

Education of a Tory

By Samuel Hux (January 2018)



Saturday Morning, Upper West Side, Theresa Bernstein, 1946

Political thought should be personal, or give up any pretense to being serious—not *out of books*, that is, no matter how *supported by books*. I can no more trust an impersonal political theorist than I can someone who writes ethics *for someone else*. And political thought is about the “good life,” as Aristotle understood, or it doesn’t seem to me worth doing. For many years I’ve thought I lived *a*, if not *the*, good life. And by some standards, cultural and economic, I have. I have certainly not been one of the “culturally deprived,” and by the sad standards of millions of people I’ve

not been deprived economically. But as I never heard my father say—he'd lost a hand in a press accident as a youth—"At least I need only one glove," I reject the relativist mode of thought. You have to pay for the pair.

"I'm better off than many . . . I'm better off than most" only because "Many are worse off than I . . . most are." I know the destitute only by safe observation; I know the marginal the same way. Sensing the quality of life of the marginal is no great mental act, for I was uncomfortably close several times in my earlier years—more times than my "station" would have led me to expect. I can sense how it is for the destitute only vicariously. And one would do well to take to heart, and suffer, the terrible irony that E.M. Forster was willing to turn upon himself in *Howard's End*. "We are not concerned with the very poor. They are unthinkable, and only to be approached by the statistician or the poet. This story deals with gentlefolk, or with those who are obliged to pretend that they are gentlefolk."

"One" would do well? Yes . . . for frankly I do not feel comfortable with the first person pronoun in what follows. I need a certain distance.

H's father was a profoundly conservative man, but with opinions surprising for a supposed *Southern* Democrat and which had nothing to do with economic orthodoxies. "The Democracy" meant to him as a young man William Jennings Bryan, and then FDR, and the radical but very odd, sometime Republican labor leader (he supported both Hoover and Willkie) John L. Lewis—that last at least an unexpected hero for a small businessman. "These damned fools around here don't know that if labor costs go up five percent, it's the owners who will grin and raise prices fifteen." When the Democrats selected

Adlai Stevenson for the first time, he preferred Estes Kefauver of the coonskin hat. He was a populist, although without (H was pleased to note when he learned a bit more history) the nativist spite, anti-Semitism, and general small-town prejudices that often degraded populism. So, deficient in Oedipal rage, H had no great distance in feeling to travel when he went to college: reading of "the cross of gold," writing a paper on Henry George, devouring biographies of Eugene Victor Debs, writing for a card in Norman Thomas's Socialist Party—well on his way, through books not experience, to possession of the "proper" views for an academic before he knew he would become one. However, a big however, when he studied English history under a professor he'd discover many years later was a contributor to Russell Kirk's journal *Modern Age*, H always "pulled for" the Royalists rather than the Roundheads, admired the Tories rather than the Whigs. A kind of schizoid tendency was setting in.

H's life is not particularly interesting, and mostly irrelevant to these reflections, for many years. University, army, university again, marriage, fatherhood, graduate school, instructorship—the marriage not surviving the extended adolescence of graduate school and instructorship. Petitions, civil rights protests, ban-the-bomb sit-ins, anti-war marches. Ordinary stuff for a junior member of what was once called "the West Side Jacobins."

By the 1970s, H's existence had settled . . . no, elevated, to give truth its due . . . into as close an approximation of the "good life" as he reasonably could have expected. Personally: the beginnings of a quite remarkable relationship, interesting friends. Professionally: publication, pleasure at the very occasional recognition of his name, slow but predictable academic advancement. Economically: child support was a healthy cut, salaries at one of the highest paying public

universities in America meant "you're better off than most," the boring pattern of contingency loan and enforced period of tight-belt, but predictable increments will be a blessing, things are looking up in other respects so why not here? One's "ship will come in."

Just as often it went out. Or rather airplanes did. H was introduced to "abroad." The pattern of nine or ten months in an apartment on Manhattan's Upper West Side and two or three months in Europe was less expensive than it might seem. An apartment could be sub-let, charter flights were laughably reasonable in those days, with friends and luck one could find a house in Europe for a relative pittance (H did), and daily expenses were lower than in New York. It's foolish to undervalue (or to price) the experience of a decade of continent-hopping. Friends have no price tag: an expatriate American painter, a German actor, a Latvian-Swedish-Jewish journalist, a Swedish psychoanalyst, an Australian novelist, a "Prussian" painter ("I'm no German! We're older than that pissy nation"), an ex-RAF pilot become the self-proclaimed "Kosher butcher of London," a Mountbatten ex-patriated to Spain who kept the original German name. Nor do acquaintances: an aged veteran of Franco's Blue Division on the Russian front, the Eurocommunist mayor of a Spanish village, a Hungarian freedom fighter become mercenary soldier, a one-good-armed Lithuanian veteran (or Ukrainian, or Ruthenian, depending upon the day) of the Waffen SS (or the Russian partisans, depending upon the day), the deposed president of an extraordinarily insignificant Third World Nation, a British Rothschild so un-assuming one never thought to call him Baron. People, whether you like or love them and are in return, or whether they are only occasions of experience, have to be accounted part of the good life.

Surely there were certain gratings of the soul, a sort of

foreboding that's almost a professional disease (or dis-ease). Unless one is cushioned by independent means, there is something debilitating and frustrating about an academic career, about trying to make a living from studying culture and being cultured. After the happy democracy of genteel poverty of the first few years, something happens. It becomes difficult to keep tastes and urges compartmentalized. Assuming their existence (and if one can't, one's in the wrong profession absolutely—as most academics in fact are!) one's sense of beauty and quality and distaste for the shoddy grow hard to restrict to aesthetic and intellectual judgment of poems, novels, scores, paintings, metaphysical propositions. One's senses begin to spill over into . . . one's life, the quotidian. Love a good poem for its fine quality, admire the painterly architecture of a Giotto, and just be not bothered by cheaply-crafted corduroys and formica-topped breakfast table? Many can manage it—having to. What to do? What you're doing.

H knew there was a trade-off. This kind of good life, while not extravagant, did cost something. This was no way to make a nest-egg. A small surplus exchanged for pounds or pesetas was not a small capital investment. Nor was rent a mortgage payment. H had become a Manhattanite: to rent is natural. He'd not yet felt the effects of the abandonment of rent control, "gift" to the citizens from Republican-Liberal mayor John Lindsay; although later he was to feel the folly of Democrat Ed Koch's sanguine trust in "land-lord restraint." Yet, Manhattanite, he remained to a degree a small-towner: one might buy a house, elsewhere (as eventually much later he would), but it's unnatural to buy an *apartment*!

It required even then a sturdiness to live in Manhattan, for all the cultural benefits, slowly beginning to rise to the cash level of the aristocrat's diversion. And the Upper West

Side has long been a schizoid area: intellectuals, academics, and shopping-bag ladies; park-bench philosophers and Christ-raving lunatics; sidewalk cafés, singles bars, Irish taverns, and corner gatherings of the unemployed with bottles in paper bags; transient hotels, Riverside Park views, and triple-locked doors. H dated his disenchantment to an afternoon walk to a news-stand. A drunk was taunting a foul-mouthed paraplegic in a wheelchair (an occasional Christ-raver). The paraplegic took out after the drunk, wheeling with his left hand, throwing beer bottles he had in a basket with his right. At home H thought: That seemed just *normal*