

with the noble house of Percy." It mattered little, Wyatt-Brown observes, that no one, including himself, has turned up any evidence of kinship, because the "American Percys assumed it and behaved accordingly"; and indeed this assumption of superiority and a recognition of the failure to live up to superior standards are recurring

themes in the family's history.

In the genealogical quest of the American Percys, Wyatt-Brown finds it ironic that "their claim for noble blood rested in genetic resemblances of a darker nature than genealogists usually expect to unearth." Looking through five centuries of legitimate and illegitimate English Percys he

turned up appalling incidents of madness, early death, depression, and creativity. Their record strangely resembles what Walker Percy called "the long line of manic depressives" from which he sprang, and whose destructive psychological pattern still eludes explanation. It would seem, however, that the manic-depressive

history of the Percys has been particularly useful to so imaginative a historian as Wyatt-Brown; for again and again their wildly shifting moods bring into relief the often contradictory tendencies—generosity, family pride, and acquisitiveness among them—that are embedded in the history of the Southern gentry. □

The Responsibility of Intellectuals

Václav Havel

President Havel gave the following address at Victoria University, in Wellington, New Zealand, on March 31, 1995.

Some time ago a wise old man came to see me in Prague and I listened to him with admiration. Shortly afterward I heard that he had died. His name was Karl Popper. He was a world traveler who watched the course of the biggest war ever waged by humankind—the war unleashed by the tribal fury of Nazi ideology—from this country, from New Zealand. It was here that he thought about the state of the world, and it was here that he wrote his most important books. Undoubtedly influenced by the harmonious coexistence of people of different cultures on the islands of New Zealand, he asked himself why it was so difficult for the idea of an open society to prevail against wave after wave of tribalism, and he inquired into the spiritual background of all enemies of the open society and into the patterns of their thinking.

Addressing you on this ceremonial occasion, I should like to offer a few remarks on Sir Karl Popper's thoughts, as a tribute to the recently deceased thinker.

1.

One of the targets of Popper's profound criticism—criticism he supported by ample evidence—was a phenomenon he called holistic social engineering. He used this term to describe attempts to change the world for the better, completely and globally, on the basis of some preconceived ideology that purported to understand all the laws of historical development and to describe inclusively, comprehensively, and holistically a state of affairs that would be the ultimate realization of these laws. Popper clearly demonstrated that this pattern of human thinking and behavior can only lead to totalitarianism.

I come from a country that lived for several decades under a Communist regime, and on the basis of my own experience, I can confirm that Sir Karl Popper was right. In the beginning was an allegedly scientific theory of historical laws; it was Marxist theory and it subsequently gave rise to the Communist utopia, the vision of a paradise on earth. That vision eventually produced the gulags, the endless suffering of many nations, the endless violation of the human being. Anything that in any way opposed the Communist vision of the world—thus calling that vision into question or actually proving it wrong—was mercilessly crushed. Needless to say, life, with its unfathomable diversity and unre-



dictability, would not be squeezed into the crude Marxist cage. The guardians of the cage could only suppress and destroy whatever they could not force into it. Ultimately, they had to declare war on life itself and its innermost essence. I could give you thousands of concrete examples of how all the natural manifestations of life were stifled in the name of an abstract, theoretical vision of a better world. It was not just that there were what we call human rights abuses. This enforced vision led to the moral, political, and economic devastation of all of society.

Instead of such holistic engineering, Popper argued for a gradual approach, for an effort to improve incrementally the institutions, mechanisms, and techniques of human coexistence, and to improve them by remaining constantly in touch with experience and constantly enriching it. Improvements and changes must be made according to whatever has proved to be good, practical, desirable, and meaningful, without the arrogant presumption that we have understood everything about this world, and thus know everything there is to know about how to change it for the better.

In my country one of the understandable reactions to the tragic experience of communism is the opinion we sometimes encounter that man should, if possible, refrain altogether from trying to change or ameliorate the world, from devising long-range concepts, strategic plans, or visions. All this is seen as part of the armory of holistic social engineering. This opinion, of course, is greatly mistaken. Paradoxically, it has much in common with the fatalism Popper sees in those who believe that they have grasped the laws of history and that they serve those

laws. This fatalism takes the form of the peculiar idea that society is nothing more than a machine that, once properly set in motion, can run on its own, automatically and forever.

I am opposed to holistic social engineering. I refuse, however, to pour out the baby with the bath water and I am a long way from thinking that people should give up altogether on a constant search for ways to improve the world in which they must live together. It must be done, though they may never achieve more than partial improvements in particular areas, though they will always have to wait to see whether the change was the right thing to do, and though they must always be prepared to rectify whatever life has shown to be wrong.

Recently I expressed this opinion in the presence of a philosopher friend of mine. He looked somewhat puzzled at first, and then began trying to persuade me of something I have never denied, that the world, in its very essence, is a holistic entity; that everything in it is interconnected; that whatever we do in any one place has an incalculable impact everywhere, though we may not see the whole of it; that even the postmodern science of these days supplies evidence of this.

With this remark, my friend has compelled me to supplement what I said, and perhaps even what Popper wrote. Yes, it is true that society, the world, the universe—Being itself—is a deeply mysterious phenomenon, held together by billions of mysterious interconnections. Knowing all this and humbly accepting it is one thing; but the arrogant belief that humanity, or the human spirit or reason, can grasp and describe the world in its entirety and derive from this description a vision of its improvement—that is

something else altogether. It is one thing to be aware of the interconnection of all events; believing that we have fully understood this is something utterly different.

In other words: I believe, as Popper does, that neither politicians, nor scientists, nor entrepreneurs, nor anyone else should fall for the vain belief that they can grasp the world as a whole and change it as a whole by a single action. Seeking to improve it, people should proceed with the utmost caution and sensitivity, step by step, always paying attention to what each change actually brings about. At the same time, however, I believe—possibly differing from Popper's views to some extent—that as they do, they should be aware of all the global interrelations that they can know, while bearing in mind that beyond their knowledge is an infinitely wider range of interrelations. My relatively brief sojourn in the realm of so-called high politics convinces me time and again of the need to take this very approach. Most of the threats hanging over the world now, as well as many of the problems confronting it, could be dealt with much more effectively if we could see past the ends of our noses and heed, to some extent at least, the broader interconnections that go beyond the scope of our immediate or group interests. This awareness, of course, should never become an arrogant utopian conviction that we alone possess the whole truth about these interconnections. On the contrary, it should emanate from a deep and humble respect for them and for their mysterious order.

2.

A debate is now going on in my country about the role of intellectuals: about how important or how dangerous they are, about the degree to which they can be independent, about how and to what extent they should become engaged in politics. At times, the debate has been confused, partly because the word "intellectual" means different things to different people. This is closely related to what I have just said here.

Let me try—just for the moment—to define an intellectual. To me, an intellectual is a person who has devoted his or her life to thinking in general terms about the affairs of this world and the broader context of things. Of course, intellectuals are not the only ones who do this. But they do it—if I may use the word—professionally. That is, their principal occupation is studying, reading, teaching, writing, publishing, addressing the public.

Often—though certainly not always—this makes them more receptive to more general issues; often—though certainly not always—it leads them to embrace a broader sense of responsibility for the state of the world and its future.

If we accept this definition of an intellectual, then it will come as no surprise that many an intellectual has done a great deal of harm to the world. Taking an interest in the world as a whole and feeling an increased sense of responsibility for it, intellectuals often yield to the temptation to try to grasp the world as a whole, to explain it entirely and offer universal solutions to its problems. An impatience of mind and a variety of mental shortcuts are the usual reasons why intellectuals tend to devise holistic ideologies and succumb to the seductive power of holistic social engineering. For that matter—were not the forerunners of Nazi ideology, the founders of Marxism, and the first Communist leaders intellectuals par excellence? Did not a number of dictators, and even some terrorists—from the leaders of the former German Red Brigades to Pol Pot—start off as intellectuals? Not to mention the many intellectuals who, though they neither created nor introduced dictatorships, time and again failed to stand up to them because they were more than others prone to the delusion that there was a universal key to eliminating human woes. It was to describe this phenomenon that the expression "*trahison des clercs*"—"the betrayal of the intellectuals"—was coined. The many different anti-intellectual campaigns in my country have always pointed the finger at this type of intellectual. This is the source of their belief that the intellectual is a biological species dangerous to humankind.

Those who claim this are committing an error very similar to the one committed by those whose utter rejection of socialist planning leads them to reject conceptual thinking.

It would be nonsense to believe that all intellectuals have succumbed to utopianism or holistic engineering. A great number of intellectuals both past and present have done precisely what I think should be done: they have perceived the broader context, seen things in more global terms, recognized the mysterious nature of globality, and humbly deferred to it. Their increased sense of responsibility for this world has not made such intellectuals identify with an ideology; it has made them identify with humanity, its dignity, and its prospects. These intellectuals build people-to-people solidarity. They foster tolerance, struggle against evil and violence, promote human rights, and argue for their indivisibility. In a word, they represent what has been called "the conscience of society." They are not indifferent when people in an unknown country on the other side of the planet are annihilated, or when children starve, nor are they unconcerned about global warming and the prospects of future generations leading an endurable life. They care about the fate of virgin forests in faraway places, about whether or not humankind will soon destroy all its nonrenewable resources, or whether a global dictatorship of advertisement, consumerism, and blood-and-thunder stories on TV

will ultimately lead the human race to a state of complete idiocy.

And where do intellectuals stand in relation to politics? There have been many misunderstandings about that, too.

My opinion is simple: when meeting with utopian intellectuals, we should resist their siren calls. If they enter politics, we should believe them even less. The other type of intellectual—those who are mindful of the ties that link everything in this world together, who approach the world with humility, but also with an increased sense of responsibility, who wage a struggle for every good thing—such intellectuals should be listened to with the greatest attention, regardless of whether they

work as independent critics, holding up a much-needed mirror to politics and power, or are directly involved in politics.

These two roles are very different from each other. My friend Timothy Garton Ash, with whom I have been discussing this subject for years, is certainly right about that. But while this is clearly so, it does not follow that we should bar such intellectuals from the realm of politics on the pretext that their only place is in universities or the media. On the contrary: I am deeply convinced that the more such people engage directly in practical politics, the better our world will be. By its very nature, politics induces those who work in it to focus their attention on short-term issues that have

a direct bearing on the next elections instead of on what will happen a hundred years from now. It compels them to pursue group interests rather than the interests of the human community as a whole, to say things that please everyone and not those which people are less happy to hear, to treat even truth itself with caution. But this is not a reason to deny intellectuals a place in politics. It is instead a challenge to draw into it as many of them as possible. After all, who is better equipped to decide about the fate of this globally interconnected civilization than people who are most keenly aware of these interconnections, who pay the greatest regard to them, who take the most responsible attitude toward the world as a whole? □