

CHAPTER XI

THEORIES AND THEIR USES

A Matter of Status

There are indeed so many ways of thinking. Each of us may have several of his own. In our study of the social cosmos, if it is to be realistic, we must be careful to discriminate between what with us is a matter of conviction and what a mere matter of convention; and between those convictions born of observation and reason and those that we hold as articles of faith. And we may try likewise to distinguish between these several possibilities in the status of what others have to say. Indeed it may be opportune to reflect here a little further on the variety of the purposes to which, in whatever sort of society, men's propensity for theorising may be seen being put. It is a variety surprisingly wide.

Consider a familiar ceremonial. They stand there, a man and a maid, before a priest, in the presence of a congregation. What can be seen now to happen is indeed *seen* to happen. What results is less easily 'seen'. The link is established. The pair are joined in matrimony, in the sight of God. They are made man and wife, in the sight of the law. They become a married couple, in the eyes of good society. In crude fact, they stand there very much as before. To one who had no notion of what legal theory was, it could mean nothing to say that something had happened in the sight of the law. We all however know what legal theory is, and what socio-cultural theory is, even if we do not call these sorts of theory by their names. In crude fact, the pair are what they were before; but in socio-cultural theory they are a married couple. Some day there may be a divorce, but then the link will not be severed as with an axe, for the link is anyhow not a physical link. It is a theoretical link, or several such together in one: there are the spiritual link, the legal link, the social link.

The very word 'link' is, of course, a metaphor, taken from the world of fact for use in the world of theory. The legal link is not merely a link; it is distinctively a legal link, or as the Romans put it, a *vinculum juris*.

Or take a different occasion. Men are standing about in white, with others looking on. In the eyes of a barbarian, who knows nothing of games (those manifestations of civilisation), they are just men standing about in white. But in the sight of cricket theory, they are more than that. They may be merely men playing cricket. They may be two clubs enjoying a 'friendly'; they may be counties deciding the result of the championship, or, who knows, a Test Match may be in progress with commentaries being heard throughout the world.

Or again, in a certain building, with certain preliminaries, a certain person utters the words 'la Reine le veult', and so at last a Bill becomes law, and what until now was permissible or not permissible as the case might be, becomes not permissible or permissible as the case may be. What happens in fact receives its meaning from the theory of the occasion, and the occasions of the marriage, the cricket and the legislation are different sorts of occasion. Yet you and I take it all in our stride: for no, we are not barbarians; we are the cultivators of theories.

Sorts of Theories

There are at least three ways in which two answers may differ. They may be different answers to the same question, or answers to different questions of the same kind, or they may be answers to questions of different kinds. All theories may be seen as answers to possible questions, and it is important to notice into what different kinds the theories may fall.

Suppose that at some wedding the ring had been mislaid, and that they made do without it. Says one: 'I have a theory that the ring does not matter.' Says another: 'I have a theory that the ring is indispensable.' These two have each his personal theory as to what is the orthodox theory and whether it be legally orthodox, or orthodox also in the theory of the Church.

'I have a theory,' says one, 'that the apple leaving the tree is

pulled down to the ground.' 'I,' says another, 'have a theory that it is pushed.' Each has his personal theory, not in this case as to what is the orthodox legal, social or religious theory, but as to what is that physical reality which the physicists are perennially out to explore. In this case the theorist answers a different kind of question, not a question as to the requirements of the law, but a question as to the nature of the universe.

An important activity these days is meteorological forecasting. A body of theory has been progressively built up in the light of which anticipations are hazarded with respect to the morrow's weather. The forecasting is not distorted by the wishes of those who do it, and their theory is solely concerned with how changes in the weather come about. A hardly less important activity is business forecasting, which comparably depends upon theories as to how things in the world of business come about.

At the card table one would sometimes like to know in which of two invisible hands there lies a certain card. If one is to make the best of one's opportunities, one may 'place' the card where, within the range of comparable possibilities indicated as relevant by the 'bidding', one would most like to find it, and one then proceeds on the theory that it in fact is there. Here we see yet another kind of theory. Investments in stocks and shares are made on the theory that particular securities are more likely to rise than to fall, and the particular investor may at the same time make hedging investments on the theory that prices may move another way. Life is largely like that. We proceed not upon certainties, but upon theories as to what *may* happen, more likely than not—though sometimes indeed not even that, for there is such a thing as backing a forlorn hope.

What makes for success in a battle is the sufficiently clear understanding, by enough of those engaged under a single command, of the theory on which on their side the battle is being fought. The Commander-in-Chief, having 'placed' certain opposing forces where he would expect to find them, proceeds on the theory that they indeed are there, and on a theory as to how to make the best of the situation. During World War II, co-operation with the U.S.A. made us familiar with the expression 'the overall strategic concept'. What was

this but the theory on which the victory was to be fought for? Two kinds of theories are here involved; those of meteorology and the like, which aid the understanding of the conditions in which the war is being fought; and those which one may call practitioners' theories, which provide a doctrinal basis for a common programme for those whose combined activities must bring the victory.

A layman in such concerns may confess to being uncertain as to how far what is known as 'economic theory' comprises elements of the quasi-meteorological and, on the other hand, elements of the battle-winning type of theory. When we differentiate Marxist economics, liberal economics and socialist economics, it is because, different sorts of victory being fought for, different sorts of theory are entertained.

Observe little children in the road. If theirs is a game you yourself remember playing, you are in no difficulty; but otherwise what you have to divine is the theory of whatever game theirs is. And if you are a social anthropologist observing the rituals of some hitherto unvisited tribe, your question will be the same one—what is the big idea? What is the underlying theory? What do they think they are at? And among anthropologists each may have his personal theory as to what is in fact the theory underlying what is happening.

Sorts of Orthodoxy

It will be seen that theories on which battles are fought, theories about the weather, and theories underlying tribal ceremonial, are theories of different kinds. To which of these three kinds, if to any of them, belongs the orthodoxy of religion, the orthodoxy of superstition, or the orthodoxy of the law? Assuming that a tribal ceremonial will not have been in the nature of a legal transaction, it is evident that what the anthropologists are discussing, and what, at the wedding, members of the congregation may be discussing, are points arising in different sorts of theory, and most of these sorts here considered have been different from the sort which seeks to explain the movement of the apple to the ground. Scientific theory is one thing. Practitioners' theory is another, and legal theory is again something different. And all these three are different again from the theory of the children's game.

Theories and Cosmos-study

What now has this to do with the subject of our main concern? Simply this. As in the playing by children of their game, so in the conduct by the statesmen of the business of the world: the onlooker either does, or does not, have an insight into what is going on. And what is going on in the case of the statesmen is no mere matter of men in white standing about with others looking on. It is men, often in black, sitting around a table and doing things which have a significance in the light of the relevant theory—or rather, the theories.

Which theories? Two in particular. One of these is the orthodox theory determining the nature of the world-wide diplomatic set-up, and in particular the place within it of the element known as international law; and the other is the theory of that international law which occupies that vital place within it.

Of these two theories the first is logically pre-legal, for it concerns and accounts for the presence, in the picture, of the element known as law. The theory accounting in this way for the existence of law cannot itself be legal theory. What kind then is it? Some kind, let us recognise, of socio-cultural theory. But we can make our answer more precise than that. For we can call it the theory of diplomatics, diplomatic theory, if we like. It is not scientific theory like that concerning the apple. It is not practitioners' theory like that of the Commander-in-Chief. It is more like that of the children's game. For it is as if mankind had one morning responded to the suggestion: 'Let's play sovereign states.'

Why Play Ball?

It is because if that ever did happen it was rather long ago that we in our day, having never not been engaged in the game, may have failed to recognise it as a game; and failed therefore to recognise the theoretical, artificial, non-natural basis on which it has all been going on. But, if we would follow with intelligence the course of events, we would do well so to recognise it, and, if we did not choose to call it diplomatic theory, then at least we should decide what else we would

wish to have it called. And similarly, in that domestic field within which courts of law and policemen have their place, the claims of law upon us have equally to be accounted for in terms not of fact, but of theory. That the law is binding upon us as citizens is true enough in the sense that it is a true statement of the orthodox theory, but only in that sense is it true. It is the orthodox formulation of a crucial point in the relevant pre-legal kind of socio-cultural theory, namely the theory of the constitution, without the sufficiently general acceptance of which the country could not function as it does, any more than the game can go on if the children no longer want to play.

Why Continue Playing Ball?

Why the children go on playing, why the country goes on functioning, and why the big world of diplomacy keeps moving on its traditional way—to these questions it is social psychology that must provide at least a large part of the answer. And the answer will to that extent be a matter of socio-psychological theory, analogous not to the legal, nor to the socio-cultural, but to the meteorological theories we have noticed before; but analogous only, be it noted, in as much as we have not in the social sciences quite as good reason as in the physical for assuming that the correct explanation, if we can find it, for what happens on one occasion and in one place is quite likely to serve for something similar having happened elsewhere at another time. Reasons why men do the same things now as formerly they did may not be the same reasons now as formerly, but this is not to say that theories of what they are doing will have changed; for what one does in the theory of the matter is one thing, one's reasons for doing it are another. One may of course theorise about one's reasons, but that again is a different story. We may all applaud on the theory that 'he's a jolly good fellow', though each with his own independent theory of what justifies the applause.

Why do the children keep on playing? Why does the country keep on functioning? People's reasons for going on doing the same things now may not be the same reasons now as formerly.

It is not as if we always were able to feel quite sure even of

our own reasons for keeping on behaving as we do. Sometimes we find ourselves looking around for new ones, yesterday's reasons having ceased to carry with us the conviction that once they did.

The Secret of Collective Happiness?

A happy society is one in which men have, or at any rate believe themselves to have, excellent, or at any rate good, or at any rate adequate, reasons for going on doing the things that the powers that be are expecting them to be going on doing. The captain expects his team to remain with him on the field. They know this: but is that the only reason why they remain? Even if no longer enjoying themselves, do they not feel, and indeed believe, or even believe themselves to *know*, that it is 'up to' them to remain?

Not all law-abiding citizens greatly enjoy their role as citizens. Yet it is not simply out of fear of being brought to book should they transgress the law that they continue to obey it. Most men believe, or even believe themselves to *know*, that it is 'up to' them to do so.

Most people at Christmas time *feel*, at least, that it is up to them to enter into the spirit of the occasion. With some, the propriety of their so doing may be a matter of conviction. With some, a matter merely of convention. Even little Willy, as he so carefully hangs up his stocking for Santa Claus to fill, may nowadays be doing it with his tongue so to say in his cheek. Is he bound to reveal to his Daddy that he now no longer takes literally the orthodox doctrine of the occasion, but is content, as well in the general interest as so obviously in his own, to accept, as his Daddy apparently does, the assumed reality of a Santa Claus, as the methodological premise for a co-operative enterprise in the pursuance of which a good time should be had by all?

Old Men's Wisdom

The question is, Just *how* good a time could it be if in the having of it all were to be motivated by the same coldly calculating selfregard as little Willy? Is it enough that no single member of the family should be so outwardly antisocial as so to say to walk off the field? Must not some at least of

the players be going on playing simply because they happen to like it? Must not some at least of the family be actually enjoying their Christmas? Must not some of them be sufficiently good citizens to be able to keep on as it were 'kidding' themselves that somehow they do at least half-believe in the reality of Santa Claus? No doubt, in the 'unconscious' of the harder-boiled among them, Freud's 'reality-principle' may be getting the better of that 'pleasure-principle' which would cling to the sweet old illusions of nursery days: but even the 'reality-principle' may deprecate the abandonment of a traditional ritual for which, even on strictly utilitarian principles, there may still be things to be said. The question however is, What becomes of the ritual if only on utilitarian grounds is anyone at all any longer taking part? There is a good deal of ritual in the collective living of the national life, just as there is in the collective observing of the family Christmas. In both cases there needs to be a general enough, and a generous enough, assent to the necessary half-dozen or so of shared assumptions. Not merely must most of the company join in singing 'For he's a jolly . . .', but some at least of them must look as if they meant it. And mean it indeed some if not most of them positively must. There is a mystique about nationhood, as there is about Christmas. And in the one case as in the other, mere mock-enthusiasm is, surely, not enough. There is a credal basis, a set of pre-requisite beliefs, social and political, if not also religious, for any successfully flourishing political system. Every living polity, from the most primitive to the most advanced, is dependent for its happiness on the continued acceptability, and prevalent acceptance, of its fundamental folklore. No portrayal, therefore, of things political will, if it means to be realistic, think to underplay the importance of myth. For the recognition of myth is not the same thing as its necessary repudiation. Little Willy need not cease to hang up his stocking. Some have used harsh names for what is required. The 'unmasking of ideologies' was Marx's idea. 'De-mythologising', in a different context, Bultmann's. Enough perhaps that we should ask, rather, from the adolescent political sceptic, that he re-evaluate, and with set intent strive to re-instate, the more socially and politically salutary of his myths. If the wise man is never too old

to enjoy a Christmas party, is it in the young man a sign of wisdom to despise the symbols which to his romantically patriotic neighbour still mean so much?

The Nursing of Necessary Beliefs

What gives to folklore its mystic potency is its relation not to the reality-, but to the pleasure-, principle, in the psyche of those whose outlook it conditions. If people are to half-believe it, it may be indispensable that some of them feel anyhow half-inclined to. They must be emotionally pre-disposed, in respect of its veredict, to give it the benefit of the doubt. Something thus depends on the inherent credibility of the goods and something on the credulity of the customer. Tell me that they are happy who believe in fairies and you have not thereby taught me to be happy, if alas I cannot possibly believe in fairies. As well might one congenitally deaf be exhorted to join a glee-club. Those who recommend religion as being good for the nerves do not make religious belief possible for the honest unbeliever. Mere playing at believing is not enough. And analogously, if everyone in the state were merely to be playing at belonging, paying mere lipservice to the national symbols, what sort of a state would it be? This is why, while 'propaganda' is, in Russia, provided for the sound-minded élite, attention is also given to 'agitation', for ensuring that deference to the national symbols shall not with the rank and file remain at the level of the lipservice which would not be enough.

At the moment when in Moscow in 1917 the Bolsheviks got control, the doctrines on which their new order would be erected were familiar to comparatively few. The fact that they are now more widely understood, and even more widely subscribed to, is not an accident. The question with them was not whether the young folk should be prepared beforehand for their role as citizens, but how. It would seem that, as was the practice in the medieval Church, to which Lenin had apparently given some study, there was accepted in Moscow the distinction between two levels of didactic presentation—the 'exoteric', aimed at the edification of the many (the undergraduates, as it were), and the 'esoteric', the austere quintessence of the matter, for consumption so to say at high table by the dons.

The Arts of the Possible

At high table level there will also, we may take it, be accepted a further important distinction: between the authentic, and the ostensible, methodologies of Soviet administrative, military and diplomatic practice. For if, in disposing of the content of their 'IN' tray, the Soviet leaders may profess themselves the people 'of a Book', it is hardly to be believed that they do in fact at all seriously rely on the sacred writings to prescribe for them a remedy for every social ailment which, as general practitioners, it may be incumbent on them empirically to treat. Nor, given that they are understood to see their overall problem so largely in terms of unremitting worldwide sociological strife, is it to be supposed that even at the level of general principles they would be any more content than were Engels and Lenin before them, to read their Clausewitz in anything short of the original.

Contrary to what might, by the 'undergraduates', be supposed, the 'code of the Politburo' does not assume that 'the Book' has all the answers or that practice must rest immediately upon 'the Book'. It means, on the contrary, that theory serves its purpose only as junior partner in the theory-and-practice firm. Which is of course the philosophy of all sensible men: life is an applied science only if the application of science is recognised as an art. What surgeon ever relied upon the theory of his craft to the disregard of that trained intuition which, as in a split second, tells him, in a novel situation, what novel thing to do. Afterwards, while the patient is recovering, he may theorise at leisure on why what he did was right. So doing, he will be bringing his theory up to date, obedient to the principle of the unity of theory and practice. On this analogy, the Marxists' unity-doctrine means simply the constant reformulation of theory to bring it abreast of the policy-changes demanded by the changing state of the global game. Experience first, explanation afterwards. The scientific theory is that of the observer and interpreter, the 'unity' doctrine that of the man of deeds.

The Opium of the Peoples' Democracies

At the exoteric level, dialectical materialism is not so much the answer to any particular questions as a standpoint for the

outright rejection of all sorts of possible answers inconvenient to the régime. For the rejection in particular, of all so-called 'metaphysical' explanations of reality, and of anything that might point to the need for independent speculation, other than what is methodologically pertinent to natural-scientific research.

Point number-one in the Soviet system of official teachings is the remarkable notion that what is being so dogmatically presented has peculiarly the authority of science. Not only does Soviet society purport to be making the moral breakthrough into a climate not poisoned by such passions as still are endemic in the pre-revolutionary types of social order: it might almost be understood as claiming also to have outlived the era of scientific doubt. Though the answers be even now not yet all of them known, the process which should presently produce them would seem already to be well advanced. It is not systematically admitted that, not only is science essentially tentative in its conclusions, but there also must ever remain questions on which science is incompetent even in theory to provide or indeed even so much as to seek an answer. The allegedly scientific quality of the premises of the present system is a matter not so much of theory, whether scientific or philosophical, as simply of social myth. And, as such, it is both an influence in the movement of events and a clue to the direction in which they are heading. The myth is like the marching song, the burden of which is that the marchers, having in their hearts the assurance of ultimate victory, must keep right on to the end of the road!

But if the scientific irrefutability of Marxist-Leninist metaphysics (repeat metaphysics) is no better than an implausible myth, this does not mean either that it therefore must inevitably fail of its purpose, or that any alternative system, whether on a Western or any other model, could be based at bottom on anything other than myth. For such is the nature of the state.

At one time in the West the faith upon which the social order officially rested was still avowedly religious. Now, the logical status of the ultimate presuppositions is less unambiguously specified. In some countries everything rests on the supposedly self-authenticating validity of eighteenth-century conceptions of the rights of man as man.

Science may yet teach us how to meet the menace of messianic materialism, just as it may tell us how to land on the moon. But it cannot tell us whether or why we ought to want to land on the moon. Nor will it tell us why we should wish our Western civilisation to survive. But, since it equally cannot tell us why we shouldn't, it can be considered so to say as leaving to our system the benefit of the doubt. If others have seen themselves as chosen peoples, why should ours not be defended as a chosen 'camp'? Have we any less reason to see our cause as worthy than others purportedly have to feel themselves the protégés of History, with a capital 'h'?