FESTSCHRIFT FOR
JULIUS STONE

*A Tribute to Julius Stone on his Retirement from the
Challis Chair of Jurisprudence and International Law at
Sydney University*

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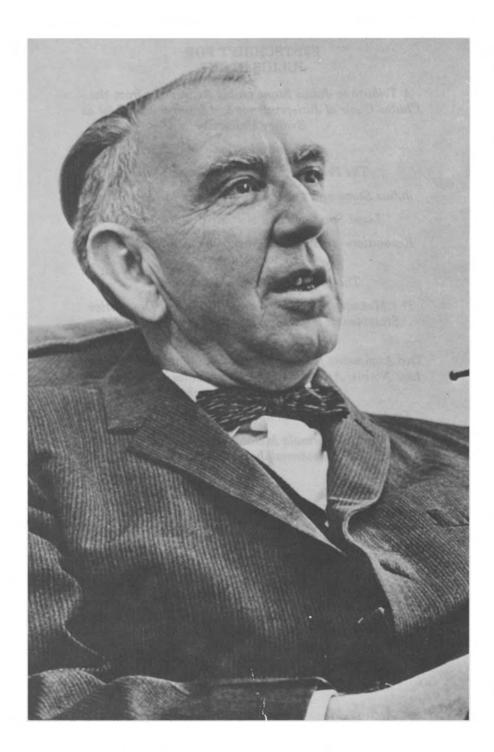History of Ideas*

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REVOLUTION—A SPIRITUAL PHENOMENON: A STUDY IN THE HISTORY OF IDEAS

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It seems fitting, when paying homage to a scholar who has always stressed his allegiance to the original law of the Christian civilization of the Occident, the law of the Old Testament and the Prophets, to describe in this short study, in a kind of Socratic dialectic, a system of thought which represents the opposite point of view. For when we see the law against the backdrop of a denial of its ontological value and the social consequences of this denial—only then does law arise in the full grandeur of its benevolent dominion. And the tension between lawful authority and power not limited by law, has lost nothing of its strength, since a philosophy of the latter arose in late antiquity. On the contrary, this tension has reassumed a special virulence in our own time which shows in its social stresses an often striking analogy to those far removed days.

The malaise of the modern world seems to be doubt in the legitimacy of authority as such. The obligatory nature of law and the right—indeed the duty—of authority to enforce it, are increasingly being regarded as a diminution of personal freedom. This "skeptical view of legality" has its root in a denial of the idea of order as the integration of the more particular in the more universal, or, speaking in social categories, of the community as a structure in which the individual parts, while preserving their integral identity, are yet forming a "Oneness" through their mutual, functional dependence. As a consequence of the waning of a sense of order, society is undergoing a process of dissolution into an undifferentiated mass. The only cohesion which remains when the process is sufficiently far gone, is the total subjection of each social group, and every individual, to a self-styled leader or small minority, purporting to represent the ideal unity for all. This is the trend which culminates in the phenomenon of the totalitarian revolution. In the words of a modern English historian, all the great revolutions of modern history are really only one revolution.[1] I will try to show that this revolution is not simply an attack on an established authority, but a phenomenon *sui generis, i.e.*, an attack on order as such, based on an identifiable metaphysical position. This position is Gnosticism: the denial,

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1. A. COBBAN, IN SEARCH OF HUMANITY 192 (1960).

on ontological grounds, of every vestige of value to anything encompassed in the natural order; a radical and utopian spiritualism which leads to a full divorce of positive law from any ethical norm.

Gnosticism, which since Hans Jonas's basic[2] and Eric Voegelin's new[3] approach to the ideological tension in modern history must be understood as the negative pole in the magnetic field of occidential civilization, has its origin in a phenomenon which in two thousand years has lost nothing of its social significance. If we lift the phenomenon of alienation from its Marxist context we find that alienation occurs when man suddenly discovers, in an environment to which he seemed to belong as a formative force, a lawfulness proper to it and independent of him. Social change can then become part of a disturbance in the sphere of personal identity and, through the feeling of becoming an alien in a wonted world, social change itself is lifted on to an altogether different and higher plane of spiritual significance. This opens a new and qualitatively different field of social tension.[4]

This break in political, social and indeed spiritual continuity occurred in the ancient world when the classical *polis* was absorbed; first into the great Hellenistic kingdoms, and later into the Roman empire. The *polis*, the city, had been "home" to a Greek in a synthesis of social and spiritual significance no longer understood by us, who are accustomed to the state as a protective hedge around our individual existence.[5]

> The *polis* was a natural phenomenon of a higher order; it came into being to make life possible, but it continues in existence in order to make life happy, excellent and as nearly perfect as possible . . . the city is a higher being of divine power. Basically the *polis* was for the Greek his religion.[8]

This synthesis of a natural and a spiritual home, this full integration of the individual in his social environment, broke down

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2. 1 H. JONAS, GNOSIS UND SPÄTANTIKER GEIST (3d ed. 1964); Jonas, *Gnoticism and Modern Nihilism*, 19 SOCIAL RESEARCH 430 (1952).

3. E. VOEGELIN, THE NEW SCIENCE OF POLITICS (1952); E. VOEGELIN, WISSENSCHAFT, POLITIK UND GNOSIS (1959).

4. *Cf.*, Gehlen, *Über die Geburt der Freiheit aus der Entfremdung*, 40 ARCHIV FÜR RECHT UND SOZIALPHILOSOPHIE 338 (1952), contains the example of Fichte—who stands at the beginning of the modern theories of alienation—lifting the "freedom-enthusiasm" of the Jacobins into the struggle of the "I" against necessity.

5. *Cf.* J. BURCKHARDT, GRIECHISCHE KULTURGERCHICHTE 80 (1898); GNOSIS UND SPÄTANTIKER, *supra* note 2, at 240.

6. *Id.*

when the spiritual element ceased to be capable of being grasped in the clear light of rational understanding. The identity of the "polites" with man in the full stature of his rational self-possession was losing its meaning when the small groups of active citizens who had *been* the *polis* became the mere subjects of the ruler in a kingdom of a distinctly Oriental type, with an authority deduced from universalist, mystical and often esoteric ideas. At the same time the masses of slaves and aliens who hitherto had led an anonymous social existence on the margin of the city-state and had been the mere passive objects of the great events in history, began to assume political consciousness and found a new sense of identity in the spreading mystery cults and similar movements. Even the nobility and the patriciate, perhaps from a sense of satiety and "tiredness of civilization," could not resist the attraction of a new world-view and lost all feeling for their own place in the cosmic order of values, thereby accelerating the process of dissolution of the structure of society.[7]

A gradual waning of a feeling of "being-at-home" in the actual, "here and now" existing world of the natural and social orders, gave rise to a spiritual crisis of the first order. A new problem moved into the center of personal and social consciousness, the problem of the incommensurability of both the "I" and the cosmic order. The question of the direct historical filiation of an idea, which was destined to become the touchstone of any existentially relevant philosophy, has remained unanswered to this day. This is hardly surprising, for we are here facing one of the primordial questions of human existence as such. It appears in the pronouncement of Genesis: "God made man in his likeness," which in its inimitable conciseness places man in the natural order as well as giving him a supernatural status. The explosive power of the idea of man being at one, at the same time a part and a whole, belonging to the community and transcending it, had remained latent in world-views such as those held by the Greeks of the classical period. There it had been counter-balanced by a basic faith in a cosmic order in which the more particular was elevated into the being of the more universal by an immanent process of ontological growth towards perfection. Only with the waning of the credibility of a cosmic order in the existentially vital sphere of social relations, did the problem of man arise in all its stark grandeur.

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7. Gnosis und Spätantiker, *supra* note 2, at 69.

Late antiquity gave a number of answers to the problem of the incommensurability of the "I" and the cosmic order. Two of those, Stoicism and Neo-Platonism, became important elements in the formation of the spiritual and intellectual climate of Occidental civilization, but they remained so fast bound to the classical concept of an immanent world-order that they were incapable of providing a real solution to the problem of man in an order which transcended man, and which he transcended. The other two, Christianity and Gnosticism, met the problem head-on and became, in their opposing answers, the positive and the negative pole of history in the new chapter which opened when the city-state disappeared below the horizon of historical reality. We are here most concerned with Gnosticism and a few words on Chrisitianity must suffice in order to show the full extent of the gnostic denial.

In Christianity a full synthesis is made of the natural and the supernatural order, not by virtue of an immanent and ontological process, but through a free act of grace by God. God became man, and thus man, though remaining rooted in the natural order, was also elevated to the supernatural position of one who participates in the divine nature.[8] The significance of this metaphysical reality in the social sphere was momentous. Man was now able to grant the community an ontological priority without losing his identity, *i.e.* without being absorbed by the community. His immediate link with the Absolute elevated him above the community, though in the natural order he remained a part of it. Thus the Greek concept of order, *i.e.*, the ontological priority of the more universal over the more particular, was preserved, but so was the value of each man as an individual. The social and legal philosophy of Occidental civilization was based on the idea of man being a part of the community and yet, as a person, transcending it in ontological value.

The answer of Gnosticism to the problem of the autonomy of man in a universe of order was the opposite of that given by Christianity. Gnosticism professed a radical pessimism which deprived the social order of any value for the human person and therefore also rejected the idea that man can find in the social order a way towards his personal fulfillment. The metaphysical root of this radical denial was the idea of an unbridgeable gap between the natural world and the Absolute. The god of Gnosticism was transcendent to the natu-

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8. "*Christum Dominum nostrum . . . Qui . . . est elevatus in caelum, ut nos divinitatis suae tribueret esse participes.*" *Preface of the Mass of the Ascension,* ROMAN MISSAL 276-77 (Benziger Bros. ed. 1964).

ral order. In that sense he resembled the God of the Old and the New Testament rather than the Greek idea of the immanence of the divine in the cosmic order. But the god of Gnosticism, in stark contrast to the God of Christianity, lacked that attribute which elevated the created world to the spiritual and supernatural order: he was not Love. In a strict dualism, the world of created things became thus the antithesis of the Absolute, and any conciliation between spirit and matter, *i.e.*, any idea of a world-order capable of elevating man to a status transcending his natural self, was condemned as a metaphysical scandal.

Gnostic dualism is consistent and radical; the god who created the world is in gnostic writing reduced to the status of the Platonic demiurge, "who had created creations outside life"[9] and gives expression to his remorse over ontological original sin by exclaiming: "who has befooled me that I became a fool and threw the soul into the body."[10] The world thus became a sphere dominated by hostile powers; it is the existential reality of the essential opposition between God and the world; the relation between God and the world is that of light and darkness.[11] The sense of "at-homeness" in the world, so characteristic of the Greek of the classical period, has been turned into an appalling existential insecurity, man's fear of the world and of himself.[12]

Gnostic man sees the world as essentially alien and evil and so intense is this feeling of—in a characteristic gnostic expression—being "thrown" into the world,[13] that he cannot face the world, as for instance the Indian does, with indifference, but only with a positive, metaphysically grounded feeling of hatred.[14] Thus does fear turn into defiance.[15] This basic attitude of revolt is squarely expressed in a gnostic version of the Prometheus myth. There Zeus, the adversary of Prometheus, is turned, in a consciously blasphemic interpretation, from the highest keeper of order to a power alien to man, coercing him with a fateful force.[16] Irenaeus of Lyon, the great Christian thinker who regarded Gnosticism as the most dangerous enemy of Christianity, did not fail to point out that

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9. GNOSIS UND SPÄTANTIKER, *supra* note 2, at 106.
10. *Id.* at 107.
11. *Id.* at 146.
12. *Id.* at 143.
13. *Id.* at 107.
14. *Id.* at 150.
15. H. JONAS, ZWISCHEN NICHTS UND EWIGKEIT 12 (1963).
16. GNOSIS UND SPÄTANTIKER, *supra* note 2, at 218.

this was the exact antithesis of the story of creation in Genesis which concludes with the words, "And God saw all that he had made and found it very good."[17]

When we consider the consequences of this metaphysics of alienation in the social life of man, we find them leading to a radical rejection of the idea of order. That is so because the idea of order is based on an equally fundamental optimism in which the concept of an inherent opposition between the identity of the self and the unity of the whole has no place. Order, in the social sense relevant here, is the integration of the value proper to each into a value proper to the community as a whole, or in other words it means that plurality and unity are different aspects of the same reality, that one presupposes the other. As Aristotle once said: one cannot make a concert on a single note. In a metaphysics of order the social whole is therefore not a diminution, but on the contrary the perfection of personal freedom. In the metaphysics of radical pessimism, the opposite is true: law is for Gnosticism nothing but tyranny and even "mine" and "thine" are only concepts introduced by an extrinsic power without any morally binding force.[18]

A social philosophy emanating from gnostic thought will therefore, true to its basic thesis of an unconquerable opposition between the world of nature and the realm of the spirit, reject the idea, which is so firmly rooted in Greek and Christian thought, that the social order, precisely because it is an order, is an indispensable medium for the perfection of man. Personal fulfillment can, in gnostic thought, only arise from being elevated beyond the social order through a direct inspiration by the divine spirit. That, however, is only granted to a small number of individuals, the elect, who thus represent the only ontological fulfillment accessible to mankind as a whole. Gnosticism distinguishes sharply between the *Pneumatikos*, spiritual man who is elevated by a direct inspiration above the common run of mankind, and "psychic man" who will never be able to free himself from the bondage of his natural existence.[19]

A social philosophy which rejected the institutional framework of society as a mere means of coercion and a denial of spirit; which proclaimed a freedom which rises above the natural order and within a small circle of the elect gives substance to a perfection

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17. *Cf.* L. BOROS, DENKEN IN DER BEGEGNUNG 37 (1973).
18. 1 C. ANDRESSEN, DIE GNOSIS 28 (Zeugnisse der Kirchenvater ed. 1969).
19. GNOSIS UND SPÄTANTIKER. *supra* note 2, at 145.

inaccessible to the multitude—this irrational and utopian creed became the fountainhead of the revolution, that great antagonist, in European history, of law and order.

The irrational and utopian note of the revolution remained constant through its long and eventful history. The revolution's gnostic claim to be a redemptive act—not however *of* a natural order but *from* it—gave its denial of the legitimacy of established order the enthusiasm and dynamic force of a movement whose origin lies within the realm of the spirit. The genuine revolutionary always saw in a total reversal of the social order his real obligation to his utopian ideal. Burke quotes Rabaud de St. Etienne, a Girondist who was executed in 1793, as saying in the Assembly, a year earlier:

> *Tous les établissemens en France couronnent le malheur du peuple: pour le rendre heureux il faut le rénouveler; changer ses idées; changer ses loix; changer ses moeurs; . . . changer les hommes; changer les choses; changer les mots . . . tout détruire; oui, tout détruire; puisque tout est à recréer.*[20]

Quite consistently, the revolutionary sees his most dangerous adversary in the reformer who wants to improve an existing order instead of setting out to destroy it. When Tsar Alexander II had shown his readiness to change the autocratic regime of Russia into a constitutional one, so as to allow the social stresses which had arisen from the liberation of the serfs to find their own balance, he was "sentenced to death" by the Nihilists. And the sentence was carried out, as it were, in the last moment; the emperor was murdered on the day when the new constitution had been approved for publication.[21]

As an historical phenomenon, the revolution followed—like a subterranean stream—the whole course of Occidental civilization. Whenever an order had become unfunctional as a result of changes in political or social or economic conditions, whenever the coercive power exercised by the institutions of a social order had lost its functionality and its legitimacy, the revolution broke through a ground which had become too brittle to hold it and came forward with its enthusiastic appeal for a total abrogation of order as such.

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20. The discontent of the people is crowned by the French establishment; in order to make them happy the social order must be rebuilt: the ideas of the people must be changed; change their laws; change their morals; . . . change men; change things; change words; . . . destroy everything; yes, destroy everything; because everything must be recreated. (Eds. trans.)
E. Burke, Reflections on the Revolution in France 164 n.1 (1964).
   21. *Cf.* B. Pares, A History of Russia 441 (1955).

This type of revolutionary assault remained constant throughout the length and width of European history. It occurred in the middle ages when the Manichaean movements of Italy and the Provence rejected in toto the authority of a visible Church whose institutions had become too closely integrated with those of the secular community. The sweeping attack on the structure of society in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries began to unfold when the nobility, while retaining their privileges, had lost the function of feudal government and regional defence, so that their exalted position had become deprived of its legitimacy. And the work of destruction of the institutional pattern of European society began with the abolition of the Monarchy in France, when the king's power no longer proved adequate to take care of the most pressing needs of government.

The revolution remained victorious when the patent unfunctionality of an established order lent credibility to its denial of the legitimacy of order as such. But in every single case, even when its victory seemed complete, the revolution ended in defeat. The history of revolution shows the inner contradiction and the self-destructive dynamic of its utopian idealism in the inability of the revolution to survive its own victory. Whenever the revolution has succeeded in destroying an established order it is faced with the task of stabilizing its victory in institutional forms. But that means that a new order has to be built on the ruins of the old one. This contradicts the basic claim of the revolution and reverses the trend that has led it to victory. The ensuing struggle within the revolutionary movement gives the latter its characteristic note of terrorism. In order to prevent a sliding of the revolutionary enthusiasm into a non-revolutionary mode of reform, the revolution is forced to proclaim a not completed, and never to be completed, war against the "inner enemy." The circle of this alleged threat has to be drawn sufficiently wide to allow a battle, the end of which would also mean the end of the revolution, to go on indefinitely. The "inner enemies," the *Çi-devants* of the French Revolution, the Jews and other lesser races in Nazism and the Capitalists and Imperalists of the Communist ideological vocabulary, play an indispensable role in the factual history of every revolution. They keep its irrational radicalism at its boiling point.

But the process of radicalization cannot go on for ever. Even the greatest wave breaks when it hits the shore. Under the pressure of the practical needs of government the revolution is forced to aban-

don its depreciation of the social order and must thus accept the factual denial of its original pledge. The revolution then turns into a stage, full of human tragedy, when many of its most enthusiastic supporters are being sacrificed to the demands of political expediency. Rakovsky, one of the old Bolsheviks of the 1920's showed a true understanding of the tragic motif of the revolution, when he lamented "the inevitable disintegration of the party of revolution after its victory."[22] And so we find the generals succeeding the genuine revolutionaries in the English civil war, Napoleon issuing his preemptory proclamation after the *coup d'état* of Brumaire in which he declared that the Revolution was over, and Stalin converting Communism *in* Russia which for Lenin and Trotsky had been the first stage of the world-revolution and nothing else, into Communism *for* Russia, *i.e.* as a means to build up the power of the state.

However, the fact that the revolution after a deluge of destruction achieves nothing but its own defeat, does not minimize its importance as a constant feature of European history. On the contrary, the true dynamic of European history can be shown to lie in the opposition between order, expressed in a law, possessing a positive coercive power but derived from norms of objective and universal validity, and the revolution, which rejects the latter and therefore feels free to defy the former. And so we must, unpalatable as it may seem, recognize the march of the revolution in the malaise of our own period.

The conditions for the rise of a revolutionary movement have been present since the First World War. At that time, under the pressure of the gigantic exertions demanded from the people by modern warfare, the state began to change its character. The concept of sovereignty, upon which the state had been based since the medieval oecumene, had sunk below the horizon of historical reality in the sixteenth century and was losing its validity. Sovereignty had meant, at least on the Continent where Common Law had been abolished by the enlightened absolutism of the eighteenth century, that the state was capable of creating law, in contrast to the medieval prince who was only thought capable of applying a law derived from universally valid norms. But on the other hand, sovereignty had also meant the strict limitation of the power of the state to a well-defined territory. This limitation, expressed in the axiomatic principle that the state could not interfere in the internal affairs of

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22. I. DEUTSCHER, THE PROPHET UNARMED 435 (1959).

another state, had neutralized the threat of international anarchy implied by the idea of a state standing above the law. However, when the state had assumed during the war a far-reaching power of control over many aspects of social and economic life, this could only be justified by a synthesis of "state" and "society" which was unknown in the nineteenth century and would have been repugnant to its liberal individualism. Thus began—or rather brought to a politically active stage—the process of giving the state an ideological context. The war which had begun as a clash of two groups of great powers received now the character of a crusade for democracy. But a state, whose principle of cohesion was ideology, could no longer accept the limitation imposed on it by the old-style concept of sovereignty; if it wanted to remain true to its postulated *raison d'être* it had to strive to gain through the power of its institutions a universal acceptance of its ideology. A contradiction between a principle of limitation and a principle of expansion had thus arisen within the state. It made itself felt immediately in the peace treaties which showed a complete lack of political or ideological consistency.

In the last half-century the "ideologization" of the state has made rapid progress. In the sphere of international relations this had led to an intensified modification of state-sovereignty. The new type of "alliances" shows a closer integration of states than one that is still compatible with sovereignty in the strict sense of the term. Also the internal structure of the state is undergoing a process of modification. Political parties separated by an ideological gulf find it difficult to recognize in each other the legitimacy of their respective trends. This tends to weaken the basis of parliamentary government and threatens to turn the "dialogue" *within* parliament into a struggle for power fought *outside* the precincts of the legislative body. This deterioration of parliamentary government has given rise to the phenomenon of the "new feudalism," *i.e.*, the growing independence from the state of powerful organizations, such as trade unions or capitalist corporations with widespread international affiliations. In the international sphere as well as in the internal sphere of government the state is thus undergoing a transformation which is liable to create a skeptical doubt over the legitimacy of the coercive power still exercised by its institutions and a general repudiation of authority. That, however, is precisely the situation in which the perennial challenge of the revolution to order as such can be raised again with a fair chance of success.

The twentieth century has witnessed the rise of a revolutionary

movement of unparalleled strength. The totalitarian revolution in its Fascist or its Communist form has spread over large parts of the globe. And if we consider the true import of the crisis of government that Western society is facing, with the state losing its function of order, we must conclude that the revolution has not spent its force. We can no longer cherish the illusion so prevalent in the nineteenth century, and not fully abandoned today, that social stresses will resolve themselves by an immanent process of balance and counter-balance. Nor can we expect the welfare state to provide the institutional medium for a reconciliation between a market economy and state-dirigism, when the state itself is increasingly losing its power of control. The current world-wide inflation may well herald the burial of a pious hope.

If we are prepared to continue the struggle for the preservation of a law which gives *suum cuique* in the real sense of guaranteeing the identity of each in the social order, we must accept the stern reality of a continued systematic attack on the very foundations of Occidental civilization. The revolution may appear in different forms, conditioned by historical circumstances, but it always represents the same spiritual force of denial of order and absolute repudiation of the rule of law. A clear understanding of the revolution as a force bent by its own inherent trend on destruction plus an equally clear demarcation between changes in the institutional pattern of authority and the rejection of authority as such, is now more than ever a condition of the peaceful evolution of society. The present article may be regarded as an attempt to contribute through an uncovering of the spiritual roots of the revolution, to an understanding upon which depends the survival of personal values in the social order, at a time when that order seems threatened from without and, even more, from within.