

Beliefs for Sale: 1900-1950

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# Jacques Barzun

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## *Beliefs for Sale: 1900-1950*

### I

THE living subject I mean to discuss could be called The Self-Made Intellectual Man of the Twentieth Century. I refer by that phrase to a social fact which I think is rather new in the history of our Western heritage. A boy is born on a farm in Ohio, or a city in Georgia, is raised through the public school system, and unless he is determined to avoid it, is eased up into college. There, as the result of the elective system and the wooing methods of his teachers, he enjoys every opportunity of choosing for himself among a great variety of beliefs—philosophical, political, social, artistic, and religious. This is something new. Until a relatively recent date, there was a convention, at least, that the community, and perhaps the nation, believed in a single specified body of thought, deviation from which was made extremely difficult. True, there has always been heresy. There has always been diversity and opposition politics, as there has always been battle about art and metaphysics. But the sense of diversity, the impression of a battle, was probably less when it was generally assumed that a given community held one set of beliefs and was bound to enforce them by authority. Part of the sense of confusion complained of today is merely a recognition of the fact that when you get to be of age, or even a little before, you can go to the bookstore of the university and there buy a book which makes you a follower of T. S. Eliot, Karl Marx, Freud, or any of thousands of people who are ready to tell you what you should believe about every conceivable thing.

I chose the date 1900 quite arbitrarily as the beginning of this new possibility. No one can give a date to the beginning of a complex cultural change, but 1900 is convenient because of one small fact that was noted in

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England at this time. According to the statisticians, it was in 1900 that for the first time the religious books published during the year were fewer than the books on secular subjects. Since then, as you can guess, the books published in largest numbers have not been religious books, but novels. And now after half a century there seems to be a great weariness, a growing complaint about secularism and intellectual diversity. People feel that they would like to be told what they should believe; or if they are not quite so undecided, they would like at any rate to know what is right to believe. They have the sense that the world is going to the dogs because everybody in it believes something different. That is of course untrue. Not everybody believes something different or the world *would* go to the dogs, and it is not more noticeably headed that way than it ever has been. But the demand for direction is insistent, and I think it justifies our looking somewhat critically at what we are offered in the market in the way of beliefs.

I have just said that there are not nearly so many different ideas floating about in the world as people think. For the purposes of this very brief exposition, I distinguish four different traditions or ways of thought, or if you want to call them so, four creeds. And I propose to deal with them as ideas, not as ideologies. There is a considerable difference between the two. The modern word *ideology*, which rightly alarms people, means rather a set of slogans than a set of ideas—arguments which you use against your friends or your enemies rather than ideas that you have thought over and decided to cling to. This suggests that if you are trying to affect the present situation in the world of ideas, you must sort out, whenever you can, the ideas that are worth considering from the ideologies, which are simply packages made up of poor imitations, of leftovers, of the real idea.

The first of the four great rallying points of modern thought that I want to deal with I shall call liberalism. The great liberal ideas go back, as you know, to the eighteenth century. The people who signed the Declaration of Independence and wrote the Constitution and shaped the institutions of this country belong to the eighteenth-century liberal cast of thought. They did not all agree, but many believed in progress and the perfectibility of man, in the goodness of man, in the need to reform institutions, in representative government, and—to a greater or lesser extent depending upon their individual taste and temperament—in legislation by the people. They put the liberal notion of the citizen's rights and freedoms into the very foundation of the country's laws. That set of ideas

is so much involved in our daily comings and goings in this country that we sometimes think that they are not ideas at all but simply the way life is. That is not so. The proof is that in recent times these liberal assumptions have been challenged and denied, and people can be found everywhere who would like to reverse the plot and abolish individual liberties for the sake of what they deem a greater good.

One must examine these attacks on liberalism, remembering that liberalism depends in a large measure upon public opinion. And nowadays there is reason to feel that public opinion has disappeared, has been frittered away. You cannot raise your voice and make a whole nation thrill with indignation at some dreadful injustice that has happened. There are too many people interested in making us indignant about too many things, and we can only take in so much. So the emotions of liberalism have noticeably waned. Almost in every country of Europe where there was a party called Liberal with a capital *L*, it has dwindled into insignificance. In this country, the name *liberal* has turned into a term of reproach. It is so used even by liberals against other liberals, and what is meant by it, I think, is that the modern liberal suffers from a certain weakness of spirit, a certain lack of imagination, due to the fact that reform by outcry and legislative improvement has become a mere routine in a world organized in large masses. Lobbies, unions, pressure groups of every kind get things done quite apart from public opinion, quite apart from liberal principles, and with no knowledge of the traditions by which the old liberalism functioned.

One of the traditional assumptions of liberalism that are now most frequently and severely criticized is the assumption that man is good. People are ready to prove to you by their own acts that men are bad, and that they have to be coerced into good behavior. Otherwise, they say, anarchy is around the corner. The fact is that all government does use coercion, that it is not needed by nine-tenths of the community, and that it has never improved anybody's behavior. We have to retain the *assumption* that men are good for the simple reason that if we assume the reverse we encourage the "cops and robbers" notion of society and make every kind of social work useless from the start. We then let things drift under an increasingly severe coercion which must end in martial law. But please remember what an assumption is. It is not a universal truth; you are not bound to believe that any particular man is good. You are only bound to believe that men at large are good, and any given man until proved otherwise. This, you will observe, is the system in which the proper rear-

ing of children goes on. Though you know nothing about your own children when you first get them, you do not assume that they are bad, or are going to be bad. That is the surest way to make them bad. Similarly with one's dealings with one's fellow man; often the mere belief in another's goodness will create it in him. You cannot rely upon this, but you are bound to test it, with due caution, in every case. That is one liberal assumption.

A second assumption of liberalism much criticized in recent times is the belief that property, which was sacrosanct to the men of the eighteenth century, can no longer give the independence of mind and body which the liberal used in order to fight oppression and maintain justice. It was believed by our forefathers in this country, by Jefferson in particular, that a man who owned a farm and knew how to run it was a good man to run the state. He deserved to represent us as lawgiver. Today, after the triumph of the industrial revolution, the man who owns a farm is no longer independent. He is partly supported by the rest of us. Through no fault of his own, he is and has to be subsidized. In other words, changes in the forms of property have brought about the decline of the liberal spirit of independence. The new form of property—say the right to a job, which is secured to a man by his membership in a union; or again the right to property which is represented by stocks and bonds—does not give the same kind of right that was given by ownership of land. The land is there and you cannot move it or destroy it. What is more, the reason another man did not want to take your land was that he owned land too, and for the sake of *his* title he would respect yours. This does not obtain about the right to a job, nor about the right to stocks and bonds. These can be manipulated by whoever runs the corporation, or by legislation, or by remote economic facts and fancies. The control of your life is anonymous, distant, and abstract. You are not independent as a stockholder and you are not independent as a jobholder. Consequently the picture that we have of the liberal defending his life and liberty against the government by keeping one foot on his property and rousing his fellows is the picture of an irrecoverable past. John Hampden could defy his king, but no one can now defy his government. The FBI is after you the minute after you do the defying. And that is what would have happened to John Hampden if he had lived in an industrial society instead of an agricultural one.

Nevertheless, the assumption behind the forms of property that made the liberal independent evidently deserves to be retained, and how to do

so presents us with a problem. How can we act at all upon society except from bases of independence? Liberalism has the duty of finding some way to preserve those qualities in man, emotional and spiritual, that come with the sense of not being under somebody's thumb. Liberalism cannot be dead so long as it has the mission of finding new ways to save us from the blank, involuntary oppression of the industrial state.

But liberalism faces a further difficulty, the result of a reversal of opinion that the liberals themselves began to undergo around 1880 or 1890. They saw that the needs of both industry and democracy ran counter to the ideal of laissez-faire, and they began to jump on the bandwagon of government control. Legislation on behalf of factory workers, of children and women, of the eight-hour day—all this was accepted as necessary (which it was), but with equal necessity it altered the liberal's notion of individual independence. We have seen in our own time the logical sequel to this reversal of liberal policies: the astonishing phenomenon of liberals going to Washington in wartime, armed with the best will in the world, and turning into little tyrants because they saw how very difficult it was to manage a country from a faraway office. The liberal is unquestionably at a disadvantage in not having a consistent outlook on this one question of government interference. He is outdone by the doctrinaire socialist, and he is outdone by the Tory democrat. Both are sure that they were born and destined to direct the affairs of the nation and they institute paternalism with their eyes open.

## II

The liberal's dilemma leads us to the second great current of thought which we have to reckon with, and from which we have to abstract what good we can if we are going to see our way through the difficulties of the present. That is the conservative or reactionary tradition. I should like to give it a special name for the present purpose, so that it can include a great many different views. For there are many different ways indeed of being a reactionary. I should like to suggest the name *neoclassic*, which indicates that reactionaries of every kind fix their eyes on one period in history as their ideal, and propose that we go back to it. That period, whatever it is, is for them the classic period. It may lie as far back as ancient Greece, or somewhere before the Protestant Reformation—most likely before the French Revolution—though some prefer a time before the invention of machinery. The choice is endless because history

stretches back so far that everybody has plenty of room to carve his utopia. A man is a neoclassic when he wants to reproduce in vaguely altered form the ideal he has abstracted from his perfect or classic era. The definition is thus broad enough to include Mr. T. S. Eliot, who seems to like the good old days of England under the first Georges, and the Southern agrarian who wants an antebellum South, and the French reactionary who wants 1789 wiped off the history books. For the neo-Thomists, medieval times are classic, and different centuries are chosen by those Catholics who believe that an orderly, unified Christendom existed before Luther.

The first principle that all of these neoclassic groups appeal to is tradition. And I could wish that the love of tradition had made them better historians, because in almost every instance they picture a world that never existed. They suppose that in their chosen epoch, of which they see the outline in the pages of history, there were no deviations from the general pattern. The historian has abstracted from the confusion of life a description of prevailing rules, and his naïve neoclassic readers think that "in those days" everybody was willing to abide by the rules. We know that it was not so, that there is always a gap between theory and practice. We know that, for example, at the time when St. Thomas was writing his beautifully organized book and when Dante was beautifully organizing the *Divine Comedy*, people were fighting and murdering one another and grabbing territory and breaking their oaths and using all the ordinary and extraordinary means of self-aggrandizement that we know today. Indeed, our age is, if not more chaotic and anarchical, at least more conscious of chaos and anarchy.

Hence disillusionment is in store for those who think that a common belief will make everybody happy and well-behaved. We know that when there was one so-called common belief in Christendom there was a tremendous amount of political and theological hatred. The one belief was but a conventional common ground for furious debate. There has of course never been a time when everything was smooth and quiet and history proceeded without a hitch from one great achievement to the next. Still, the neoclassic faith in tradition is worth our best attention, for it contains something very important about all government. Our neoclassics who insist upon tradition know at least that human reason was not invented twenty years ago; they know that there is good sense in things that seem nonsensical; they know that institutions cannot be built up in a day; in short, they know something about the psychology of man in

society. They know that man behaves in certain ways, not because of ideas he may have at the moment, but because of habits. Those habits may be related to ideas, but the habits cannot grow up in a single week or a single month, and it is therefore quite futile to decree that beginning next January we will have this or that new kind of government. The continuity of social life is that of father and son—the link between one generation, its institutions and customs, and the next which, while men are men, cannot help feeling some sentimental attachment to its inheritance. If not a tradition, as each neoclassic group tries hard to believe, then traditions in the plural are agents of social cohesion, beneficent substitutes for coercion, and valuable brakes upon the volatile impatience of the liberal, the socialist, or any less rational innovator.

A second merit of the conservatives is their persistence as critics. They seem to be people bent upon system and order, but since as we have seen, their retrospective utopias are rather unlikely of fulfillment, their program is really a critique of what is going on. When the liberal weakness makes itself felt as it does in the modern world, the conservative or reactionary steps in and acts precisely as the gadfly that the liberal once was. We are all concerned nowadays about certain problems because men like Mr. Allen Tate, Mr. T. S. Eliot, and others have told us that to them the present state of affairs is intolerable, and have specified details.

It is too bad that by a sort of biographical accident a great deal of the neoclassic criticism in the English language should not come from the English tradition of conservatism. Paradox though it may seem, a great deal of neoclassic criticism comes from French sources, the body of work, namely, that was done in France between 1880 and 1900 against the ideas of the French Revolution. It included attacks against the Romantic movement, against the Third Republic, and against the industrial democratic state. The men who later founded the *Action française* and other religious and royalist groups devised many of these arguments, which got into the Anglo-American bloodstream, so to speak, through the personal action of a Harvard professor. Mr. Irving Babbitt was a member of the Romance language department, which meant that he read French. He read the books I refer to and they struck him as apt social criticism. Not being a historian, he did not see that they were bad history and he began in all good faith to adapt these arguments to the conditions that he saw in America. He was a good lecturer and a man of great intellectual fervor, so he made disciples. Among them was a gifted boy from St. Louis, Mr.

T. S. Eliot, who is now the leader in English of the neoclassic attitude I have been trying to describe.

If, however, you feel persuaded as I am that some of the assumptions and criticisms contained in the neoclassic tradition are worth holding in mind side by side with the liberal accomplishments and criticism, I would urge you, after you have read through T. S. Eliot or any other congenial advocate, to go to some of the British sources of conservative thought: Burke, Sir Walter Scott, Bagehot, Ruskin, Fitzjames Stephen, T. H. Green—there is quite a choice. They are literate and sympathetic, they have a firm grasp of the principles implied in the great idea of tradition, and they talk a rather different language from Mr. Eliot.

### III

The third current of belief that is active in our world and from which we must learn what we can is the materialistic, scientific, or Marxist. Perhaps I should say “*and* Marxist,” because of the three adjectives I use for it, each adds a different shade of meaning. The materialism I mean is of course not the crude materialism of desiring worldly possessions and overindulgence of the senses. I mean the philosophic materialism which won its great victory in the middle of the nineteenth century when Darwinian evolution swept the world. It was the final and victorious battle in a movement that had been going on for almost seventy-five years: there had been evolutionists since 1750. Darwin carried their ideas to a kind of perfection that persuaded everybody that he was right, and with his rightness went the belief that the entire universe consisted of nothing but matter in motion. It was a proud moment when the scientists could say that at last they had the explanation of the universe in their hands. Interpretation by matter-in-motion went so far that Huxley, the great proponent of Darwinian evolution, developed the hypothesis that minds did not really exist. Human bodies were machines that operated under a strict determinism like a steam engine, and though it seemed to be true that these machines had ideas and feelings, the ideas and feelings must be discounted as having no testable claim on our attention as scientific philosophers. This was the so-called automaton theory. Huxley soon had to give it up because of the embarrassing yet simple question: if you are an automaton and I am an automaton, then what are we talking about? How do I catch your idea and why should I believe it to be true? Huxley gave up, but the “explanation” of mind that is contained in materialism is

still with us. You need only observe your own conversation, the advertisements of everything from patent medicines to breakfast foods, and the general attitude of our friends when dealing with *our* inward life: we feel it at first hand and know it to be real; but they incline to explain it away by mechanical means—glands, nerves, diet, heredity—anything but Us.

In the laboratory, of course, the reduction of all being to simple units of matter or energy is a beautiful assumption which works, and we must preserve it. But we need not preserve the results of its extraneous applications. One of these was the materialistic interpretation of history according to Marx. Not men and their ideas or their will, but the means of producing goods were, for Marx, the motive power in history. One economic system displaces another by the working out of the struggle among classes, and history is thereby determined. Hence the revolution is bound to come. Here there is usually a little jump in the argument because the propagandist must offer an inducement to the prospective convert. It is this: "You had better decide to come in on our side in order to help along the inevitable." This little skip in logic has generated a mighty movement, and we now see in Russia and elsewhere a fanatical faith which demands much more than drifting with the tide of history. It is a new kind of religion based on the contradictory supposition that everything valuable in the world is material and that one must give up life itself to make that truth prevail.

What then is the lesson to be drawn from the combined experiences of scientific and Marxist materialism? First, that science, while showering benefits and dangers upon us with equal hands, offers us no philosophy to live by. Second, from Marxism in action we learn that man must have some sort of idea to set his face against odds and achieve in this world something greater than his own well-being. We must if possible develop some of our enemies' enthusiasm for social action, though not for their cause and not on their principles. And we must in the third place recognize that they are dealing with a problem that is inescapably before us. We do not like the words *Marxism* and *socialism*, but the Marxist, socialist, materialist view of the world faces the fact that we live in an industrial and democratic situation which calls for certain rearrangements in society. Whether we like it or not, industry makes us live a collective life, to the problems of which we need collective solutions. This is not to say that the Russians have solved any of the difficulties of the Industrial Age, but simply that in their violent, ruthless way they are trying to solve

them, and from this preoccupation we can learn at least that in an age of mass production for mass consumption, new forms of collective organization are called for.

I was reminded just a few days ago when Lord Lindsay died, of an address that he gave at Columbia shortly after he had become master of Balliol College. He began his remarks by saying, "Gentlemen, I should tell you that I am a liberal, a conservative, and a socialist." Some of the audience were naturally bewildered, but Lord Lindsay went on to explain that he meant something which should by now be perfectly obvious, something which is implicit in what I have been saying about liberalism, conservatism, and materialism. He meant that as a free man endowed with independence and originality—gifts of nature—he wanted a liberal regime; as a propertied man, a student of history, and a political philosopher, he wanted to conserve some of the great institutions and great traditions that his own country and Western culture generally put at his disposal; while as a man of the twentieth century he recognized the needs created by technology and the rise everywhere of popular states, of universal democracy. He knew that new institutions—whether called socialist or democratic or anything else—must arise to meet the demands of community life. The occasion for them may be public hygiene or flood control or the regulation of the airways: one need not specify here (nor be systematic anywhere) as regards the purview of the new collective institutions. The important thing is rather to recognize that the three traditions of the Western world can no longer be taken as mutually exclusive choices. The problem is not whether to stay a liberal and fight the conservatives, or else join hands between liberals and conservatives to fight the socialists. The problem is to find a way of compounding what is livable in all three so that a stupid, doctrinaire socialism will not down the liberal individual; so that a stupid, doctrinaire liberalism will not let the nation and the economy fritter itself away; and so that a stupid, doctrinaire conservatism will not sulk and dream, and resist the forward-moving reality.

#### IV

The difficulty of judging and acting wisely within these specifications is enormous, and it brings to me the fourth philosophy that I want very briefly to sketch—a philosophy that we have every right to call a native American tradition as well, though as a conscious movement it began in many places simultaneously, again about 1890–1900. I refer to the move-

ment generally known as Pragmatism. The great American pragmatist was, as you know, the Harvard philosopher William James, and it was he who, in my opinion, gave the most persuasive account of the pragmatic principles. But the form in which you are likely to encounter Pragmatism today is that given it by the European movement known as Existentialism. I happen to think that through a variety of accidents, of which the Second World War was the worst and greatest, Existentialism represents a distorted form of Pragmatism, but I shall not bother to distinguish between the two now. I shall merely say what I think I find useful for us in the present time in the original pragmatic attitudes.

In the first place, the pragmatic philosophy is not a doctrine or a dogma; it is a test, or more precisely, a formula for testing our ideas; and this is it: any principle, any rule, any proposal, must sooner or later stop being an abstract hope or belief and become concrete and actual through some act. It must merge with the whole scheme of facts, feelings, ideas, and habits that we call experience. There and there only can it be judged, by examining the results that it leads to. In one sense, everybody is a pragmatic thinker. If something goes wrong with your car, you try this and that, and the act that makes the engine start up again is obviously that which corresponds to the correct idea of the trouble. It is much harder, apparently, to use this pragmatic test in things that are not mechanical, because we all tend to enjoy fine sentiments, great principles, elevated beliefs—and to act quite contrary to what they require us to do. The pragmatic test is then often dismissed, not because it is a way of finding out what will work in simple physical predicaments, but because it is also a way of making our actions square with our beliefs; and if that is beyond us, it forces us to make our beliefs square with our actions, to eat our highfalutin words, to stop lying to ourselves and to the world.

Since, moreover, it is not a doctrine or a dogma, the pragmatic outlook is discredited with the ugly name of relativism. But this quality is in fact a second virtue. Pragmatism *relates*—that is the way in which it is relative—what others would like to keep separate: it relates promises to fulfillment, as we just saw; proposals and consequences; description and reality. And here it takes into account the fact that everybody cannot possibly occupy the same point of view and act in precisely the same way. Certain truths are relative to our circumstances, our abilities, our purposes. To live together, these relative discrepancies must be recognized and allowed to subsist. For example, some of us believe in various absolutes. But mankind fought a thousand years before it was agreed to stop

enforcing rival absolutes on dissenters. Nowadays, as we saw at the outset, education, democracy, and world communication have made variety in belief a precondition of social peace. Pragmatism permits a pluralism of beliefs. It is a kind of Federal government of beliefs, and it keeps them from waging war for the vain cause of making one notion extinguish all others and one party win all the seats.

Finally, Pragmatism and the pragmatic method lead us necessarily to the task of inquiry. A pragmatist not only wants to say what he thinks and have the right to continue doing so, but he wants to find out by debate with those who disagree with him which is the more probable truth. He has no conviction that his view of truth is perfect, or that truth as a whole is by now all recorded, absolute, and unchangeable. The peculiar merit of Pragmatism at the present juncture in world affairs is of course obvious: it is only the labor of inquiry and the commitment to debate that can make possible the fusion of those assumptions in liberalism, conservatism, and collectivism that are valuable; and they can be made to work only in a country which, like the United States of America, has pragmatically accepted diversity of belief under political and cultural federation.