I TOLD YOU SO

TO SAY I TOLD YOU SO is psychologically gratifying but morally wrong and no doubt rather unattractive; nevertheless, I should have been less than human if I had not many times felt a strong temptation to say it in the wake of the riots that shook England in August 2011 like a tree laden with rotten fruit.

For almost twenty years I had been adverting in the press to the unpleasant and criminal nature of a substantial portion of the young British population, and to the degraded nature of the life lived in large parts of our cities. In so far as anyone took any notice of what I wrote, it was almost always to accuse me of cynicism, misanthropy, class prejudice, snobbery, exaggeration, anecdotalism or outright fabrication. I was asked more than once whether I made up the stories I relayed from the general hospital and prison in which I worked as a doctor, these stories being apparently beyond the capacity of those who asked the question to conceive of as being true, though survey after survey showed that the phenomena I was describing were widespread and were evident to anyone with the most minimal powers of observation. Indeed, it seemed to me to require extraordinary willpower, manifested by voluntary blindness, *not* to see them. Of course, it is true that I did alter details, for obvious reasons, and tried to give some literary polish to the stories; but in essence, they were true and if anything underplayed the violence and depravity that I heard about and witnessed day after day, year after year. I once attempted to keep a diary of all that I saw and heard, taken down without any attempt at literary refashioning, in the most literal possible way; but I soon realised that it would have been impossible to read, so appalling was what I had to record. The diary depressed me terribly, and I had to stop keeping it after about four days; I realised then that my literary refashioning of the stories I heard was necessary for me as well as for the reader, because I needed to distance myself from the raw, terrible reality.

It is true that my sample of English life was a selected one, but it was not small; in all, I heard about the lives of five per cent of the inhabitants of the city, itself a large one, and my hospital was one of only four that served a similar population. There was no

reason to suppose that the stories I would have heard in any of the other hospitals had I worked in them would have been substantially different, either in nature or number. In other words, my anecdotes, amusing as I hoped them to be, were indicative of something of the greatest national importance, much more important indeed than a lot of what passed for important news.

Well, the riots illuminated as if by lightning flash the social landscape that I had been trying, with very limited success, to describe for my fellow citizens who seemed determined not to see it. Suddenly they could not avert their gaze from reality, and it appalled them, as well it might. They were discomfited.

However, the work of psychic healing – that is to say, the restoration of wilful and comforting blindness – by means of intellectual and emotional dishonesty started at once. Many were those who spoke of the tragedy of the rioters having destroyed amenities in the very areas in which they themselves lived, such that the quality of their lives would be yet worsened by their own activities.

This is by now an old way by which intellectuals seek to demonstrate their compassion to the world, their superior comprehension of the predicament of others, and their own absence of unattractive condemnatory rigour.

A few years ago, for example, I was briefly interviewed on the BBC in the company of a junior minister, in the wake of some relatively minor riots in the poorer areas of some of our cities. The minister, with the intonation of constipated compassion that we have come to know so well, said that one of the tragedies of the riots was that the rioters rioted in their own areas, to which I retorted by asking her whether she thought it would be better if they came to riot in *her* area. (I was reminded of Afrikaner policemen during the years of apartheid who referred to black rioters in townships as having 'fouled their own nest.' The only difference between the Afrikaner policemen and the minister was that while the former approved, the latter disapproved.) My question she ignored, as if it were not the question of a gentleman, though in fact (in my opinion) it went straight to the heart of her patent dishonesty, exposing her opinion as insincere, untruthful and offered purely for rhetorical effect. It demonstrated that the riots, and the questions they raised, interested her not at all; what interested her was herself and her political standing with a large

section of the population that was also predisposed to such dishonesty for fear of having to face unpleasant reality.

I was invited in the wake of the riots in 2011 on to a well-known foreign television station; my fellow guest on the programme was a man of liberal sympathies. Most of what he said was perfectly sensible, but when I suggested that one of the reasons for the riots was the violent and degraded nature of much of British culture and social life, for example the grotesque public drunkenness that is to be witnessed up and down the country every Friday and Saturday night, with virtually no attempt at control by anyone, thus demonstrating to all the impunity of bad behaviour, he clearly bridled. There was a difference, he said, between people getting 'pissed' (the word he used, thus demonstrating the vulgarisation not only of British life, but of British minds) on a Friday or Saturday night and burning down buildings in riots.

Now obviously this is quite right in a narrow sense. A drunk and an arsonist *are* different. But human life is lived in a context, psychological and social (or, in this case, antisocial). What my fellow guest wanted to imply by his rejection of my point was that, while there was something wrong with the social *milieu* from which the rioters came, it was a circumscribed problem: that the rioters were a kind of *lumpenproletariat*, to use a Marxist phrase, shall we say five per cent of the population isolated or 'excluded' from the rest of society, but that otherwise there was not much to worry about in Britain, that its liberal and permissive mores were perfectly fine.

This is not realistic, nor is it intended to be realistic: it is intended to be comforting. Among other things, it is intended to protect liberal intellectuals from the painful necessity of having to rethink their whole world-outlook, and from having to accept at least some of the blame for the deeply unpleasant nature of contemporary British society.

Let me here resort to anecdote to illustrate my point.

I live when in England in a small town in Shropshire (to whose surrounding countryside I respond emotionally as to no other in the world). By day, it is delightful; my house abuts a charming Elizabethan cottage near church grounds that look as if they materialised from an Anthony Trollope novel. By night, however, it is transformed, invaded by standard British youths who come to get drunk, scream, shout, and impose themselves upon the quiet streets, whose residents have simply to put up with it and suffer in silence the drunken vandalism to their

property. The average age of the person on the street drops from 60 to 20, with few older people venturing out. Charm and delight vanish. Not long ago, my street awoke to the sound of a young man being kicked almost to death by other young men, all of whom had spilled forth from a pub at 2am. The driver of a local taxi service, who accepts only prearranged pick-ups, tells me that it is now normal (in the statistical sense) for young women to emerge from the bars and try to entice him to drive them home by baring their breasts, even pushing them against his windows if for some reason he has to stop in town. (I laughed when hearing this, but in essence it is not funny.)

To all this, the criminally-stupid Shropshire council had responded by extending the licensing hours of the pub where most of the aggressive, noisy and destructive young men and women gather until four in the morning, without the slightest consultation with the townspeople or reference to their interests.

Recently I stayed a couple of nights in the middle of the week in Manchester, in the Palace Hotel on the Oxford Road. On one of the nights I was woken at about one in the morning by the sound of drunken British revellers, a sound that to me has all the charm of a fascist rally. The drunken screaming and shouting continued until about four; the next morning, right outside the front door, there were police lines with the familiar tape saying 'do not cross', and a forensic tent within. A man had been beaten nearly to death there at about 1.30 in the morning, and was still in a coma in hospital. The event had not interrupted the drunkenness, however, which had continued unabated and, presumably, uninterrupted by any authority; in England, there is scant difference between the sound of people enjoying themselves and people being murdered.

My Shropshire taxi driver was talking not about an isolated transgression of customs but about a whole manner of cultural comportment. By no means coincidentally, the young British find themselves hated, feared, and despised throughout Europe, wherever they gather to have what they call 'a good time'. They turn entire Greek, Spanish, and Turkish resorts into B-movie Sodoms and Gomorrahs. They cover pavements with vomit, rape one another, and indulge in casual drunken violence. In one Greek resort, 12 young British women were arrested recently after indulging in 'an outdoor oral sex competition'.

Another anecdote comes to my mind, this time not about drunkenness, but about impunity – often in the context of drunken violence, however. I wrote to the Chief Constable of my city to complain that assaults in the hospital in which I worked were not dealt with properly by the police; that they neither arrested nor charged those responsible for them. Chief Constables in Britain having long since been turned into political eunuchs, much more concerned with the preservation of their favour with political overlords than with the preservation of the peace, the Chief Constable replied that what I said was not true, that the police always took such assaults seriously. Such a reply could only mean ignorance or deliberate untruth; be that as it may, within a short time notices appeared in the hospital to the effect that, from then on, anyone who committed an assault in the hospital would be arrested and charged. Not only was this a tacit admission that my complaint had been justified, but it seemed also a tacit admission that, in most circumstances and most places other than in the hospital, assault would be ignored.

The connection with drunkenness is obvious: for a large percentage of those who commit assault or are victims of assault are drunk. (The connection between drunkenness and violence is more complex than is often supposed and is not simply a pharmacological effect of alcohol. Behaviour while under the influence of alcohol depends upon personal disposition but also – perhaps more importantly – upon social context. As I am sure many readers know, it is perfectly possible to be drunk without becoming aggressive or violent.)

A society in which the above anecdotes are not only possible, but representative of its ethical, legal and administrative mores, should not be surprised if a section of its population, believing itself to have been deprived of its inalienable right to a high standard of living, full of grievance but also aware of its own radical worthlessness, with no ethical boundaries worth the name, and with a culture that celebrates the most degraded conduct, should from time to time exhibit the full beauty of its collective personality. But a great deal of the responsibility lies with those who not only have persistently and wilfully failed to notice that an education costing £50,000 per head has equipped these young people with no useful attainments, not even the ability to read, write or reckon; who have promoted every possible way to encourage family breakdown (or rather, the

non-formation of a family in the first place); but have also persuaded the objects of their social experimentation that they are endowed by their governments with certain inalienable rights, among these being a level of consumption equal to those who work hard, save money, display determination and have learnt difficult skills. 'We are fed up with being broke,' said one rioter, as if the quality of being flush with money were normal, natural and a human right.

The promotion of rights to tangible benefits leads eventually to a vile mentality, which oscillates between ingratitude at best – for why should they be grateful for the receipt of something that is a right? – and resentment at worst. Resentment, the only human emotion that can last a lifetime, provides infinite justification for one's own bad actions. He who stokes resentment stokes riots.

THE QUIVERING UPPER LIP

WHEN MY MOTHER ARRIVED in England as a refugee from Nazi Germany, shortly before the outbreak of World War II, she found the people admirable, though not without the defects that corresponded to their virtues. By the time she died, two-thirds of a century later, she found them rude, dishonest, and charmless. They did not seem to her, moreover, to have any virtues to compensate for their unpleasant qualities. I occasionally asked her to think of some, but she couldn't; and neither, frankly, could I.

It wasn't simply that she had been robbed twice during her last five years, having never been the victim of a crime before – experiences that, at so advanced an age, would surely change anyone's opinion of one's fellow citizens. Few things are more despicable, after all, or more indicative of moral nihilism, than a willingness to prey upon the old and frail. No, even before she was robbed she had noticed that a transvaluation of all values seemed to have taken place in her adopted land. The human qualities that people valued and inculcated when she arrived had become mocked, despised, and repudiated by the time she died. The past really was a foreign country; and they did do things differently there.

What, exactly, were the qualities that my mother had so admired? Above all, there was the people's manner. The British seemed to her self-contained, self-controlled, law-abiding yet tolerant of others no matter how eccentric, and with a deeply ironic view of life that encouraged them to laugh at themselves and to appreciate their own unimportance in the scheme of things. If Horace Walpole was right – that the world is a comedy to those who think and a tragedy to those who feel – the English were the most thoughtful people in the world. They were polite and considerate, not pushy or boastful; the self-confident took care not to humiliate the shy or timid; and even the most accomplished was aware that his achievements were a drop in the ocean of possibility, and might have been much greater if he had tried harder or been more talented.

Those characteristics had undoubted drawbacks. They could lead to complacency and philistinism, for if the world was a comedy, nothing was serious. They could easily slide into arrogance: the rest

of the world can teach us nothing. The literary archetype of such arrogance was Mr Podsnap in Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend*, a man convinced that all that was British was best, and who 'had even acquired a peculiar flourish of his right arm in often clearing the world of its most difficult problems, by sweeping them behind him.' Still, taken all in all, my mother found the British culture of the day possessed of a deep and seductive, if subtle and by no means transparent or obvious, charm.

My mother was not alone. André Maurois, the great French Anglophile, for example, wrote a classic text about British character, *Les silences du Colonel Bramble*. Maurois was a translator and liaison officer between the French and British armies during World War I and lived closely for many months with British officers and their men. *Les silences* was the fruit of his observations. Maurois found the British combination of social self-confidence and existential modesty attractive. It was then a common French opinion that the British were less intelligent than the French; and in the book, Maurois' fictional alter ego, Aurelle, discusses the matter with one of the British officers.

'Don't you yourself find,' said Major Parker, 'that intelligence is valued by you at more than its worth? We are like the young Persians of whom Herodotus speaks, and who, until the age of twenty, learnt only three things: how to ride, archery and not to lie.'

Aurelle spots the paradox. 'You despise the academic,' he replies, 'and you quote Herodotus. Even better, I caught you the other day *in flagrante*, reading Xenophon… Very few French, I assure you…'

Parker quickly disavows any intellectual virtue in his choice of citations or reading matter. 'That's very different,' he says. 'The Greeks and Romans interest us, not as an object of enquiry, but as our ancestors and as sportsmen. I like Xenophon – he is the perfect example of a British gentleman.'

Forty years later, in 1959, another French writer, Tony Mayer, in his short book *La vie anglaise*, noticed the reluctance of the English to draw attention to their accomplishments, to blow their own trumpets: 'Conversation still plays an important role in England. They speak a lot, but in general they say nothing. As it is bad form to mention personal or professional matters which could lead to discussion, they prefer to speak in generalities.' The Franco-Romanian playwright Eugène Ionesco brilliantly parodied this tendency in his *La cantatrice*

chauve (*The Bald Soprano*), in which a respectable English couple has a long conversation at a dinner party. At the end, after many pages of utter banalities, they realise that they are actually married, and have been for a long time.

Appearances in Britain could deceive. The British, after all, despised intellectuals, but were long at the forefront of intellectual inquiry; they were philistines, yet created a way of life in the countryside as graceful as any that has ever existed; they had a state religion, but came to find religious enthusiasm bad form. Mayer comments:

> Even in the most ordinary places and circumstances, an accident happens. You hit by chance upon a subject that you have long studied; you go as far as allowing your interest in it to show. And suddenly you realise that your interlocutor – so reserved, so polite – not only knows a hundred times more about this subject than you, but about an infinite number of other subjects as well.

This attractive modesty mixed also with a mild perfidy (this is *la perfide Albion* we are talking of, after all): irony, understatement, and double meaning were everywhere, waiting to trap the unwary foreigner. The British lived as if they had taken to heart the lines of America's greatest poet (who, not coincidentally, lived her whole life in New England):

> Tell all the Truth but tell it slant Success in Circuit lies . . .

The habit of indirection in speech, combined with probity of action, gave English life its savour and its interest. Mayer provided a brief interpretive key for the unwary:

> I may be wrong – I am absolutely sure. I don't know much about – I am a specialist in. No trouble at all – What a burden! We must keep in touch – Goodbye forever. Must you go? – At last! Not too bad – Absolutely wonderful.

The orderliness and restraint of political life in Britain also struck my refugee mother. The British leaders were not giants among men but – much more important for someone fleeing Nazi Germany – they were

not brutes, either. They were civilised men; the nearest they came to the exercise of arbitrary power was a sense of *noblesse oblige*, and the human breast is capable of far worse sentiments. Politics was, to them and the voters, only part of life, and by no means the most important. Maurois' Dr O'Grady describes to Aurelle what he calls 'the safety-valve of parliament': 'From now on, elected champions have our riots and *coups d'état* for us in the chamber, which leaves the rest of the nation the leisure to play cricket.' Major Parker takes up the theme, also addressing Aurelle: 'What good has it done you French to change government eight times in a century? The riot for you has become a national institution. In England it would be impossible to make a revolution. If people gathered near Westminster shouting slogans, a policeman would tell them to go away and they would go.'

Many remarked upon the gentleness of British behaviour in public. Homicidal violence and street robberies were vanishingly rare. But it wasn't only in the absence of crime that the gentleness made itself felt. British pastimes were peaceful and reflective: gardening and the keeping of pigeons, for example. Vast sporting crowds would gather in such good order that sporting events resembled church meetings, as both George Orwell and anthropologist Geoffrey Gorer (writing in 1955) noted.

Newsreels of the time reinforce the point. The faces of people in sports crowds did not contort in hatred, snarling and screaming, but were peaceful and good-humoured, if a little pinched and obviously impoverished. The crowds were almost self-regulating; as late as the early sixties, the British read with incredulity reports that, on the Continent, wire barriers, police baton charges, and tear gas were often necessary to control crowds. Incidents of crowd misbehaviour in Britain were so unusual that when one did happen, it caused a sensation.

The English must have been the only people in the world for whom a typical response to someone who accidentally stepped on one's toes was to apologise oneself. British behaviour when ill or injured was stoic. Aurelle recounts in *Les silences du Colonel Bramble* seeing an officer he knew on a stretcher, obviously near death from a terrible abdominal injury. The officer says to him: 'Please say goodbye to the colonel for me and ask him to write home that I didn't suffer too much. I hope this is not too much trouble for you.

Thanks very much indeed.' Tony Mayer, too, says of the English that when they were ill they usually apologised: 'I'm sorry to bother you, Doctor.'

No culture changes suddenly, and the elderly often retained the attitudes of their youth. I remember working for a short time in a general practice in a small country town where an old man called me to his house. I found him very weak from chronic blood loss, unable to rise from his bed, and asked him why he had not called me earlier. 'I didn't like to disturb you, Doctor,' he said. 'I know you are a very busy man.'

From a rational point of view, this was absurd. What could I possibly need to do that was more important than attending to such an ill man? But I found his self-effacement deeply moving. It was not the product of a lack of self-esteem, that psychological notion used to justify rampant egotism; nor was it the result of having been downtrodden by a tyrannical government that accorded no worth to its citizens. It was instead an existential, almost religious, modesty, an awareness that he was far from being all-important.

I experienced other instances of this modesty. I used to pass the time of day with the husband of an elderly patient of mine who would accompany her to the hospital. One day, I found him so jaundiced that he was almost orange. At his age, it was overwhelmingly likely to mean one thing: inoperable cancer. He was dying. He knew it and I knew it; he knew that I knew it. I asked him how he was. 'Not very well,' he said. 'I'm very sorry to hear that,' I replied. 'Well,' he said quietly, and with a slight smile, 'we shall just have to do the best we can, won't we?' Two weeks later, he was dead.

I often remember the nobility of this quite ordinary man's conduct and words. He wanted an appropriate, but only an appropriate, degree of commiseration from me; in his view, which was that of his generation and culture, it was a moral requirement that emotion and sentiment should be expressed proportionately, and not in an exaggerated or self-absorbed way. My acquaintance with him was slight; therefore my regret, while genuine, should be slight. (Oddly enough, my regret has grown over the years, with the memory.) Further, he considered it important that he should not embarrass me with any displays of emotion that might discomfit me. A man has to think of others, even when he is dying.

My wife, also a doctor, worked solely among the old, and found them, as I did, considerate even when suffering, as well as humorous and lacking in self-importance. Her patients were largely working class – a refutation of the idea, commonly expressed, that the cultural ideal that I have described characterised only the upper echelons of society.

Gradually, but overwhelmingly, the culture and character of British restraint have changed into the exact opposite. Extravagance of gesture, vehemence of expression, vainglorious boastfulness, self-exposure, and absence of inhibition are what we tend to admire now – and the old modesty is scorned. It is as if the population became convinced of Blake's fatuous dictum that it is better to strangle a baby in the cradle than to let a desire remain unacted upon.

Certainly, many Britons under the age of 30 or even 40 now embrace a kind of sub-psychotherapeutic theory that desires, if not unleashed, will fester within and eventually manifest themselves in dangerous ways. To control oneself for the sake of the social order, let alone for dignity or decorum (a word that would either mean nothing to large numbers of the British these days, or provoke among them peals of laughter), is thus both personally and socially harmful.

I have spoken with young British people who regularly drink themselves into oblivion, passing first through a prolonged phase of public nuisance. To a man (and woman), they believe that by doing so they are getting rid of inhibitions that might otherwise do them psychological and even physical harm. The same belief seems universal among those who spend hours at soccer games screaming abuse and making threatening gestures (whose meaning many would put into practice, were those events not policed in military fashion).

Lack of self-control is just as character-forming as self-control: but it forms a different, and much worse and shallower, character. Further, once self-control becomes neither second nature nor a desired goal, but rather a vice to avoid at all costs, there is no plumbing the depths to which people will sink.

No person with the slightest apprehension of human psychology will be surprised to learn that as a consequence of the change in the character of the British, indictable crime has risen at least 900 per cent since 1950. In the same period, the homicide rate has doubled – and would have gone up ten times, had it not been for improvements

in trauma surgery and resuscitation techniques. And all this despite the fact that the proportion of the population in the age group most likely to commit crimes has fallen considerably.

Two things are worth noting about this shift in national character: it is not the first such shift in British history; and the change is not entirely spontaneous or the result of impersonal social forces.

Before the English and British became known for self-restraint and an ironic detachment from life, they had a reputation for high emotionalism and an inability to control their passions. The German poet Heinrich Heine, among others, detested them as violent and vulgar. It was only during the reign of William IV – 'Silly Billy,' the king before Victoria – that they transformed into something approaching the restrained people whom I encountered as a child and sometimes as a doctor. The main difference between the vulgar people whom Heine detested and the people loathed and feared throughout Europe (and beyond) today is that the earlier Britons often possessed talent and genius, and in some sense stood in the forefront of human endeavour; we cannot say that of the British now.

But the second point is also important. The moralisation of the British in the first third of the nineteenth century – their transformation from a people lacking self-control into exemplars of restraint – was the product of intellectual and legislative activity. So, too, was the reverse movement.

Consider in this light public drunkenness. For 100 years or more in Britain, the popular view was that such drunkenness was reprehensible and the rightful object of repression. (My heart leaps with joy when I see in France a public notice underscoring the provisions of the law 'for the suppression of public drunkenness.') Several changes then came: officials halved the tax on alcohol; intellectuals attacked the idea of self-restraint, making it culturally unacceptable; universities unapologetically began to advertise themselves as places where students could get drunk often and regularly; and finally the government, noting that drunkenness was dramatically increasing, claimed that increasing the hours of availability of alcohol would encourage a more responsible, 'Mediterranean' drinking culture, in which people would sip slowly, rather than gulp fast. It is difficult not to suspect also the role of financial inducements to politicians in all this, for even they could hardly be so stupid.

Habits become character. Perhaps they shouldn't, but they do. Therefore, when I hear that some American states seek to lower the drinking age from 21 to 18, on the grounds that it is absurd that an 18-year-old can join the army and die for his country but not drink a beer in a public bar, I experience a strong reaction. It is a more important goal of government to uphold civilisation than to find a general principle that will iron out all the apparent inconsistencies of the current dispensation.

Not long ago, I attended the graduation of a friend's son at an upstate New York university. The night before, and the night after, I observed the students through the windows of their frat houses getting drunk. They were behaving in a silly way, but they were not causing a public nuisance because they did not dare to step out of their houses. If they did, the local police would arrest them; or, if not, the university authorities would catch them and suspend them. (This, incidentally, is powerful evidence that drunks do know what they are doing and that the law is absolutely right not to accept drunkenness as a negation of *mens rea*.)

No doubt the student drunkenness in the frat houses was unsatisfactory from an abstract point of view; but from the point of view of upholding civilisation, to say nothing of the quality of life of the townspeople, it was all highly satisfactory. In England, that town would have been a nightmare at night that no decent person would have wanted to be out in. So I say to Americans: if you want your young people to develop character, have the courage of your inconsistencies! Excoriate sin, especially in public places, but turn a blind eye to it when necessary – as it often is.

THE PAINS OF MEMORY

WE ARE ENJOINED, WHEN we suffer or feel unhappy (which are not necessarily quite the same thing, of course), to consider those who are yet worse off than ourselves. This is supposed to relieve and console us, but it rarely does. The most that it achieves is to make us feel guilty that we are so miserable over comparative trifles when others have so many worse travails than ours; and this in turn makes us feel more wretched than ever. Moreover, there is a curious moral asymmetry at work: while the thought that there are always people worse off than ourselves is supposed to be edifying, the thought that there are always people better off than ourselves is not. Indeed, it is the very reverse, a powerful stimulus to resentment, the longest-lived, most gratifying and most harmful of all emotions.

As children, many of us were told to finish what was on our plate because there were so many hungry people in the world who would have been grateful for what we left. I confess that, at a very early age, I was puzzled by this line of moral reasoning: I did not see how the hungry people of Africa would be helped if I stuffed food I really did not want down my protesting gullet. But a home is not a parliament, and I did, more or less, what I was told.

Youth, it is often said, is a generous age, fully of pity and compassion. I do not agree: I think it is mainly an age of self-pity, when one is inclined to imagine that the problems of growing up are the greatest problems in the world. 1968 in Paris, for example, was all about self-pity, not about making the world a better place. You can see from the photographs that the student rioters were spoilt and narcissistic children, posing carefully for the photographers.

In France, there has been a huge 40th anniversary outpouring of books devoted to the events of 1968, and one in particular caught my eye and angered me: a book of posters and caricatures by the student participants. I opened it, and there was a caricature of de Gaulle, his face revealed as a mask behind which was his real face, that of Hitler. I slammed the book shut in disgust. What whippersnappers the *soixante-huitards* were!

Shortly after then, I was taught physiology by a woman called Gerta Vrbova, later a professor. She was very distinguished in her

field, neuro-muscular physiology, and world-famous in it: though, of course, you could go a very long way on an average street before you met anyone who knew anything of her subject, or even of its existence.

I regret to say that I was not a very good student, not being gifted in the right fashion and, to be honest, not very conscientious either. I wish now that I had been more attentive, but at the time I was only intellectually aware, not emotionally aware, that time's arrow flew in one direction only. I still thought my life was so long that there would be time for everything, and that no omission on my part would have lasting or irrecoverable consequences.

Everyone in the department knew that Dr Vrbova had suffered greatly in the war, but she never spoke of it. On the contrary, her work appeared far more important to her than her past; most of us were too young, too callow and too spoilt to appreciate the depth of the kind of suffering that she had endured. And so it was with great interest that I recently came across her memoir, *Trust and Deceit*, quite by chance. It starts with a moving explanation of why she wrote it (in 2006):

> I should like to explain why I now feel the need to extract from my memory people, places and events that have been buried there for half a century. After all, 'forgetting' them was what helped me to live a normal life, pursue my career as a scientist and bring up my children, with what I hope was minimal damage.
>
> Yet the burden of my past, the memories of my loving family who perished in the gas chambers of Nazi Germany and the story of my own survival are now haunting me and demanding that they be written down so that they should not be irretrievably lost.

Dr Vrbova was born in Slovakia of bourgeois Jewish parentage, speaking German at home and Slovak at school. Her father was a businessman who trusted to the fundamental goodness of his neighbours and fellow citizens, and in the protection of the law, refusing to emigrate despite all the signs of trouble to come, until it was too late. (One of his employees, whom he had always treated well, joyfully took over his business without a qualm when the opportunity arose as a result of anti-Semitic legislation, and of course ran it

into the ground, just as the new African owners did when Idi Amin confiscated Indian-owned businesses in Uganda.)

Dr Vrbova's family fled to Budapest because of the comparatively mild regime there of Admiral Horthy; but Horthy was replaced by Hitler because he was not anti-Semitic enough, and the subsequent regime grew much more murderous. On the final occasion that Dr Vrbova saw her father, he said to her, 'You must forgive me that I have always made the wrong decisions, and brought you into danger. Your mother wanted us to emigrate, but I had too much trust in my fellow citizens...' With dignified poignancy, Dr Vrbova, who was 17 when this happened, writes, 'Somehow I knew that this was the last time I would see him.' And it was.

She and her mother were arrested by the Gestapo, but on the sixth day of her interrogation, Dr Vrbova managed to escape by jumping out of a window while the guard's back was turned. She wanted her mother to go with her, but her mother could not face the danger of escape and stayed behind; she did not really want to live any longer and was deported to Auschwitz where she was gassed.

Remaining at large, Dr Vrbova met up with some young men on the run. One of them fell in love with her and wanted her to sleep with him, but she was not attracted to him and refused. Neither of them had ever had sexual relations; he was killed the next day, and she felt deeply sad for the rest of her life that she had not agreed to give him his moment of ecstasy before he died.

To have made a distinguished career after such experiences (and many others that I have omitted), to have found life still to be worthwhile, to have been able to deal equably with spoilt young middle class students who had experienced nothing remotely comparable to all that she had suffered by the age of 17, and whose idea of conflict and suffering was not being allowed by their parents to stay out after ten o'clock at night, was admirable.

It was her forgetfulness – a very different thing from amnesia – that made it possible. By forgetfulness I mean the decision to put these terribly painful things to the back of her mind. She must have understood that dwelling on them was of no use if she were to live a tolerable life; that if she were not forgetful in that sense, she would never smile or enjoy anything again; but that now that she was approaching the end of her life, things were different:

> I owe those who did not survive the Holocaust, as well as those who might benefit from my experience, an account of my observations of certain events that took place in Europe during those terrible years when a highly sophisticated society perpetrated the most horrible crimes in history.

It was not only because Dr Vrbova taught (or rather, tried to teach) me that I found her book so moving. My mother died in 2005 aged 85. She came to England from Nazi Germany in 1939. Her father was a doctor who evidently had also not seen the writing on the wall, just like Dr Vrbova's father had not. A major in the German army in the First World War, he was a German patriot who had won two Iron Crosses.

After my mother's death, I found a cache of letters from her father, some from Nazi Germany and the rest (after July 1939) from Shanghai, to where he managed to escape with his wife and older daughter. The language in which these letters were written changed abruptly from German to English on 4 September 1939.

The letters from Germany describe, without commentary, his journeys to all the embassies and consulates in search of a visa. It came as a surprise to me, for example, that Haiti maintained a consulate in Nazi Germany. No South American country would accept him; eventually, China did.

In 1942, from Shanghai, he wrote:

> It is a beautiful spring day and the sun is shining brightly. But there is no sun bright enough to penetrate the dark clouds that are covering the whole earth.

My mother was 21 at the time.

In 1945, she received a letter from her sister asking her in what language she wanted the gravestones of her two parents: German or English?

There was another cache of letters, tied up still in red ribbon. It was of letters from her first fiancé, a fighter pilot in the Royal Air Force. Among them was the telegram from the War Office, telling her that he had gone missing in the defence of Malta, and another saying,

after an interval of a few weeks, he must be presumed dead. There was also a love letter from Malta, written by him on the very day before he went missing; and a letter from his wing-commander giving an eye-witness account of the shooting down of his aircraft.

I discovered many other things from these letters: for example, that my mother had entered domestic service when she arrived in England in order to survive financially. There are other things too painful to disclose.

Now my mother spoke very little of her past, right up to her death. Her memories died with her. She would speak of her childhood up to 30th January 1933 – that of a bourgeois girl growing up – but there was a complete blank (except that she had seen Hitler in the stadium in the 1936 Olympics) until such time as she had found her feet in England. She gave every appearance of having enjoyed the war.

Most of my mother's suffering was unknown to me. Of course, there were people who suffered much worse than she: she never saw the inside of a concentration or extermination camp, for example. But yet, never to have seen her parents again, to have emigrated, friendless and penniless, to another country at the age of 17, and to have lost her fiancé killed in a war: that is enough for any human being.

She dealt with it by silence. When the Mayor of Berlin invited her back to Berlin towards the end of her life, she accepted, much to my surprise; and she pored over a map of the city, pointing out to me where she had lived and where she had gone to school. When she arrived the streets were there, but she recognised nothing; bombs had razed everything to the ground.

I offered to go with her, but she went on her own. It is an unfashionable truth in these times of psychobabble and emotional intelligence, but a trouble shared is often a trouble doubled. She wanted all that she had seen, and all that she suffered, to go with her to the grave, for she was of the pessimistic view that man never learns, at least from the experience of others. I do not entirely agree, and wish she had said more; but she had earned the right to silence.

INFLATION'S MORAL HAZARD

INFORMATION FROM THE MOST diverse sources sometimes coalesces and provokes reflection on a subject to which one has not previously given sufficient thought. This happened to me recently with regard to the effect of monetary inflation on human character. With many observers predicting a substantial rise in inflation as a result of various government spending programmes undertaken to reverse the current global downturn, the topic is anything but academic.

I was reading *The Innocence of Edith Thompson*, by Lewis Broad, a book written in the 1950s about a murder in 1920s London. Freddy Bywaters was a handsome young sailor, Edith Thompson an unsatisfactorily married woman. They had a torrid love affair, and Bywaters eventually stabbed Thompson's husband to death as he walked home one evening from the theatre with his wife. Thompson's love letters to Bywaters, prosecutors claimed, were an incitement to murder – such an incitement that they rendered her a murderess herself. She was found guilty and hanged.

Broad's book happens to mention Thompson's comparative prosperity. She managed a millinery shop and earned enough to put her in the middle class: 'six pounds per week', as the author puts it, 'or twelve pounds in our debased currency.' A doubling of prices in three decades called a debasement of the currency? What would Broad have written if he knew what was to come in the years ahead?

Then I began reading *Ursa Major*, a study of Doctor Johnson by C.E. Vulliamy. It was hostile to the great man; but from the point of view of inflation, what was interesting was Johnson's pension from the Crown. Worth £300 per year when granted in 1762, Vulliamy informs us, it would have been worth £800 at the time of *Ursa Major*'s publication in 1946.

But that £800, according to Broad's book, would have been worth only £400 as recently as 1921. If we put these two stories together, it means that £300 in 1762 was the equivalent of £400 in 1921; or that in a century and a half, prices rose in Britain by about 33%, an overall rate so slow as to have been almost imperceptible year to year. Such stability must have seemed more a fact of nature than a consequence of human behaviour or policy, and therefore something that would last forever.

I can attest to a prolonged era of price stability from evidence in my own lifetime. When I was born, it cost one and a half times as much to send a letter as it had 100 years earlier. In my childhood, during the 1950s, we still used the same coins, with the same denominations, that people had used during the Victorian era. Occasionally, indeed, we came across pre-Victorian coins and their continued use was not absurd: although prices had risen, they still bore some resemblance to what they had been in the earlier time.

I also remember the vast white £5 notes that my father kept in a roll in his pocket, only 100 or 200 of which would have been needed in those days to buy a decent house. And it was still possible for a boy like me to buy something with the smallest coin of the realm, a farthing, worth one-960th of a pound.

The regime of relative price stability soon collapsed. During the 1960s and 1970s, the sums of money of which everyone spoke increased, first by a little and then by a lot. All that had seemed solid, to paraphrase Marx, melted into air.

At the time, I gave no thought to the effects of this inflation, which tended to be discussed in purely economic terms. In a naive way, I assumed that since most people's income tended to rise with inflation, there was nothing to worry about. I did not suffer personally because of it, nor did most of the people I knew. If a product once cost y and now cost $10y$, what did it matter, so long as your income had gone up by ten times, too? Since people seemed better off, one could even assume that incomes had risen faster than inflation.

Yet this was a crude way of looking at things, as my father's fate should have instructed me. He sold his business in the 1960s, at the end of the period of price stability that had reigned throughout his life, for what then seemed a large amount of money. He was a man who held a deep contempt for financial speculation with the result that he did nothing as inflation inexorably eroded his savings. He grew poorer through the remaining 30 years of his life, and might have sunk into poverty had he not moved into a house that I owned.

For a while, I was angry about what seemed my father's improvidence. As the current financial crisis has conclusively demonstrated, however, not everyone is blessed with foresight, not even those whose livelihood depends on the claim of possessing it. My father was born of a generation that saw money as a store of

value, a far from dishonourable notion. And as I reach the age when inflation might cause me some embarrassment, my sympathy with my father's plight has grown. I am no longer young enough to fight another day, economically speaking: the destruction of my wealth by inflation would be final.

Like my father, I am not particularly avaricious; on the other hand, I have no vocation for poverty and share the prejudice of most of mankind that a loss of capital and a sharp decline of income are much to be feared. In an era of price stability, a man of my disposition could judge with a degree of certainty how much money he would need for each year of his retirement. The calculation of how much principal he would require now, in order to yield that amount of money in interest each year in the future, was relatively simple and would yield financial tranquillity.

That kind of tranquillity about one's financial future is more difficult for most of us to achieve now. U.S. President Ronald Reagan and British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher brought raging inflation under control during the 1980s, but they could not reverse the public's loss of confidence in money as a store of value. People must today try to foresee not only how long they will live but also the reigning economic conditions of the next 40 years. And this, to quote Doctor Johnson in another context, 'requires faculties which it has not pleased our Creator to give us.'

There seems to be no choice, then, but for everyone to have constant regard to his own pile, and to try to outwit the economic moth and rust that threaten to erode all but the largest fortunes: he must speculate, or risk losing nearly everything. The question of whether it is best to hold shares, or bonds, or property, or some combination of them, is constantly before him. Further, funds' managers and investors do not always have the same interests. A man trying to preserve a competence learns to trust neither himself nor others.

Many times I have received advice to borrow as much as I could so that I might buy the best and most expensive house possible. And for many years it seemed good advice, for what could be more advantageous than to buy an appreciating asset with depreciating currency? It was a painless way to become rich.

I did not take the advice. I remained sufficiently a child of the regime of constant prices that I found it difficult to imagine how a

sum that seemed vast now would seem trifling in just a few years. Even so, I borrowed within what I thought to be my means, and thereby accumulated assets of a value that I could not have obtained by the steady build up of savings. The curious result has been that at no point in my career could I have afforded to buy the property that I now own, whose value greatly exceeds my cumulative income over the years. If my borrowing had been bolder, the value would exceed my earnings even more.

My situation is no different from that of millions of others. And since we are all richer than we should otherwise be, is there anything to complain about? The problem is that this 'richer' represents a curious kind of wealth. I must live somewhere, and everywhere else has appreciated in value, too. I don't live any better in my house than I did before simply because it is worth three times what I paid for it. Its increase in value is thus of no use to me, unless I want to sell it to live in a less valuable house and invest the difference.

But for many years people have treated rising property values as if they were the real thing, and the government has supported this belief by allowing extremely easy credit.

During those fat years, a man could sit at home watching television and imagine that he was growing richer thereby. I remember an eminent professor telling me that he was making nearly £600 per day merely by owning a very large house in a fashionable area. The government could not have been better pleased, for the majority of the population felt prosperous as never before and attributed their affluence to the government's wise economic guidance.

But asset inflation as the principal source of wealth corrodes the character of people. It not only undermines the traditional bourgeois virtues but makes them ridiculous and even reverses them. Prudence becomes imprudence, sobriety becomes mean-spiritedness, self-control becomes betrayal of the inner self, patience and steadiness becomes inflexibility. And circumstances force almost everyone to join in the dance.

Except in one circumstance: the possession of a salary and a pension that the government promises to index against inflation. This is the situation of public sector workers and is a pyramid scheme, too. But meantime, such employment will seem a safe haven, and the temptation will be for government to expand it, with the happy

consequence – for itself – of increasing dependence. And dependence, too, undermines character.

It is no coincidence that the Western leader most worried about a new bout of inflation is German Chancellor Angela Merkel. If there is one thing that Germans agree about, it is the necessity of a sound currency. The hyperinflation of the 1920s brought about a German change in mentality as great as the one caused by the First World War, with what disastrous consequences 50 million dead might attest if they had voice. The solidity of the Deutschmark was the great German achievement of the second half of the twentieth century.

Inflation is not a bogey for everyone – not for those who wish to restructure society, for example. But for the rest of us, the consequences of its full-blown return are not likely to be good: for inflation is not an economic problem only, or even mainly, but one that afflicts the human soul.