



JOHN PETROV PLAMENATZ

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1912–1975

I

JOHN PLAMENATZ left his native country, Montenegro, in 1917 when he was five years old. He was taken by his parents first to Paris and then to Vienna. In 1919 he was sent to school in England where he attended Clayesmore School in Dorset before going up to Oriel College, Oxford. Illness in his final year of Greats led to an Aegrotat degree but in the following year, 1934, he took a First in the Honour School of Modern History. In 1936 he became a Fellow of All Souls, to which College he returned after the war. In 1943 he married Marjorie Hunter. For sixteen years from 1951 he was a Fellow of Nuffield College and was elected to the British Academy in 1962. In 1967 he succeeded Sir Isaiah Berlin and returned to All Souls as Chichele Professor of Social and Political Theory.

II

It was as a social and political theorist rather than as a political philosopher (if any such distinction can sensibly be made) that John Plamenatz would have described himself. He did not work out or present any schematic theories or proposals of his own. His special skill, unrivalled among his contemporaries, lay in the detailed exposition, clarification, and evaluation of the work of the major figures in the history of political thought—the English Utilitarians, Locke, Rousseau, Hegel, Weber, and Marx. Even in his more conceptual writing—in expounding the idea of obligation or spelling out the implications of different theories of democracy—his own conclusions tended to arise from a process of collision with and reflection upon the ideas of others. They would be inserted as the argument moved along, often in the form of some pointed observation that lifted the eye from the page of the text to some general feature of social organization or human experience ('Where custom reigns the fact that it changes is not much noticed'). Frequently these summarizing or generalizing remarks were used to point some distinction between concepts ('Many people who have not shared our concern for liberty of conscience . . . have put a high value on independence of spirit').

Plamenatz's first published work *Consent, Freedom and Obligation* appeared in 1938. On his own account it was influenced by the work of H. A. Prichard and E. F. Carritt. Much has since been written on freedom and on obligation, but less about consent. Plamenatz here took consent as his primary concern and he returned to the topic later when he came to write about Locke's political theory. In a characteristic appendix to the second edition of his early work (published in 1963) Plamenatz treated his own ideas with the same detachment that he brought to the work of others. His view of consent had, he thought, been too narrow. He had related it too closely to the notions of giving permissions and expressing wishes. One who votes in an election for a candidate who is not elected does not, he pointed out, wish the winner of the election to do anything at all but it must be possible to say that he consents to the winner's authority if the election is a free election. How far then, he went on, could the obligation to give obedience to government be based upon the fact of consent. In his later work *Man and Society* Plamenatz denied that this could be said to be the case in constituted political systems. Locke's proposition that government rests on consent confused, he thought, the acceptable view that no one could initially be brought within the bounds of society without his own consent with the false belief that in a constituted society no one could be obliged to obey without having consented to obey. 'For', he said, 'where government already exists and protects men's rights they ought to obey it whether or not they have consented to do so.' Perhaps here he drew too sharp a distinction between consent and the protection of rights. There seemed to be envisaged a possible society in which there were no elections but in which the government continued to maintain the rule of law and the protection of civil rights. Such a society is almost impossible to conceive since an election is more than the act of voting. It includes a bundle of civil rights such as freedom of organization, public meeting, and the communication of ideas. So a society in which elections and the consent that goes with them did not exist would *ipso facto* be a society in which many of the main civil rights were *not* protected. The solution to this difficulty, as Plamenatz had suggested in 1938, perhaps lies in equating government by consent simply with 'responsible' government, or a system in which rulers consent to be removed at periodic free elections. On this view the Lockian proposition about consent as a necessary condition of obedience seemed more plausible. In insisting

that those who take part in free elections consent to the authority of the winners Plamenatz in effect came to treat consent stipulatively, relating it to obedience in something like the way that promise-making is linked to promise-keeping, rather than taking consent to involve internal dispositions or mental acts of willing, wishing, or permitting. Students of civil disobedience, or alienation, or tactical voting have in fact suggested that in many societies voters can and do vote without in some psychological sense 'consenting' to the authority of the government that emerges from their activities.¹ Plamenatz however did not believe that consenting to authority or electing and rejecting governments committed the participants absolutely to whatever might be done by the winners or rulers. So he was in no way obliged to hold that those who freely consent and vote in elections are precluded by their actions from taking part, in appropriate circumstances, in civil disobedience. Civil disobedience however was one of the few major topics on which Plamenatz (so far as I know) published nothing, though he discussed it in seminars on a number of occasions.

In 1949 Plamenatz published an edition of Mill's *Utilitarianism* together with an introductory essay on the English Utilitarians. His treatment of Mill was not noticeably sympathetic. He was critical of Mill's claim to rest his anti-paternalist libertarian principles on utilitarian grounds. Mill's free speech principle he also treated roughly, suggesting that no fundamental distinction could be drawn between governmental interferences with speech and with action, in the way that Mill suggested in the essay on Liberty. 'There are', he wrote, 'a number of reasons which make it more expedient to control men's actions rather than their opinions . . . Economy is the true utilitarian explanation of why it is better to control men's actions rather than their beliefs.' About utilitarianism in general Plamenatz thought that it suited the English character. He also thought (or said that he thought) that the English habitually deceived themselves both about their vices and virtues. I do not know if he classified utilitarianism as an English virtue or an English vice.

In the 1950s Plamenatz's work might be seen as falling into three areas. 1952 and 1954 saw the publication of books on *The Revolutionary Movement in France 1815-71* and *German Marxism and Russian Communism*. He also (possibly under the

¹ A point made by F. Siegler in 'Plamenatz on Consent and Obligation', *Philosophical Quarterly* (1968), p. 256.

influence of Nuffield College) acquired an interest in electoral theories and theories of Democracy. But he continued in his lectures and writings to explore the work of the classical political writers. One of his most vigorous polemical articles appeared in *Political Studies* in 1957.¹ In it he attacked the ingenious reassessment of Hobbes offered by Howard Warrender. Warrender's book² on Hobbes's theory of obligation sought to reassess the traditional view of Hobbes as basing obligation on the security offered to self-interested men by absolute allegiance to a sovereign able to offer them protection against the prospect of violent bodily death. Warrender argued that without the backing of the law of nature acknowledged as a fundamental obligation and possibly a Divine command, mere self-interest could not secure the degree of obedience stipulated by Hobbes in *Leviathan* as necessary to the maintenance of society. Plamenatz argued that no such assumption was needed. Men were obliged to obey, he said, on Hobbes's view of obligation when they were so situated in relation to some other person that if they saw their situation clearly they could not help but choose to do what he required of them. That being so, a sufficiently powerful sovereign in a Godless world could create the requisite degree of obligation without the backing of divine commands or fundamental moral laws. The argument (which continued)³ was partly against Warrender and partly against Hobbes. This was characteristic. Hobbes was for the purpose in hand a participant in the argument about the basis of obligation. In many cases he might have said what he should not have said, or he might have spoken inconsistently. Moreover, what he meant to say could in the main be understood from an examination of the text of *Leviathan* and *De Cive*. Plamenatz did not deny that social history was relevant to the understanding of political theory. But he reserved the right to leave it to others. ('Is there', he said, 'to be no division of labour?') Thus when he came in 1963 to publish his study of social and political theory from Machiavelli to Marx,⁴ he acted on the belief that to understand what a man is saying we do not in general need to know why he is saying it or what his purpose may have been or what his circumstances were. Some political theorists would no doubt

¹ 'Mr. Warrender's Hobbes.' 1957 *Political Studies*, p. 295.

² *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes: his Theory of Obligation*, 1957.

³ See Warrender, 'The Place of God in Hobbes's Philosophy: A Reply to Mr. Plamenatz.' 1960 *Political Studies*, p. 48.

⁴ *Man and Society* (1963).

deny this. They would say that to know what Hobbes or Locke or Marx really meant we must know the historical context and the social conditions in which the words were written. Plamenatz held that at least within a certain range—in the use of terms such as ‘obligation’, ‘law’, ‘rights’, ‘consent’, and ‘liberty’—time and place could for most purposes be ignored.

In *Man and Society* something can also be gleaned of Plamenatz’s view of the wider role of the political theorist as distinct from that of the critical expositor of the history of ideas. Three years earlier he had set out explicitly some thoughts about the nature and purposes of political theory.¹ In the early 1960s it was said by some that political philosophy was quiescent and possibly dead. This remark, being coined and circulated by a sociologist, deserved to be treated with suspicion. But certainly some political theorists, breathless perhaps in the presence of the natural sciences and of various kinds of positivism, had urged that the job of the political philosopher could be no more than to sort out confusions in the language of political theory and political science. Plamenatz rejected this view. Political philosophy, understood in this sense, would not be likely, he thought, to be important for long. There were two dangers inherent in this ‘tidying up’ notion of the discipline. In the first place the time might soon come when the job would be done and the political scientist at least would need no more help from the philosopher. (This was perhaps an underestimation of the continuous creation process in the production of conceptual confusion by modern political science.) But secondly those who expelled nonsense or exposed confusion in the doctrines of past thinkers might assume too readily that where they had seen nonsense there was no sense that they had not seen.

Plamenatz did not, however, rest his belief in the value of political theory on any benefits that it might confer on the textually or linguistically confused. He was willing to say that at a certain level of generality it had a commendatory and hortatory role. In earlier times political theorizing had in the last resort rested upon religious or metaphysical beliefs. Men had believed in equality because they had believed themselves equally sons of God. If they lost their belief in God they might cease to believe in equality. Values such as equality, freedom, and rights generally, together with their opposites had become,

¹ ‘The Use of Political Theory.’ 1960 *Political Studies*, p. 37. (Reprinted in *Political Philosophy* (ed. A. Quinton 1967).)

therefore, the subject matter of the political philosopher. His job, typically, was to explain and relate principles and values, to arrange them in a proper hierarchical order, and to work at making them consistent. He also might have the practical aim of inventing, refining, and advocating principles. So inevitably political theorists must come to be regarded as preachers and propagandists. They are people who have discovered or who believe they have discovered how men should live and they will not be listened to unless they speak with conviction. If such a notion of political philosophy made it a form of indoctrination, then so it was. But there was no monopoly of indoctrinators.

In the present climate of political theory it is perhaps less necessary than it was in the 1950s and 1960s to argue the entitlement of theorists to propound substantive conclusions. Such conclusions seem necessarily to follow, though they may not be obvious, when acknowledged general principles are weighed against each other and applied to particular fact situations. Plamenatz did not elaborate his theories about the relationship of theory to practice, but he forwarded them by example. Two such examples come to mind. In 1957 in a paper contributed to a symposium on electoral studies¹ he attacked the notion that psephological discoveries about voting behaviour had outdated liberal presuppositions about free elections as embodiments of rational choice. Political sociologists had, he thought, been too modest on the voters' account. To be able publicly to give plausible reasons was not always evidence of the capacity to make wise choices. The reasoning that lies behind choices, he said, is often made in a private language which the chooser never learns to translate into words intelligible to others. When the voter is suddenly called upon to put his thoughts into the public language he is apt to make big mistakes or even to stop thinking. Elections, he added, were important not only for what happened at them but for what happens because of them.

A second example concerns the relationship between theories about equality and the policy of enforcing laws against discrimination. In 'Privacy and Laws against Discrimination'² Plamenatz argued that although discrimination might be objectionable apart from significant inequalities of opportunity arising from it, it ought not to be forbidden by law except

¹ Later published as 'Electoral Studies and Democratic Theory: a British View'. (1958) *Political Studies*, p. 1.

² Delivered to the Association for Legal and Social Philosophy in 1974.

where it led to such inequalities. The right to privacy, a right highly valued in Western countries, is in essence, he pointed out, a right to discriminate. The cases in which privacy and liberty should take precedence over equality and those in which such precedence should be enforced by legal sanctions are obviously not matters into which philosophers have any privileged insight. Nevertheless Plamenatz's bringing to bear of relevant general principles and the indication of inconsistencies or insufficiencies of justification standing behind existing political arrangements could not fail to have implications for political policy-making.

III

Though he defended the idea of political theory as a form of preaching, the notion of Plamenatz as a preacher or indoctrinator would have seemed bizarre to anyone who knew him. He was not a man who sought platforms or occasions for advancing his views. He did not play an active part in the administration of the University or of the Social Studies Faculty. Yet on occasions when he felt either a political or an academic principle to be at stake he could be forcible and even passionate in defending it.

In his relations with his colleagues both senior and junior he combined to an unusual degree self-sufficiency and a total absence of self-importance. (As a very junior research fellow I remember being rebuked by him for using his surname in a way that he felt to be unduly deferential.) He did not depend upon his colleagues for stimulation, but he responded to criticism or discussion of his work with courtesy and an unaffected eagerness to assess its impact rather than to defend his own views. This characteristic appeared very clearly in seminars. He would frequently in the aftermath of a discussion wonder whether he had been unfair to some view which he felt that he might not have perfectly understood. Sometimes he thought that he himself might have failed to express his meaning clearly and one might receive several days later a letter setting out the points at issue in careful detail. As a critic of the work of others he would always acknowledge and underline what was true before showing what he thought false. About movements, groups, and nationalities he could be critical or amused but I do not recollect his ever engaging in condemnation or denigration of individuals.

As a scholar, the width and variety of John Plamenatz's writings were unequalled by any political theorist of his generation. At the time of his death in February 1975 he had recently completed a major study of Marxist social and political thought (*Karl Marx's Philosophy of Man*). Two years earlier his *Democracy and Illusion* explored the implications for democracy of the ideas of utilitarians, anarchists, Marxists, and capitalists. In 1970 he published a short analytical study of *Ideology*. Perhaps these, together with his Oxford lectures *Man and Society*¹ could be said to represent the core of his work. But over the years few of the major themes of political and social theory escaped his attention. The relations between freedom, authority, and equality were his special concern but he also wrote on punishment,² political interests,³ public opinion,⁴ participation, élite theory, and colonialism.⁵ The manner and execution of it were peculiar to him. In *Man and Society* he began a discussion of the philosophy of David Hume with the words 'Legend has it that a Dutch Admiral once tied a broom to the mast of his flagship. If philosophers had emblems Hume's would surely be a broom. Not that he liked to boast or threaten. He was the most polite as well as the most ruthless of critics; he used his broom deftly and quietly raising little dust but he used it rigorously.' The ideal was one to which Plamenatz aspired and had the remark been made of his own writing, which it with justice might have been, the compliment would have been one with which John Plamenatz would have been well pleased.

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¹ Other writings in the history of political ideas were 'The Legacy of Philosophical Radicalism' (in *Law and Opinion in England in the Twentieth Century*, ed. M. Ginsberg 1959), 'Pascal and Rousseau', *Political Studies* (1962), p. 10; Introduction to Hobbes's *Leviathan* (1962), Introduction to *Readings from Liberal Writers* (1965); 'Ce Qui Ne Signifie Autre Chose Sinon Qu'On Le Forcera D'Être Libre' *Annales de Philosophie Politique*, Vol. v (1965) (Reprinted in *Hobbes and Rousseau*, ed. M. Cranston and R. S. Peters, 1972); and 'History as the Realisation of Freedom' (in *Hegel's Political Philosophy*, ed. Z. A. Pelczynski, 1971).

² 'Responsibility, Blame and Punishment' (in *Philosophy, Politics and Society*, 3rd series, ed. P. Laslett and W. G. Runciman, 1967).

³ 'Interests', *Political Studies* (1954), p. 1.

⁴ 'Public Opinion and Political Consciousness', *Political Studies* (1975), p. 220.

⁵ *On Alien Rule and Self-Government* (1960).