that are different from those of the individuals of whom it is composed; and secondly, by identifying it with them, it becomes the personification of the views held on these social aspirations by certain individuals who claim to be endowed with a more profound insight or to possess a stronger sense of moral values. Frequently enough a speaker will claim that his own views and aspirations are 'social', while those of his opponent are brushed aside as 'anti-social'. There is, I think, no need for me further to emphasize that, when 'social' is used in the sense of 'serving the interests of society', it certainly raises a problem, but provides no solution. It concedes precedence to certain values to which society should adhere, but it does not describe them. Were the word strictly used in this sense, there would, I think, be but little objection. In point of fact, however, not only does it compete in many ways with existing ethical values, but it has also undermined their prestige and influence. Indeed, I am coming more and more to the belief that the substitution of this rubber word, 'social', to denote values we have always described as 'moral', may well be one of the main causes of the general degeneration of moral sense in the world.

The first great difference, at which I have already hinted, stems from the fact that the tenets of ethical behaviour consist of abstract, general rules which we are called upon to obey, regardless of what the consequences may be and very often without our even knowing why it is desirable that we should act in one particular way and in no other. These rules have never been invented, and no one, so far, has ever succeeded in producing a rational foundation of the whole of the existing system of ethical behaviour. As I see them, these rules are genuine social growths, the results of a process of evolution and selection, the distilled essence of experiences of which we ourselves have no knowledge. They have acquired general authority because the groups in which they held sway have proved themselves to be more effective than other groups. Their claim to be observed is not based upon the fact that the individual is aware of the consequences of disregarding them, but they exemplify a recognition of the fundamental fact that the majority of these concrete consequences are beyond our ken and that our actions will not lead to constant conflict with our fellow men only when they are guided by rules which pay due regard to the circumstances under which we commit them. But it is against the very nature of *all* these rules of ethical behaviour and justice that this bogus rationalism to which the concept of 'social interest' owes its origin, transgresses. Rationalism refuses to be

guided by anything it does not completely understand; it reserves to itself the right to decide what is desirable in each individual case, because it claims to be fully aware of all possible consequences; it refuses to obey any rules, but insists on pursuing definite, concrete aims. But by so doing, it transgresses against every fundamental principle of ethical behaviour, for agreement regarding the importance of any aspiration is only possible if it is reached in unison and in accordance with accepted general rules which themselves are impervious to rationalization. Thus, by undermining respect for rules and 'plain' ethical behaviour, this demand for 'social behaviour' is destroying the foundations on which it is itself built.

This dependence of the conception of what is 'social' on ethical rules which are not explicitly stated or simply disregarded is shown most clearly by the fact that it leads to an extension of the concept of justice to fields to which it is not applicable.² The demand for a just or more equal distribution of the world's goods has today become one of the primary 'social' demands. The application of the concept of justice to distribution requires, however, reward according to merit or desert, and merit cannot be measured by achievement but only by the extent to which known rules of ethics have been observed. Reward according to merit thus presupposes that we know all the circumstances which led to a particular performance. But in a free society we allow the individual to decide himself about his actions because we do not know those very circumstances which determine how meritorious his achievement is. It is therefore necessary in a free society to reward the individuals according to the value of the services actually rendered to their fellows, a value which has often little relation to the subjective merit they have earned in rendering them. The concept of justice has application only in so far as all will be equally rewarded according to the value of the objective results of their efforts and not according to someone's judgment of the merit they have thereby acquired. The demand for the latter, for a reward according to merit, is a demand which cannot be met in a free society, because we cannot know or isolate all the circumstances which determine merit. The attempt at a partial application of the principle of reward according to merit can, however, lead only to general injustice, because it would mean that different people were rewarded

² The extent to which the misuse of the word 'social' has been pushed in this connection seems at last to have provoked protests in other quarters; and it was with great satisfaction that, shortly after delivering this lecture, I read in a book review by Charles Curran in *The Spectator* of July 6, 1958 (p. 8) the sentence: 'Social Justice is a semantic fraud from the same stable as People's Democracy.'

according to different principles. Such abuse of the concept of justice must ultimately lead to a destruction of the sense of justice.

In reality, things in this connection are even worse. Since in questions of distribution there exists no yardstick of justice, other and less noble feelings inevitably and unexpectedly insinuate themselves when decisions come to be taken. That the social concept in this context is only too frequently used as a cloak for envy, that a sentiment which John Stuart Mill has rightly described as the most anti-social of all passions,³ should be able to make its appearance, decked in the beautifying form of an ethical demand, is one of the worst consequences for which we have to thank the unthinking use of the word 'social'.

The third point in which the predominance of the idea of the 'social' has had an anti-ethical effect is the destruction of the feeling of personal responsibility to which it has led. Originally, the appeal to the social sense was expected to lead to a more widely spread acceptance of personal responsibility. But the confusion that arose between the further aims to which the individual man should aspire, between the taking-into-consideration of social repercussions and social—in the sense of collective—behaviour, and between the moral obligations of the individual to the community and his claims upon it, has gradually undermined that sense of personal responsibility which is the foundation of all ethics. To this, all kinds of intellectual movements have made their contributions, into which I cannot go in any detail, but which, like 'social psychology', in most cases sail under the 'social' flag. Indeed, there seems to me to be very little doubt that this whole process which has thoroughly confused the issue as regards personal responsibility, absolving the individual on the one hand of all responsibility as regards his immediate environment and, on the other hand, placing upon him vague and undefined responsibilities for things that are not clearly apparent, has, by and large, led to a marked diminution of man's sense of personal responsibility. Without placing upon the individual any new and clear obligations which he has to fulfil by his own personal endeavours, it has expunged the boundaries of all responsibility and has become a standing invitation to make further demands or to do good at the expense of others.

Fourthly, with their emphasis on concrete aims and on the claims of expediency, these 'social movements' have hindered more than they have promoted the very essential emergence of genuine principles of political ethics. All ethics and justice are based, surely, on the application of general, abstract principles to concrete cases; and the dictum that the

³ John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, 1859 (p. 10).

end justifies the means has for a long time been justly regarded as a negation of all that is ethical. It is, however, just this that is, in fact, very often meant by the plea, so frequently heard nowadays, that due consideration must be given to 'the social aspect'. As regards the genuine products of social evolution, such as justice and ethics, it is claimed on behalf of the social will of the moment that it is justified in neglecting those principles in favour of its own immediate aims.

I have, unfortunately, insufficient space to go in any detail into the reasons why the rules of political ethics, like all other rules of ethics, are, of their nature, long-term principles, and for that reason must not be judged on the evidence of their effect upon an individual case. More important from our point of view is the fact that it is only as the result of a long and unfettered process of evolution that these rules are able to come into being and to acquire authority. Only when adherence to a principle comes, as a matter of course, to be regarded as more important than success in any individual case, and only when we acknowledge that the use of compulsion is justifiable solely when it is applied in accordance with general principles, and never when it is used as an expedient in the pursuit of a concrete aim, can we hope that a general principle of political ethics will gradually come to be accepted by all. Any 'social' code of ethics must be based upon rules which are binding on the collective behaviour of society, and to me it seems that we are further from a recognition of this fact today than we were in the past.

For there certainly *was* a time when a conscious sense of what was just and right imposed ethical limits on the use of compulsion by society for its own ends. The ideal of the freedom of the individual was one, and, indeed, the most important, of these ethical rules of political behaviour which, at one time, enjoyed universal recognition. But it is just this ideal that those who march under the 'social' standard have been attacking with ever increasing vehemence. The ideals of freedom and independence, of being answerable to one's own conscience and of respect for the individual, have all gone by the board under the dominant pressure of the conception of the 'social'. But in reality, it is the nurturing of the spontaneous forces of freedom that truly constitutes a service to society—to that which has grown, as distinct from that which has been deliberately created—and to the further strengthening of the creative forces of the social process. What we have experienced under the banner of the social concept has been a metamorphosis from service *to* society to a demand for an absolute control *of* society, from a demand for the subordination of the State to the free forces of society to a demand for the subordination of society to the State. If the human intellect is

allowed to impose a preconceived pattern on society, if our powers of reasoning are allowed to lay claim to a monopoly of creative effort (and hence to recognition only of premeditated results), then we must not be surprised if society, as such, ceases to function as a creative force. And in particular we must not be surprised if, from a policy based upon the ideal of material equality, there emerges a mass society, admittedly more thoroughly organized, but devoid of any spontaneous articulation. True service to the social concept is not rendered by the imposition of absolute authority or leadership, nor does it even consist of common endeavour towards a common aim, but rather of the contribution that each and every one of us makes to a process which is greater than any one of us, from which there constantly emerges something new, something unforeseen, and which can flourish only in freedom. In the last resort we find ourselves constrained to repudiate the ideal of the social concept because it has become the ideal of those who, on principle, deny the existence of a true society and whose longing is for the artificially constructed and the rationally controlled. In this context, it seems to me that a great deal of what today professes to be social is, in the deeper and truer sense of the word, thoroughly and completely anti-social.