Prospects for Tomorrow

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Between Security and Insecurity

Thames & Hudson

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Preface

When Yorick Blumenfeld asked me to write a book for the series *Prospects for Tomorrow* on the subject of security and insecurity, and added the request that I should, if possible, avoid being over-pessimistic, I hesitated. There is a sense in which being pessimistic or optimistic is an attitude to life, and throughout my life I have resisted writing anything that contradicted my attitude to life. Am I an optimist or a pessimist?

My childhood was not the easiest, since a quarter of it was spent in a concentration camp. Most of my relations and childhood friends perished. The dead and dying were so much before my eyes that it must have had an effect on me. But when the war was over and I had managed to survive it, somewhere in my subconscious the thought became lodged that if I could survive that horror then I could survive anything. Maybe that explains why, when I became one of the banned writers in Czechoslovakia, my colleagues regarded me as a lifelong optimist and would come to me for encouragement.

What are my books like in this respect? Criticism (apart from the so-called 'socialist' variety) tends not to deal with the question of whether a book is optimistic or pessimistic. Readers, on the other hand, are powerfully aware of a book's message. Some of my readers have told me that my books depress them, others have said that, on the contrary, they found them uplifting. I personally think that my first books, such as *A Ship Named Hope* (1970), were not particularly uplifting. I was still preoccupied with thoughts of death, my experience of the barbarities that people are capable of, and my concern that at any moment a sham saviour might turn up offering people false hope and lead them to some new catastrophe (a danger, incidentally, that persists, as I shall try to show.)

Some time at the beginning of the 1970s I read an extremely gripping novel by a leading Jewish American author. It was highly critical in tone, fulminating rather like an Old Testament prophet against human pettiness and the futility of the goals that most people in contemporary American society set themselves. It struck me that literature often assumes the prophetic role of condemning our way of life but without the hope that the Old Testament prophets offered – the Lord God had signed a Covenant with Man promising to support those who remained true to Him, and He should therefore be the goal of all their strivings. It occurred to me then that literature that criticizes people without offering them a solution only increases their sense of helplessness and alienation. Literature ought to give people hope – hope that has nothing to do with affluence, and is not necessarily found where people sought it for hundreds and thousands of years. In my novel *Love and Garbage*, published in 1990, I wrote:

> I still believe that literature has something in common with hope, with a free life outside the fortress walls which, often unnoticed by us, surround us, with which moreover we surround ourselves. I am not greatly attracted to books whose authors merely portray the helplessness of our existence, despairing of man, of our conditions, despairing over poverty and riches, over the finiteness of life and the transience of feelings. A writer who doesn't know anything else had better keep silent.
>
> Man goes through the landscape, seeking hope and waiting for a miracle, waiting for someone to answer his questions . . . .'

It seems to me that there are few optimists among those who reflect responsibly on the future of humanity and the planet. Some of the most optimistic, in my view, are the authors of the remarkable study *Beyond the Limits* (1992) that comprises Donella and Dennis Meadows' vision of a permanently sustainable future. The conclusions that emerge from their computer models, which largely deal with material factors, demographic growth and technology, are very persuasive. What they could hardly have taken into account, however, were spiritual considerations: our customs and aspirations; the fact

that as well as reasonable people there are hundreds of millions of unreasonable and criminal individuals; that alongside those who can afford the luxury of considering the future of the planet, there are hundreds of millions whose only concern is how to stave off hunger. These are such variable and unquantifiable factors that it would be hard to create a computer programme capable of evaluating them. It is something that only we can do, and people's judgments are notoriously personal.

I don't know to what extent I was influenced by the original Club of Rome report *The Limits to Growth* (Meadows, et al.) and its views on the 'Predicament of Mankind', but even before it was published in 1972, I held the view that our civilization is selfish and profligate, and therefore immoral.

I am convinced that the moment is approaching for the whole of humanity when it will be a question not just of the survival of our civilization, but of life itself. We are the only living creatures with the power of abstract thought, and human reason is undoubtedly capable of finding positive and worthwhile solutions at moments of crisis. Unfortunately the voice of reason does not always prevail at such critical moments.

I don't know whether my reflections will sound optimistic, but they will also be about the pursuit of hope.

Chapter 1

A New Concept of Time

Many authors and thinkers have tried to identify what most typifies the modern age. What is most characteristic of our times: splitting the atom, escaping the pull of gravity, the invention of the computer or genetic engineering?

All those revolutionary discoveries are more or less related to the material side of life. They have also had spiritual repercussions, of course, but I would contend that even more emblematic of our age is the radical transformation in the understanding of space and time. I am not referring to philosophical arguments about the nature or direction of time, but to ordinary people's conceptions of it.

For thousands, or rather tens of thousands of years, people were only aware of their immediate surroundings, and their understanding of time and space had a human dimension. Not so very long ago people believed that God created the world with a word, that he created it out of nothing and in total darkness. Greek mythology held that both the world and the gods emerged in the dim and distant past out of endless Chaos – but even that distant past had a human dimension. According to the *Bundahish* of the Avesta (the sacred writings of Zoroastrianism), the world was only twelve thousand years old, and in the first period of its creation it existed solely in the mind of the Creator-God Ahura Mazda. The Jewish thinker Shimon ben Lakish maintained that the Torah predated the Creation by two thousand years. Indeed the Bible provides a genealogy going back to the first man – Adam. Even though the lifespan of the patriarchs was many hundreds of years and had little in common with conceivable human longevity, it was still a period of time that people could comprehend. Compared to the beautiful and comforting myth of Adam, it is much harder to grasp the idea that each of us is here only as the result of

thousands of chance encounters, or thanks to the fact that some unknown ancestor of ours tens of thousands of years ago returned safe from the field of battle or survived the plague, or that one of our female ancestors avoided being murdered when she was taken captive – in other words, that we are the descendants of love and hate, and if we want to be consistent we ought to seek our ancestors in the pre-human past.

In the eighth Psalm, the singer praises God:

> When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained . . . .

This is a very human picture of the cosmos.

In the splendid *Bhagavadgita*, Krishna is without beginning, without growth, without end. He is the time that smooths the world. He is adorned with stars but at the same time is capable of assuming 'the dear face of humanity', in the same way that the Christian God assumed human form in Jesus Christ and as did the gods of Greek mythology. These were all very human concepts.

A few thousand years ago, people began to suspect that the stars were more distant than was supposed, but ideas of their size, distance and age bore no relation to reality. Apparently only the Maya – whose culture existed in total isolation from other cultures – calculated the age of the earth in millions of years. It would seem, however, that their notions were arrived at essentially by deduction. It was an attempt to explain the present in terms of the past rather than objective research into the age of the universe.

Ignorance of the actual extent of time and space also influenced the various myths about the beginning and end of the world and the form and creative power of the gods. It had a bearing, too, on the idea of the special position of man, whose immaterial soul – according to most religions – survives the death of the body and is invisibly present in the world of the living or is subject to the circle of reincarnation, or at least is reunited with the body at the end of the world, when it will be judged on the day the Saviour finally returns.

In the human dimension of time and space, all such assumptions were conceivable. A world that had only lasted a few thousand years was bound to end soon, or it was at least a possibility. The gods (or the One God) could create this world and the strange lights in the night sky – the whole of Creation – and could direct the course of life on earth. Poets could believe in the immortality of their works in the same way that people could write on gravestones that the memory of the departed would live for ever.

A universe that has existed for billions of years since the original singularity (what preceded it, another time? another universe?), and whose dimensions have to be measured in billions of light-years no longer has human dimensions. Our reason may register those enormous figures, but their actual meaning defies our power of imagination.

God or the gods as we know them from mythology belong to the era of time on a human scale along with notions of the immortality of the human soul: the comforting conjecture that the self is capable of surviving its death in some form or other. For what can be capable of lasting billions of years in a world in which everything is condemned to disappear, where even the hardest rock is destroyed in the end?

The Czech philosopher Josef Šafařík published a wide-ranging work in 1992, whose main premise is that Christianity, which sought to do away with history, runs into trouble when it is forced to enter history and historical time. It concludes:

> Christians have a mental complex about history to which they do not belong, and the longer salvation is delayed, the more their self-saving and infallible church loses credit with the lord of time . . . . Time operates mercilessly to the detriment of Christians and undermines their security by calling into question the very certainty and assurance of their radical self-sacrifice, through which they participate in the power of limitless death, in absolute, other-worldly power.

When people start to doubt their faith, however, it must affect their behaviour, their moral criteria and their concern for their souls. Such

concern is the very basis of Greek thought, particularly Plato's philosophy, as it is of Christianity. The person who loses interest in his own soul loses one of the fundamental attributes of humanity.

The latest knowledge about the dimensions of time and space conflicts with traditional notions about the origin of the world, or about Creation and human immortality. It also challenges the view that man is privileged to have the power of life or death over all other living beings. Those who are prepared to accept this new knowledge must also accept their own insignificance and the fact that the only real and unchangeable certainty of life is that it is finite. The trouble is that people want hope; they want to believe in permanence, in some continuation of their existence after their physical death, in the way that former generations believed in it. Why then should they accept the certainty of their non-existence as their only security?

One of the most beautiful ballads in Czech literature, 'Christmas Eve' (1853), tells of two girls who go to a lake on Christmas Eve to read their immediate fate in the water's surface. One of them sees a coffin and within the year she dies. The poet, Karel Jaromír Erben, concludes his ballad with the following paraphrase of folk wisdom:

> But better far to hope on vainly,
> Pure darkness hiding the time to be,
> Than to seek light, and to see too plainly,
> And know the terrible certainty.

This is a piece of wisdom that some people, at least, are bound to accept, even if subconsciously; accordingly they will strive to regard their own lives as the only significant dimension, and pay no heed to the others. But what security will that give them? What security will the world offer them in the near future?

It is unlikely that people in the not-so-distant past lived in greater security than we do. They were at greater risk from unexpected events and upheavals in nature and society alike. In Europe wars followed upon wars. Wars meant pillage and destruction. From time to time a plague would wipe out more people than the wars. At other times,

people suffered bad harvests that threatened their property and their lives. Most people lived in straitened circumstances that are hard for us to imagine, and even that subsistence level was not assured. Nobody could be sure of holding on to the little they had, of having something to eat the next day. But people's attitude to life made them meeker and reconciled them to the course of life, which appeared unchangeable and fixed for eternity. Moreover, people believed that if they led humble, God-fearing lives at peace with their neighbours, an eternal reward was theirs. That was their supreme security, even though I imagine many of them doubted it from time to time.

Many of these dangers have been eliminated from modern life. In the developed countries bubonic plague and smallpox are a thing of the past and hunger is no longer a common risk. For over half a century most of the countries of Europe have been free of war. New dangers have arisen, however. Even though most of the time we don't like to recognize the fact, we know that our civilization is threatened because of our actions and our lack of moderation. Our living environment and nature – of which we are a part and without which we cannot exist – are being ruthlessly destroyed. We know that drinking-water, fertile soil and clean air are disappearing. The land, the air and the seas are polluted with hundreds of chemicals, and we have no idea what effect many of them have on living organisms, including ourselves. In the West the probability of our being attacked, robbed or killed at any moment is increasing all the time. We know that there are still so many atomic weapons in the world that all human life could be extinguished as the result of mechanical or human error, or at the whim of a lone madman or a fanatical group. Furthermore, even though medical science copes with most of the diseases that threatened people in the past regardless of age, new dangers are now appearing, partly because of damage to the environment. Cancer now affects even small children, something that tended to be the exception half a century ago. No one can be sure of living to the average age that statistics promise. Citizens in the democratic countries have their basic rights assured, but the experience of this century has proved that it is possible for democracy to disappear overnight. People in the

developed countries need no longer fear going hungry, but this has not brought greater security in their lives.

Several years ago I visited Denmark and took an interest in this very question of social security. One of the richest countries of Europe, Denmark had taken truly radical social measures during the many years of Social Democrat government. As a consequence, nobody lived in fear of poverty. The unemployed received such high benefits that they were able to afford decent housing, private cars, foreign holidays and provide for their families. However the upshot was that nobody bothered about providing enough jobs. Almost half of the country's young people had no hope of finding a job: they lived on unemployment benefit, and in the space of a few years they were accorded the status of pensioner and lost any hope of obtaining employment in Denmark. Their lives were so bereft of any normal rhythm that they become no more than aimless existence. Most members of that enormous section of the population tried to fill the emptiness of their lives with drugs or alcohol.

In our days social insecurity has given way to existential insecurity or emptiness. It would not appear that people have acquired any greater certainty or security than their forebears. Moreover their traditional faith has been undermined, even if they still share many of the beliefs of their ancestors and maintain the remnants of various rituals. They celebrate Christmas, which is often transformed into meaningless over-indulgence. They enter into traditional marriages, half of which break down in some countries (such as in my home country, the Czech Republic). They attend church for at least the major religious festivals, and try to ignore the contrast between what they hear from the pulpit and what they read in books or see on their television screens. In most cases, people's religious belief lacks any authenticity and cannot therefore become the cornerstone of their existence. Nonetheless, people hold on to it, or, if they abandon it, they look for a new one. Why?

In my younger days I was very fond of Vercors' novel *Les Animaux dénaturés* (1952), published as *You Shall Know Them* in the USA in 1953, and as *Borderline* in Britain the following year. The author tries to

answer the seemingly obvious question about where the borderline lies between people and animals. After lengthy research, the author's protagonists come to the conclusion that what distinguishes people from animals is the religious spirit, which is capable of belief – in God or anything else.

Indeed, throughout its existence mankind has acted in accordance with something that transcends daily life. It would seem that the need for belief is somehow anchored in the human genes, which would explain those often inexplicable hordes of fanatics in the course of this past millennium who have fallen prey to preposterous ideologies, false and even psychotic prophets, and absurd superstitions.