

Ignazio Silone

## The Choice of Comrades

THE last forty years have witnessed the collapse of most of the great politico-social myths bequeathed to us by the 19th century. As a result, certain kinds of people who had relied on these myths as a compass find themselves in a state of spiritual vagueness and ambiguity that is still far from being clarified. This situation is one aspect of the general crisis of capitalism and anti-capitalism. We are confronted with the need for reassessment, not only of the problem of how to behave but also of the greater question of the meaning of our existence. It is not a matter, be it said, even in its subsidiary aspects, of literary diversion. There will always be a number of perfectly respectable people who interpret in their own fashion, by their haircut or the way they knot their ties, the spirit of the age in which they live. For others less fortunate, however, times of crisis may bring graver consequences. My concern in these pages is with them.

Suicide among writers in various countries during the past thirty years has reached an unparalleled figure. It seems to me that however much they may differ outwardly, the majority of these episodes have a common source: what Nietzsche called the nihilism of modern times. Whenever I happen to consider the sense of bewilderment, tedium, and disgust characteristic of our age, my mind turns not to the books of Heidegger, Jaspers, and Sartre but to the suicides of Essenin, Majakowsky, Ernst Toller, Kurt Tucholsky, Stefan Zweig, Klaus Mann, Drieu La Rochelle, F. O. Matthiessen, Cesare Pavese, and other lesser-known figures.

What a flock of terrifying ghosts! Persecution, exile, isolation, poverty, illness, abnormality—one or other of these external reasons has been suggested in each case to explain how a man of talent could have sought such a desperate end. But the last writings of these men before death, or their last confidences to their friends, are invariably a confession of anguish or despair at the effort and the futility of living.

These suicides are not to be easily explained away. To pin responsibility for them on any one political régime would clearly be a misrepresentation, since we know that they occurred under widely differing régimes, in Russia, America, and Western Europe. Still less can we blame the pernicious influence of some pessimistic doctrine; Majakowsky was the poet of a victorious revolution, and the others, from Zweig to Pavese, were deeply rooted in the humanist or religious traditions of the society from which they came. (Indeed, one might well reverse the explanation and say it was precisely because they were not pessimistic enough, because they had banished *Angst* from their doctrine and their art, that some of them were to end by succumbing to it so miserably. Inhibition is more deadly than sincerity.)

The decadence of our age, however, had already begun prior to these tragic episodes. It has not merely engulfed a number of cultivated and hypersensitive individuals; it has invaded entire classes and institutions, not even sparing the people. Nietzsche was the first to define this decadence, calling it nihilism, as I

said, and giving the word a new meaning that it has retained, a meaning different from that found in Turgenev's famous novel. Since then, wars and revolutions in constant succession have borne out Nietzsche's prophecy, making evident what in his day was still perhaps obscure.

Nihilism, as Nietzsche conceived it, is the identification of goodness, justice, and truth with self-interest. Nihilism is the conviction that beliefs and ideas are, ultimately, a mere façade with nothing real behind them, and that consequently only one thing really matters, really counts: success. It is nihilistic to sacrifice oneself for a cause in which one does not believe, while pretending to believe in it. It is nihilistic to exalt courage and heroism independently of the cause they serve, thus equating the martyr with the hired assassin. And so on.

**H**ow did we come to this pass? The First World War is generally blamed as the cause and origin of the disaster; but would that war ever have broken out in the first place had the civilised world not already been in a state of crisis? The war merely demonstrated how fragile were the myths of progress on which capitalist civilisation was based. Even in the victorious countries, venerable institutions were subjected to such terrible ordeals that they began to totter like rotten scaffolding. And from them, scepticism and corruption spread and seeped downwards to the very foundations of society. Traditional moral and religious values, rashly invoked to prop up the vested interests which were being threatened, were thereby compromised.

The authoritarian restoration which followed the war—first in Italy and the Balkans, later in Germany and elsewhere—was a remedy worse than the disease. How could conservatives ever have deluded themselves into thinking that political tyranny of any kind would eliminate nihilism? On the contrary, fascism in all its forms meant that nihilism was installed in power. The dictatorships strengthened the old instruments of coercion and created new ones, but they did not create a new moral order; indeed, with their atmosphere of fear and servility, they aggravated

and exacerbated the general decadence. With the collapse of these régimes, the basic nihilism remained, buried deep in peoples' consciences.

And so in many ways we are back where we were, except that we are once again free to discuss the moral situation of man without having to make concessions to a false optimism, dissimulation not being a civic virtue in a democracy.

But the big difficulty is this: nihilism is not an ideology, it cannot be legislated about, it is not a subject for school curricula; it is a disease of the spirit which can be diagnosed only by those who are immune from it or have been cured of it, but to which most people are quite oblivious, since they think it corresponds to a perfectly natural mode of being. "That's how it has always been; that's how it will always be."

We are all familiar with the picture which post-Nietzschean and existentialist literature has drawn of the predicament of present-day man. It can be summarised as follows: all links between the existence and the being of man are broken; existence has no meaning beyond itself; what is human is reduced to mere vitality. Before commenting on what I consider the provisional and transient nature of this representation, I feel bound to state that in some respects I find it praiseworthy. I think sincerity is always to be admired, especially if it requires a certain amount of courage, for without sincerity neither morality nor art can exist. And moreover, at the stage to which things are now reduced, I as a writer see no other way, outside the freedom of art, of placing before the minds of men the problems which elude them, and of presenting them with a truer image of themselves than that which they see daily in the mirror. However, literature cannot take up a permanent abode in a nihilist situation, and the only way out for it, I think, is to explore courageously the entire surface of this situation. Anyone undertaking to do so with absolute intellectual honesty and an uncorrupted heart should sooner or later be able to reach its farthest limit. At that point, one of two things will happen to him: either he will find the abyss of suicide yawning at his feet, or else he will

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rediscover some valid meaning in human existence. This is no abstract hypothesis, but the plain truth of what has happened to quite a number of people.

THE examples are far from insignificant. Here I shall only mention two: the literary path of Ernst Jünger and that of Albert Camus. The German writer reached the farthest limit of nihilism in his famous message *Der Arbeiter*. In this description of a new type of proletarian, depersonalised and standardised, without heart, soul, or brain—a living robot—he depicted the protagonist of the transformation which is taking place in modern society. The greatest freedom of this human robot would consist in being mechanically employed in the series of civil and imperialist wars on which we have already embarked and which will dominate the coming centuries. “To sacrifice oneself for a faith,” wrote Ernst Jünger, “means to reach one’s maximum, irrespective of whether that faith is true or false. The mere fact that men throw themselves into the fray, even though they are knotted up with a fear that no discipline and no love of country can dispel, makes them, like martyrs, bear witness to an ultra-human reality that is beyond and within them.” The heroism of Jünger’s proletarian robots would therefore be all the more sublime the remoter it was from the traditional human sphere and the more closely it resembled that of highly perfected machines. This was a final point beyond which it was impossible to advance. Ernst Jünger retreated from it in time, while Hitler was still in power. In his subsequent works, among which may be mentioned the pages on pain, the novel *Auf den Marmor klippen*, and the diary he kept during the invasion of France in the Second World War, his condemnation of nihilism is increasingly explicit and increasingly based on human motives.

The experience of Albert Camus is different but analogous. No reader of his books can fail to discern the sharp contrast dividing *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* and *L’Etranger* on the one hand, from *La Peste* and the book of essays entitled *L’Homme Révolté* on the other. Camus opens *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* with the concept of suicide,

in order to distil from it an explanation of the meaning of life. He bluntly defines as absurd the reasons for living. “To die voluntarily,” he writes, “implies that one has recognised, at least instinctively, the absurd nature of this habit, the absence of any serious reason for living, the senselessness of this daily agitation and the futility of suffering.” To kill oneself means “simply to recognise that life is not worth the trouble.” In compassion Camus finds the cure for this desolate sense of the absurd. “The world in which I live repels me,” he wrote later, in *L’Homme Révolté*, “but I feel with its suffering inhabitants.” In his novel *La Peste* the existence of the characters is presented, not as the impassive unfolding of arbitrary and meaningless facts, but as the compassionate encounter of human beings suffering and struggling against a common destiny.

At a certain point in *La Peste* Rieux, a doctor, meets a municipal employee named Grand whose wife has just left him, with no ill-will on either side. “From a distance he looked at Grand, who was standing almost glued to a shop window full of roughly carved wooden toys. Tears were streaming down the cheeks of the old clerk. And those tears shook Rieux, because he understood them and could feel them in the dryness of his own throat. He could even remember the day when the poor fellow had got engaged to be married; he had seen him standing in front of a shop decked out for Christmas, with Jeanne bending towards him, telling him she was happy. No doubt but that Jeanne’s fresh voice was echoing now to Grand across the distant years. Rieux knew what the old, weeping man was thinking of at that moment, and he too thought that without love this world of ours is a dead world, and that there always comes a time when, weary of the prisons of work and courage, one wants the face of another human being and a heart filled with the wonder of tenderness. . . . He felt Grand’s unhappiness as his own, and something gnawed at his heart at that moment—the fierce anger that comes over one at the suffering which human beings have to endure.” Even the revolt born of pity alone can restore meaning to life.

André Malraux presents a more remarkable case because this French descendant of Nietzsche, through his progress from Communism back to nationalism, gives the impression of having remained a Nietzschean at heart all the time. The stormy curve of his life's journey does indeed seem the adventure of a "superman" seeking tests and opportunities for his own dreams of glorification. Nevertheless it would be unjust to consider it as a superficial movie-hero affair. Between *La Tentation de l'Occident* and *La Psychologie de l'Art* there is more than a change of scene. In 1926 Malraux was announcing the historical downfall of Europe, "this cemetery where only dead conquerors sleep." The Communist revolt of the coloured peoples seemed to offer him hope; but how ambiguous was his adherence to it. The virile sense of a new brotherhood of man alternated, in the pages of *La Condition Humaine*, with the intoxication of action for its own sake. In *Le Temps du Mépris*, brotherhood was invoked more wholeheartedly, as the last resort against nihilist desperation. It was an active sympathy, consecrated by the sacrifices which culminated in the act of an unknown comrade who saved Kassner, the Communist leader, from Nazi torture. But did this member act on his own initiative or by order of the party machine? And can brotherhood be founded on anything but freedom and personal responsibility? "Economic servitude is hard," old Alvear was to say in *L'Espoir*, "but if in order to destroy it we are obliged to strengthen political or military or religious or police servitude, then what does it matter to me in comparison?" Revolutions, like trees, are to be judged by their fruits, and not by the effort they cost.

I know that these are isolated examples, and that one or even two swallows do not make a summer. Still they do point to a path of salvation, a true way out of nihilism, which springs from a sure and indestructible element deep-rooted in man.

But to return to my point. The particular spiritual condition I wish to discuss has affinities with the instances I have just mentioned. However, it follows a different path and has a

significance of its own. For example, it never starts from philosophical or scientific conviction, but almost always from simple instinctive revolt against family or social surroundings. One fine Sunday some of us stopped going to Mass, not because Catholic dogma seemed to us, all of a sudden, false, but because the people who went began to bore us and we were drawn to the company of those who stayed away. A young man's revolt against tradition is a frequent occurrence in every age and every country, and his reasons are not always clear to the onlooker. According to circumstances, it can lead to the Foreign Legion, to common crime, to a film career, to a monastery, or to political extremism. What characterised our revolt was the choice of comrades. Outside the social organisation of which the Church was so important a part, there were the landless peasants. A choice once made, the rest, as experience shows, follows automatically. Without the slightest attempt at resistance, indeed with the well-known fervour of neophytes, one accepts the language, symbols, organisation, discipline, tactics, programme and doctrine of the party to which one's new comrades belong. It is hardly surprising that rarely should anything learnt in the catechism and schoolbooks hinder one's docile acceptance of the new orthodoxy. Indeed, one does not even feel the need of refuting them, because all of that has become part of the world one has left behind. They are neither true nor false: they are "bourgeois," dead leaves. The choice is emotional, beyond logic. And the claim of the new orthodoxy, which one has accepted so completely, to be scientific and objective—that is not the least of the inconsistencies which you will vainly seek to force on the attention of the convert.

This is the rule. I have read a certain number of biographies of anarchists, socialists, communists and fascists, and I am more or less familiar with the circumstances that led some of my acquaintances into political activity; so far I have found no exceptions to the pattern I have just described, and if any do exist, I think they are rare. We proclaim ourselves revolutionaries or conservatives for motives, often ill-defined, that are deep within us, and

before choosing we are, unknown to ourselves, chosen. As for the new ideology, we learn that, usually, at the schools of the party to which we have already pledged allegiance by an act of faith. Altogether similar—and just as it should be—is the opposite process of abjurement. Ideology is now given the same rough treatment once meted out to the catechism and to patriotic stories. To speak in old-fashioned terms, the head, even in the process of re-learning, is towed along by the heart—or, according to the health of the person in question, by the stomach.

**T**HERE is one duty, however, that we cannot evade: to be aware of what is happening. What could the landless peasants of his Southern Italian village have meant to a young student, in the years immediately preceding the First World War, that he should embrace their cause? He was certainly not thinking of politics as a career. Besides, he as yet knew nothing of the proud Marxist prophecy acclaiming the proletariat as the legitimate heir of modern philosophy. Neither did he know that, after the Milanese revolution of 1848, Carlo Cattaneo had declared the cause of the proletariat to be indissolubly linked thenceforth with that of freedom, one destined to travel through the coming ages with the other, like horseman and rider. He had as yet heard nothing of Rosa Luxemburg's theory of the natural impulse to revolution of the working class, or of Lenin's theory of the forces which propel modern society on the path of progress. Nor did he know of Sorel or other prophets of the new Messiah. But if the new revolutionary theories of the historical mission of the proletariat had not yet reached that remote district of Southern Italy, emigrants returned from America were already prompting the landless peasants to form their first resistance leagues. It is not to be wondered at that a young man already secretly disgusted with his surroundings, witnessing this unaccustomed ferment, should undergo a profound change of heart and become convinced that in an old, tired, decrepit, blasé society such as the one in which he lived, the poor represented the final refuge of life—something

real, to which it would be wholesome to attach oneself.

Those were the declining years of an epoch in which a number of events had seemed to prove the myth about the liberating mission of the proletariat. The fascination of that myth spread far beyond the narrow limits of party politics. It was the great popular alternative to the nihilist decadence of Nietzsche's prophecy—the promise of a new earth and a new heaven. Morals, art, philosophy were all directly influenced by it. And events seemed to indicate that Rosa Luxemburg was right. In those years one did not yet risk contradiction if one claimed that wherever a workers' organisation was active, under whatever régime, in whatever climate or social conditions, despite its shortcomings it would move “naturally” towards freedom and renewal. Indeed, a certain episode occurred around 1905 in Moscow which has remained a classic in the history of the workers' movement and seemed to have been created for the express purpose of proving even to sceptics how well founded was the theory of Rosa Luxemburg about the liberating impulse of the working class. The Tsarist secret police, the Okrana, decided to encourage the formation of a labour union in the hope of drawing underground agitators into it and arresting them. These, however, scented a trap and kept clear of it; but the labour union, despite its police origin, became of its own accord a revolutionary organisation, so that the Okrana was soon obliged to disband it.

Since then, as we all know, the myth of the liberating power of the proletariat has dissolved along with that other myth of the inevitability of progress. The recent examples of the Nazi labour unions, those of Salazar and Peron and, in a broader sense, all reformist and cooperative unions, have at last convinced of this even those who were reluctant to admit it on the sole grounds of the totalitarian degeneration of Communism. Now, however, the decline of that myth must be obvious to anyone who takes the trouble to inform himself of the conditions prevailing in the world beyond his own backyard. It is no longer merely a question of a few privileged

workers (the so-called "proletarian aristocracy" of the imperialist countries, made possible by the exploitation of colonial peoples); nor of the inferior groups on the margin of the productive process (the so-called *Lumpenproletariat*); but of the normal working classes. For Marxists the moral to be drawn is clear: a similar way of living no longer determines an identical or analogous way of thinking. Class consciousness is no longer a natural product of class. Ever since this situation arose, ever since there ceased to exist a world-wide trend of the working classes towards freedom, human life has acquired a new aspect, spiritually as well as politically. The workers' world is spiritually broken-up. It is multiform. The horse of Carlo Cattaneo has thrown its rider and gone wild again. The worker can work for the most conflicting causes; he can be Blackshirt or partisan, executioner or victim, or simply, in rich and peaceful countries, a lazy philistine with no ideals, insured against unemployment, old age, illness, and also against the risk that the insurance company might go bankrupt. But generally, in poor countries, because of his relative political simplicity, he can still be the prey of extremists. He can still be Christ, taking on himself the sins of others; and he can also be Barabbas, an ignoble totalitarian Barabbas, trampling on all that is most human in man. Either way, he is a protagonist on the world stage. The vital role of the workers in production, their numbers, their greater social compactness and homogeneity—the sum of these factors in every country gives them the decisive voice in politics. No other single element is so powerful. On it depends the freedom of mankind, and much else. But since it is no longer class that decides, but conscience, we are back where we started.

ONE need only look around one to see the state to which consciences have been reduced. Nihilism has spread from the upper classes over the entire surface of the social fabric: the epidemic has not spared the working-class districts. Today the nihilist cult of force and success is universal. And the widespread sophistry of cowardice that identifies

History with the winning side—that too is nihilism. Are the dead, are the weak always in the wrong? Was Mazzini wrong? Was Trotsky wrong only because he was defeated? Were Gobetti and Matteotti wrong? And did Gramsci begin to be right only after April 1945? Will he cease to be right if the strength of his party declines? And is fear of the hydrogen bomb the fear of a stronger right, a right therefore more convincing than the others?

To the general feeling of personal insecurity which in our age has been engendered by the economic crisis and the intrusion of the state and politics into every field of human activity, there corresponds the anxious search by individuals for some kind of security and protection in one or other of the political mass parties. This by no means excludes, incidentally, a double game with the opposing party, which might be the winner tomorrow. If ideological criticisms and moral campaigns cannot shake the compactness of the mass parties, if they leave the majority of their members indifferent, it is precisely for the reason already mentioned: those joining the mass parties out of inner ideological conviction are very few. And to the opportunism of individuals obsessed with their own security and that of their families, there is added the usurping tendency of collective organisations. Frankly, I cannot think of a single collective organisation today which could be said to be untainted by the leprosy of nihilism. Group living, it would almost seem, creates the most favourable temperature for the incubation of its germs. The deathly mechanism is always the same: every group or institution arises in defence of an ideal, with which it rapidly comes to identify itself and for which it finally substitutes itself altogether, proclaiming its own interests as the supreme value. "Whoever injures the Party is against History." The members of the group in question are unruffled by this procedure; in fact, they find it serves their purposes. The advantages are by no means negligible, because they are completely absolved from all personal responsibility. In the deplorable event of someone having a scruple, all he need do is bring his problem to the propaganda office. If the



matter is delicate, the answer will be delivered to him at home. Few people realise that the tyranny of means over ends is the death of even the noblest ends. And it is a mere mystification to claim that the reduction of human beings to the status of instruments and raw materials can ever ensure human happiness.

There is no more melancholy image than that of the persecuted who in their turn become persecutors. Here I should like to recall the letter which Simone Weil wrote to Georges Bernanos in the spring of 1938 about the Spanish Civil War. The Catholic-Royalist writer's vehement indictment of the excesses of the Franco repression in Majorca is countered by the anguished confession of the young revolutionary intellectual, then a volunteer on the Republican side. The letter has been published only recently. It expresses a sensitive woman's horror at the useless massacres which accompanied these events. But she had witnessed something else that had made an even more painful impression on her than brute violence. A purer-hearted witness or a more exemplary circumstance would be hard to find.

"I have never seen," she writes, "either among the Spaniards or among the French who have come here to fight or to amuse themselves (the latter often being gloomy, harmless intellectuals) anyone who expressed, even in private conversation, repugnance or disgust for, or even only disapproval of, unnecessary bloodshed. You talk of fear. Yes, fear has played a part in these killings; but where I was I did not find that it played as large a part as you ascribe to it. Men to all appearances courageous, when dining with friends, would relate with a warm, comradely smile how they had killed priests or 'fascists'—a word of elastic meaning. I felt that whenever a certain group of human beings is relegated, by some temporal or spiritual authority, beyond the pale of those whose life has a price, then one finds it perfectly natural to kill such people. When one knows one can kill without risk or punishment or blame, one kills; or at least one smiles encouragingly at those who kill. If at first one happens to feel some revulsion, one hides it, stifles it, fearing to seem lacking in virility. There seems to be in this some im-

pulse or intoxication which it is impossible to resist without a strength of mind which I am obliged to consider exceptional, since I have not found it in anyone. On the contrary, I have seen sober Frenchmen whom I had not previously despised—men who of their own accord would never have thought of killing anyone—plunging with obvious relish into that blood-soaked atmosphere. The very aim of the struggle is blotted out by an atmosphere of this kind. Because the aim can be formulated only in terms of the public good, the good of human beings; and human beings have no value." And the letter ends: "One sets out as a volunteer, with ideas of sacrifice, only to find oneself in a war of mercenaries, with a great deal of unnecessary cruelty thrown in."

Of course there will be people foolish enough to dismiss Simone Weil's letter as defeatist; but the defeat had preceded it, as an illness precedes its diagnosis. In this worldwide moral shipwreck, what scrap of driftwood can one clutch in order not to drown? Among the reflections of Simone Weil collected under the title *La Pesanteur et la Grâce*, we find this indirect answer, the validity of which goes far beyond politics: one must, she says, "always be ready to change sides with justice, that fugitive from the winning camp."

**W**E HAVE come a long way now from the very simple situation in which some of us revolted against our family surroundings and went over to the side of the proletariat. The proletariat of this world are no longer in agreement among themselves; they are no longer the incarnation of a myth, and if one were to follow them blindly and unconditionally one might find oneself where least one wants to be. The initial choice must now be followed by another. To judge men, it is no longer enough to see if they have calloused hands; one must look into their eyes. There is no mistaking the look of Cain. Do we side with the inmates of the slave labour camps or with their gaolers? This dilemma we can no longer evade, because the executioners themselves are forcing it on us. Threateningly they demand: "Are you with us or against us?" We must call a spade a spade. We are certainly

not going to sacrifice the poor to the cause of freedom, nor freedom to the poor, or rather to the usurping bureaucrats who have climbed on the shoulders of the poor. It is a matter of personal honour to keep faith with those who are being persecuted for their love of freedom and justice. This keeping faith is a better rule than any abstract programme or formula. In this age of ours, it is the real touchstone.

It should be apparent from the foregoing why humanism in general, literary or philosophical, means very little to us. Perhaps the time for it will come again, but at present we feel very remote from the serenity and harmony it represents. To us it seems that the self-complacency of man implicit in humanism has scant foundation nowadays. Mankind today is in poor shape. Any portrait of modern man, if at all faithful to the original, cannot but be deformed, split, fragmentary—in a word, tragic.

Our problems are limited in range. We are neither believers nor atheists, nor are we sceptics. When the premisses of metaphysics and even of history are uncertain and open to question, the moral sense is forced to extend its scope, taking on the additional function of guide to knowledge. There is a concreteness in it, moreover, which saves us from abstract moralism. The moral sense never operates in a vacuum: for our part, the emotional charge which impelled us to our initial choice has not been exhausted by disillusion. And many of those who belong today to no church and no political party are in a similar spiritual condition.

What is left in the end? There are, it seems to me, a few Christian certainties so deeply immured in human existence as to be identified with it. Anyhow I do not think I have the right to speak of faith, but only of a certain trust. This trust is founded and turns on something more than the compassion of Albert Camus. It is founded on the inner certainty

that we are free and responsible, and it turns on the absolute need of finding a way towards the inmost reality of other people. This possibility of spiritual communion is surely the irrefutable proof of human brotherhood. Love of the poor is born (or reborn) from it, as an obvious corollary the truth of which no disillusion, since it is not a love based on self-interest, can place in doubt. How can one resign oneself to the thought that in so many human creatures born to poverty and wretchedness, man's noblest faculties are stifled? To live one's life, ignoring the fundamental obligation which this implies, is no longer, it seems to me, morally conceivable. This is not to be interpreted, however, in political terms of power or tyranny. To use the poor as a stepping-stone to power, and then to betray them, is undoubtedly the most wicked of all sacrileges, because of all human beings they are the most defenceless. Nor can this suffice as an indication of how to solve every problem. Humbly we must confess that we have no panacea. All we have—and it is a great deal—is this trust that makes it possible for us to go on living. The sky above us is dark, and this small circle of light barely enables us to see where to place our feet for the next step.

This amounts to saying that the spiritual situation I have just described admits neither of defence nor of arrogance. Frankly, it is merely an expedient. It resembles a refugee encampment in no-man's-land, an exposed makeshift encampment. What do you think refugees do from morning to night? They spend most of their time telling one another the story of their lives. The stories are anything but amusing, but they tell them to one another, really, in an effort to make themselves understood.

As long as there remains a determination to understand and to share one's understanding with others, perhaps we need not altogether despair.

*Peter Wiles*

## In Defence of “Big Business”

IS large-scale business more or less efficient than small? The question has very many interesting ramifications. Our answer to it can affect our attitude to trade union organisation, diocesan and parish boundaries, local government, Scottish nationalism, European Union, comprehensive schools, and the future of Icelandic literature. In being thus important to non-economists, it is not alone among economic questions, but it is perhaps distinguished by its essential simplicity and the ease of non-technical presentation. I shall begin by defining my terms and describing previous answers to the question, proceed to give my own, and conclude by drawing a few non-economical consequences.

Efficiency is best defined, not as the quantity of production per man, but as the average cost, including all overheads, of an article produced. Production per man obviously neglects machines (why not take production per machine?), interest, raw material wastage, etc. Clearly, the best measure is one that takes account of all possible “inputs,” and this is the cost in money. It has certain disadvantages, but in a large number of observations these may be dismissed as random errors not affecting the result; and incidentally productivity figures show the same result anyway. Secondly, everyone knows that very small businesses are inefficient (and observation confirms this); what we really want to know is how medium and large businesses compare. Lastly, we suspend for the moment all judgement as to whether it is size that causes efficiency or efficiency, size. We must first obtain a simple correlation; causal analysis follows.

NINETEENTH-CENTURY economists held that large firms are more efficient than medium. It was not, however, this that interested them. Marx saw that very small businessmen—peasants, shopkeepers, and artisans—formed a different social class from the rest and were being ground out of existence by them. This was the Law of Capitalist Concentration, whereby the lower-middle-class entrepreneur, is beaten by the competition of the modern mechanised capitalist and sinks—Marx hoped—to a desperate and embittered proletariat, property-less state. As far as this directly concerns our question, it is right enough, though Marx’s views cannot decently be mentioned even in passing without pointing out his one gross error in this field: he forgot that modern capitalism needs a salaried lower-middle-class so big that, if we add it to the vigorous and still numerous remnants of his own entrepreneurial lower-middle-class, we find that the whole group actually expands; the net effect of capitalism, then, is in the long run to deproletarianise. Be that as it may, Marx, being interested only in social classes, seldom bothered his head with the relation of one capitalist to another. He did not analyse competition and monopoly among his capitalists, but if pressed he would undoubtedly have said that the larger the firm the more efficient, so that each trade ends in a monopoly. Left-wing economists have never shied away from this conclusion, which is welcome to them (unless they are anarchists) on every ground.

The more orthodox Marshall held the same view. If efficient entrepreneurs were immortal,