

ПОЛИТИЧЕСКАЯ КУЛЬТУРА И ИДЕОЛОГИИ**POLITICS, CULTURE, PHILOSOPHY**

Interview with John Gray¹
by Marco Negri¹

Let us consider carefully the basic thesis contained in the thought of John Gray.

The way of thinking of the contemporary West more and more reflects, in its essence, the Enlightenment project. The Enlightenment project underpins a conception of morality and society based on universal principles: principles purely rational, independent of the specific tradition and culture of peoples. In particular, all contemporary schools of political thought in the West should be re-described as versions of the Enlightenment project. The liberal thought or liberalism is perhaps the greatest of these schools. Liberalism, especially when it expresses the ideological project of the Enlightenment, should be abandoned because it is bound to result in nihilism and destructive exploitation of the natural world. For example, the call to a universal civilization, which is typical of certain forms of Enlightenment or ideological liberalism, can support, or fail to adequately counter the current and dehumanizing process of global diffusion of the practice of economic *laissez-faire*. These serious limitations of the Enlightenment-inspired ideological liberalism can at least be mitigated if we assume the perspective of classical political theorists (such as Smith, Hume and John Stuart Mill) or theoretical exponents of traditional conservatism (as Edmund Burke, Oakeshott and Montaigne). For each of these theorists, in fact, one cannot justify any economic or political practice if it is conceived as independent from its specific historical context, or as independent of a given community. This involves, among the other things, a rejection of abstract and perfectionist conceptions of human nature, and a rejection of the idea of comparing the different values and life plans of individuals and peoples. In this framework, the main effort of philosophy, especially of political philosophy, is the reconstruction of a phenomenology of the various forms of moral and political life on the planet, starting from a position of absolute skepticism or post-Pyrrhonism.

Since 1997, John Gray is professor of 'European Thought' at LSE (i.e. London School of Economics and Political Science). It is also a Fellow of Jesus College at Oxford University, where he taught until 1997 as professor and mentor. He has collaborated, as it does currently, with many newspapers and magazines, writing specifically on political theory and philosophy. He has published many essays and monographs [e.g.: in 1989 (with Routledge), *Liberalisms: Essays in Political Philosophy*, in 1993 (with Routledge), *Beyond the New Right: Markets, Government and the Common Environment*, in 1995 (with Routledge), *Enlightenment's Wake*:

¹ Marco Negri is a Ph.D. student in political philosophy at the University of Pisa. He graduated from the University of Pavia with a thesis entitled 'The Problem of Motivations in Ethics'.

Politics and Culture at the Close of the Modern Age, in 1996 (with Princeton University Press), *Isaiah Berlin*, in 1997 (Polity Press), *Endgames: Questions in Late Modern Political Thought*, the most recent, in 1998 (with Granta), **False Down: The Delusions of Global Capitalism*].

Consider now the interview with Professor Gray.

Q1. In your latest essay*, you have argued that a free world market, that is, a worldwide system of *laissez faire*, would be a global tragedy. You have come to the conclusion that the market should always be driven by some form of centralized power, capable of guarantying the safety and welfare of people. But what kind of government would be able to exercise such power?

R1. A world government does not exist and will not exist in any future that we can reasonably imagine. We could only develop and implement a few necessary constraints to the world markets through the cooperation of the major governments and with the assistance of supranational institutions. I have doubts that the current supranational institutions are adequate to the enormity of the task, but they are all what we have.

Q2. You have been studying the liberal thought for a long time. You seemed to argue, sometimes, that although many versions of philosophical and political liberalism are not dead, they are nevertheless quite ill. Now, do you believe there is still a form of liberalism that can, in practice, legitimize a government committed to the safety and welfare of people?

R2. Liberalism has been corrupted by arrogant universalistic pretensions. Liberalism should not be thought of as a prescription of an ideal regime that all people should strive to adopt. It should instead be conceived as a project for a *modus vivendi* which is part of a set of social arrangements that will always remain different.

Q3. The gulf that separates, on the international arena, rich countries from poor ones is historically difficult to fill. But strong economic inequalities also affect many societies of that portion of the so-called rich world (for example, strong economic inequities that affect many western societies). Do you think that the problem concerning the redistribution of the resources (both within a rich society and between rich and poor societies) could in principle be solved?

R3. It is not impossible to ensure, within a single society, a distribution of resources able to meet widely accepted standards of fairness. But the redistribution between states is much more difficult. I think it is better to focus on the causes of extreme poverty (including the current system of *laissez-faire*), rather than aiming at an unattainable situation of global equality.

Q4. Which are, in your opinion, the most polite or humane societies that have existed throughout history?

R4. I prefer not to specify any particular society as kind or humane. There are many types of kindness or humanity and many ways not to be kind or humane.

Q5. You often uses the expression 'human flourishing', usually referring to one of your purest ideals. What exactly happens when a person 'flourishes'?

R5. Human flourishing means three things: developing the potential of a person, which is precisely a human potential. Realization of the chances that are open to that person, and which are uniquely her own, and full participation in a particular way of life, or set of ways of life. Often these three dimensions of human flourishing are in conflict with each other.

Q6. You refer sometimes to the need of a community for the human beings. What is more precisely this need? (You also said, for example, that in Western societies, individualism is a kind of historical destiny. But what then is the need for a community for people who have individualism as their historical destiny?)

R6. There are individualistic communities just as solidaristic communities. There is no one single model of good community. Moreover, many people, in the late modern societies, belong to many communities, often of different types. The central question for political philosophy is not to determine what are the best communities but to conceive the conditions for a peaceful coexistence between different communities.

Q7. Do you think that in political philosophy one should elect history as one's own guide. If so, is this a way of suggesting that human nature should not be regarded as something that changes significantly over time?

R7. Human nature *does* change over time, but not in its politically and morally important aspects. The postmodern ideal that human nature is nothing more than a cultural construct is only an illusion of the late modernity.

Q8. You argue that cultures are important and note that there are many different cultures on Earth. Is this a way of suggesting that human nature must be regarded as something that changes significantly with respect to space?

R8. Human nature is shaped differently with respect to different cultures, but there are human needs that are universal. Unfortunately, these common human needs are often conflicting. Different cultures come to light in part by differently resolving conflicts about the universal human needs.

Q9. You then believe that anthropology should be a source of inspiration for political theory?

R9. Anthropology is an important source for political theory. The study of pre-history, then, is as important as the study of history.

Q10. You are quite suspicious about the role of rationality in practical matters (for example, you are quite wary about something like an Enlightenment project).

Do you also have some personal reasons for taking this position? If you have any personal reasons, do you believe that they are important?

R10. I derive my skepticism about rationalism from the exercise of reason. The most important use of human reason coincides with the discovery of its limits.

Q11. There is nothing that the people of Europe should and could learn from Eastern societies and cultures?

R11. There is much that Western societies can learn from Eastern cultures. The philosophical and religious traditions of Western societies are only a small segment of human thought. It is time that philosophy (including political philosophy) becomes truly multicultural.

Q12. Wittgenstein thought that the sense of wonder was one of the things about which humanity should care more. Do you think that the sense of wonder could and should be taught?

R12. I doubt that the sense of wonder can be taught. But at least you should not teach people not to do it.

Q13. You have sometimes criticized what you call the 'academic nomenclatura' (mainly in the U.S.). What does not work very well with the academic nomenclatura?

R13. The academic nomenclatura are universal. Their main weakness is to put the internal discourse of the academy before the thought that seeks to understand the world. Perhaps this is an inevitable professional deformation, although I hope not.

Q14. Is there something you want for philosophy in the future?

R14. Philosophy cannot govern the practice, but can return us to practice with fewer illusions. This is my hope for philosophy.