

An Interview with
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JA: Why did *Rationalism in Politics* come out as it did?

The impulse to publish it didn't come from Oakeshott at all. It was compiled by Maurice Cranston, at his (Cranston's, not Oakeshott's) suggestion. (Oakeshott by then, 1962, had been at the London School of Economics for ten years). Lee Auspitz asked Oakeshott why they had left out that long (and I think inferior) piece about 'The Masses and Representative Democracy'. His answer was, 'We just forgot it'. I myself asked him why he had omitted his brilliant *Cambridge Journal* review of E. H. Carr, 'Mr Carr's First Volume'. His answer: 'I didn't think anybody would be interested.'

JA: Why did the book alter Oakeshott's reputation so?

I suppose it was his first book to manifest a political stance, however hard that stance might be to classify. (Contrast it with his earlier scepticism in 'The Claims of Politics', 1939). Also it was his first (semi-)polemical work. Previously he would have been (and was) thought of as a superannuated Idealist. (See Susan Stebbing's sniffy review of *Experience and Its Modes*.) In fact, he really didn't have much of a 'reputation' at all at this stage (though he had impressed Collingwood and Barker).

JA: Did it damage Oakeshott's reputation with any of the influential members of the successor generation: for instance, Brian Barry, Garry Runciman, or Quentin Skinner?

All these people were a good generation or more his junior, and would not have commanded any influence at the time *Rationalism in Politics* came out. However, there is no mystery about Barry's hostility. He was quite simply an egalitarian socialist, and whatever Oakeshott was, it wasn't that. Runciman I met at dinner six or seven years ago, and we discussed Oakeshott briefly, though more as a person than as a thinker. I didn't expect Runciman to have any views on his thought, though he would have known that Oakeshott was very anti-welfarist. I think Oliver Letwin was right to think that the British are so wedded, not to say welded, to welfarism as to make Oakeshott's approach pretty well a non-starter as far as policy is concerned—not that Oakeshott was either very prolific or very forthcoming on policy. In policy he was a dyed-in-the-wool pragmatist (i.e. do whatever the situation demands: cf. Halifax's 'Trimmer'). I can only think of two 'policy' pieces he ever wrote, 'The Political Economy of Freedom' (1949: a sort of proto-Thatcherite manifesto, and weak, not to say limp, on the details: Hayek was far superior and more conscientious in these respects). The oth-

er is that 1944 MS attributed to him (rightly, I think) concerning the policy the Allies should adopt towards a defeated Germany. It was pure Morgenthau Plan: *Carthago delenda est*. (Henry Morgenthau was US Treasury Secretary). In other words, destroy their industry and sow their fields with salt, so that they can't cause any more trouble. If they starve, well, they brought it on themselves. Lee Auspitz told me that Oakeshott supported Morgenthau, though Oakeshott may well have offered his own prescription first. He does not seem to have considered that the Versailles Treaty, which was only half as punitive as Morgenthau, was in part the origin of World War Two. Come to think of it, there was another, and this time very good, 'policy'-oriented piece by Oakeshott, his review of Quintin Hogg and John Parker called 'Contemporary British Politics', also omitted from *Rationalism*.

I told Runciman I was writing the biography (though this may have been before I had the Yale contract), and that I had spent a day with Oakeshott at his place in Dorset. *Inter al* I said that he had been very charming. 'Oh yes,' said Runciman, laying the irony on with a trowel, 'he was charming all right.' Had Oakeshott perhaps seduced someone Runciman knew and cared about? Who knows? Anyway, he certainly didn't admire or like him. He never really said what he thought about Oakeshott's ideas. Did he ever write about Oakeshott?

As for Skinner, I had lunch with him three or four years ago, but we didn't discuss Oakeshott at length. He gave the impression of having got on quite well with him, and also of knowing him quite well from various professional rendezvous (e.g. the Carlyle Club, and Political Science Association conferences) but this was before I had read his damning opinion—I think it was in an interview with some Finn—of Oakeshott on Hobbes (an opinion I actually don't greatly disagree with: cf. also Noel Malcolm, who, though actually a protégé of Oakeshott's, was similarly critical). He gave me a photo of Oakeshott and himself together at a Durham conference. I've written somewhere that Oakeshott was a great admirer of ferocious Skinner-style scholarship (e.g. that of his friend and appointee, Kedourie), but that he also thought (so Simon Oakeshott told me) that a man might pick up just as much historical understanding from browsing in second-hand bookshops, such as Oakeshott's own father habitually did in his lunch breaks. (I'm inclined to agree with him here). Oakeshott was hugely widely read, but said that he himself hadn't much aptitude for scholarship proper. He was certainly very careless about footnotes, citations and the like.

JA: Why has Oakeshott only been taken seriously by non-Oakeshottians since around 2000?

I think this may in part have been due to Richard Rorty's championship of him in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979), but also because his low profile during his life, and the ensuing dearth of commentary on his work, opened endless opportunities to researchers after his death. Non-Oakeshottians probably forgave him for being what they would call conservative, since he had been widely characterised as post-modernist, like Rorty. And it is true that he wasn't a realist, even as regards natural science (cf., e.g., Bruno Latour & co.). I remarked on this to Scruton, otherwise a great admirer of Oakeshott. His view was that—if only in this respect—Oakeshott was 'simply mad'.

JA: Did Oakeshott enjoy his reputation as essayist-polemicist?

Simon Oakeshott told me Michael wanted posthumous fame, but was little concerned with publicity or celebrity in his lifetime. He refused a Companionship of Honour on the grounds that 'public honours should go to public people'. (A contrast with that near-Stalinist Eric Hobsbawm, CH).

JA: Do you think *Rationalism in Politics* stops people ever reading *On Human Conduct*?

They are so different in style that few would spontaneously attribute them to the same author. I myself think *On Human Conduct* was underrated on its appearance (it is a serious book, though the third part is scrappy and thrown-together—and readable), and has been overrated since. I asked Isaiah Berlin if he had

read it. He said he had chucked it aside after ten pages, having not understood a word. But there was little love lost between him and Oakeshott in any case, despite (as Berlin noted) the similarity of their philosophies. I shall have to reread *On Human Conduct*, but am not looking forward to it. Its attempt at precision comes at too high a price.

We can all understand ‘enterprise association’, and see why it is inapplicable to a tolerable politics, but ‘civil association’ remains obscure, and I do not think it can realistically be appropriated by the multiculturalists, though some, e.g. B. Parekh, have tried. It is true that the Ottoman *millet* system kept the lid on ethno-religious divisions, and survived in ghostly fashion in the Lebanon until the 1970s; true also that Oakeshott used to joke that Norman Sicily under Roger II was an example of civil association. But he also observes that civil association, unlike its enterprise counterpart, is compulsory; and I would note that both Roger’s Sicily and the Ottoman Empire were absolute monarchies. Multiculturalism looks incompatible with liberal democracy. It may possibly ‘work’, but only under despotism, such as Saddam Hussein’s. See what happened in Iraq once he was removed: Hobbes’s ‘war of all against all’.

JA: I was looking at Michael Bentley’s book on Butterfield again, and what struck me how little he seemed to admire Butterfield, or felt obliged to apologise for him. I recently reread *Englishman and His History* last week and thought it was marvellous. Do you know anything about Butterfield’s influence on Oakeshott?

I was struck by how much Oakeshott obviously owed to *The Whig Interpretation of History*, which is a brilliant book. There are verbal echoes of it in Oakeshott, just as there are of Collingwood’s *Speculum Mentis* in *Experience and its Modes*. Oakeshott told me he wrote his book first, before reading Collingwood, but this cannot be true. Maybe he was being post-modernist.

Oakeshott and Butterfield were close friends, and I believe there is some extant correspondence, though not at the LSE. There is a rumour, which few will take seriously, that Mrs Butterfield once caught them kissing. She is supposed to have been hyper-vigilant regarding Herbert’s love life, but whether or not with good cause I don’t know. It is, however, true that he had a long and agonising affair with a lady whose name I forget.

JA: Peter Ghosh, who likes essays, as he writes them himself, is extremely eager to point out that Macaulay and Trevor-Roper were at their best writing essays. Would you say that Oakeshott preferred the essay form? I think one of Oakeshott’s achievements in the essay form is combining an old-fashioned Chesterton-type meandering style with a heavily worked-out content. Plus, his writing, somewhat remarkably, moves, like a barge, at the right speed to carry one’s reading thoughts along with it.

I think, despite his advocacy of Hegel (why?), he rightly disliked these vast synthetic, panoptic philosophies. A single brick out of place, and the lot comes crashing down. It is perfectly possible to assemble a series of cogent, focussed *aperçus* in a collection and for it to be the case, so long as one’s initial focus is sharp enough, that they cohere quite as much as any through-composed monograph, only tacitly. Oakeshott was a huge admirer of the scholarly Kedourie, as I said; though again there is the point about browsing at random in a second-hand bookshop. He and his father Joseph both admired Montaigne, the inventor of the essay. No one ever complained that mathematicians do their work mostly in papers, which are the scientific equivalent of essays. So did philosophers, and still do. And so did literary critics, when I were a lad.

JA: You mentioned that Oakeshott picked up bits of Butterfield’s language. He owed vast amounts to Collingwood. I am fairly sure he stole from G. C. Field and also the *dux* and *rex* business from Jouvenel (for which there is evidence in the book reviews): since both Field’s and Jouvenel’s typologies played into the lines of thought Oakeshott worked on in the 1950s and 1960s. He covered himself by saying that citation was irrelevant, and that one had a duty to work out one’s own arguments. Why do you think he was so reluctant to admit debts?

I guess for the reason you give. He ploughed a very lonely furrow, since Idealism was so out of fashion for most of his career. Temperamentally he could never have belonged to a school, unless it was a dead one, and thus incapable of demanding conformity. Incidentally, it's worth noting that the Idealists generally (and pragmatists, who live next door) were excellent prose stylists: James, Royce, Bradley, Quine, Blanshard ... why? These are interesting lines you trace (I have never heard of Field, and will look into him).

JA: Of course, the advantage of not admitting intellectual debts is that it gives the successor generation, if it bothers at all, something to do.

I'm not sure it's obliged to bother. But certainly, as already said, the dearth of early commentary on Oakeshott, and his reclusiveness, has left the field wide open since his death, which has encouraged the huge amount of recent interest in him. Graduate students are always looking for doctoral subjects.

JA: Famously, Collingwood disliked his colleagues at Oxford so much he worked alone, and wrote an autobiography.

Well, his thought was also incompatible with theirs, at least superficially.

JA: When I think back it is easy to see Oakeshott fitting into 1920s, 1930s and 1940s Cambridge, but then there is the question: what would have happened if Oakeshott had stayed, perhaps defeated Brogan, to get the Professorship?

Well, did he fit in so well, though? If anything, he was a bit Bloomsburyish, but not leftist like the true Bloomsberries. Indeed, he was unfashionably patriotic, though also so anti-war as almost to be pacifist (until war came). About the Professorship, that is what Ernest Barker wanted, as you know. Barker groomed him for the chair, but could not swing it. At the time (1939) Oakeshott only had the one self-authored book, *Experience and Its Modes*. He and Brogan were both, with several others, on the editorial board of *Cambridge Journal*, of which Oakeshott eventually became General Editor.

JA: How successful could Oakeshott have been in inculcating the next generation in anti-Beveridge anti-Robbins politics? What I mean is that there is, or was, nay, probably is, let's be fair, a crown quality to Cambridge: not necessarily because the best people are there teaching, but because the best undergraduates are there chewing on whatever the local teachers are teaching: and, whatever that is, is the language they pick up. So Oxford and Cambridge academics of the 1960s to 1990s generation have sometimes had an undeserved amount of influence.

Ninety per cent of an undergraduate's education comes from the peer group and his personal effort anyway, however good or bad the teachers are. When I was at Trinity hardly anyone read English (though Terry Eagleton was there, two years ahead of me: he was my next-door neighbour and quite close friend until he went to Oxford, and I to the Right—thanks largely to Oakeshott).

JA: If the 1962 volume had been entitled *The Voice of Poetry and Other Essays* do you think it would have received as much attention? I have a sense that Oakeshott's reputation is rather shackled by the word 'rationalism'.

I think not, but then I don't think highly of Oakeshott's aesthetics (see my contribution to Corey Abel's *The Intellectual Legacy of Michael Oakeshott*). However, 'The Voice of Poetry', like 'The Activity of Being an Historian', also contains a digest of Oakeshott's world-picture generally, which is of considerable interest. Of course, Oakeshott's attack on what he calls Rationalism has led many of the ignorant to think him irra-

tionalist, which, equally of course, he isn't. What he means by Rationalism is the (fetishistic) habit of applying the 'reason' appropriate to one kind of thinking to another kind (e.g. 'scientific politics' and the like), and even—in fact usually—to the whole across-the-board spectrum of thought. And this is genuinely irrational, for all its pretensions to rationality. (Oakeshott cruelly calls it 'the relic of a belief in magic').

JA: I am very conscious of the way my own mind works. I don't claim it is Oakeshottian, but I do not think in lines: I think in blocks, or blocs: and I think Oakeshott also tended to think this way. He liked binaries, needed them, in fact.

What is so special, or unusual, about binaries? Any singular identity is (apophatically) constituted in part by what it is not, so binarism is at the root of all thought, willy-nilly. And there is nothing wrong with linear thinking, where appropriate—in logic or maths, e.g., in fact, in the hard sciences generally.

JA: He had little time for what I call 'ingenious' arguments. Do you agree? His essayistic style sometimes achieves movement, or layering development, but the substructure is almost always carved in stone. He gave the game away with the famous threefold distinction in the Introduction to *Leviathan*.

I've forgotten what it was, except that Will and Artifice were two of the three, but why I can't recall. I never prized that introduction as highly as some have; in fact, I don't think he is that cogent on Hobbes at all. As I said, the great Noel Malcolm thinks Hobbes is essentially a Rationalist in Oakeshott's sense, which only confirms what I have long suspected.

JA: Perhaps you see Oakeshott in a more sinuous writerly way than I do. I see the Hegelian structures sticking out of his essays like ribs, but this may in part be to do with my eye. Wouldn't you agree that Oakeshott, though not writing systematically, sought system?

No, I think I wouldn't. You recall he praises Cervantes' painter, who, when asked what he is painting, answers 'whatever it turns out to be'. See also his pragmatical interest in 'Trimmer' Halifax, and his aversion to political programmes and parties, indeed, almost to political 'philosophies' of any kind. He has no interest in the Hegelian dialectic (mind you, it doesn't feature in *The Philosophy of Right* either), nor does he invoke Hegel's Estates, and he is certainly averse to Hegel's (and Marx's, of course) so-called 'historicism', which is simply a kind of ruthless Whig history.

JA: I now think that it was a shame that his musings that eventually became *On Human Conduct* did not come out earlier, since we now know that he had manuscripts about this finished as early as the mid-1950s. There was an entire generation of rising historical-philosophical-political academics looking for guidance, and on not finding it from Oakeshott they took from where they could from the 1960s onwards, which mostly meant, alas, sociology and political science.

I'm not too keen on *On Human Conduct*, actually, though it does, like Berlin, contain some ponderable binaries. It's too dense. As I have already said, Berlin told me he couldn't make head or tail of it, and chucked it aside after ten pages; not that I necessarily take Berlin as gospel, far from it. I think Oakeshott says these things better in *Rationalism in Politics*, even though—or perhaps because—he's not trying to systematise them. Though *Experience and Its Modes* is impressively systematic, as anything indebted to Bradley is bound to be.

JA: I asked you already about Oakeshott's reputation since his death. You mentioned Rorty. There is that. We know about the purist Oakeshottians. But I have noticed recently that the one academic sector which takes Oakeshott very seriously, and at a high intellectual level, is legal philosophy. Legal philosophers such as Martin

Loughlin and David Dyzenhaus, admire Oakeshott greatly without agreeing with him, and are as enthusiastic about his legal theory as Shirley Letwin, who of course was partial, was in her posthumous *History of Law*. I think for the time coming his reputation will be highest amongst the lawyers.

I think you are very likely right, though I never thought he was especially clear about the Rule of Law. He has an excellent summary of his attitude to law (at least, the Common Law) at the end of 'Contemporary British Politics'. I don't think he would have much appeal to those (e.g. the European Union) in the Napoleonic legal tradition.

JA: So he will increasingly stand with Hart, Rawls, Kelsen, those sorts of people, and be considered alongside them. And Schmitt, of course.

Schmitt, I suppose, only via Hobbes. There is something brutal and philistine about Schmitt, whatever people say (incisive, realist, etc. etc.). I can't read him with any patience. I went to a Liberty Fund colloquium about him, where most of the participants, doubtless similarly averse, ended up talking about other things. Not surprising that he flirted with Hitler, and vice versa (though I think like Heidegger he never actually belonged to the Party). I cannot now recall exactly how, but there is something self-confirming, tautological, about his argument. It is conceived in such a way as to make it unfalsifiable. He exemplifies much of that aggressive German paranoia that Oakeshott diagnoses in the 1944 'Morgenthau' piece.

JA: I don't see Oakeshott becoming a luminary as a theorist of poetry.

Agreed. And by 'poetry' he means any (positive) aesthetic experience, whether or not intended (i.e. whether art or nature). Very Bloomsbury, like Bell and Fry (and the grand-daddy of them all, Pater). He likens religion to poetry in *On Human Conduct*.

JA: Was the twentieth century, now we know what the future looks like, an anomaly? Was the university, between, say, 1890 and 1970, in a happy era between 1. Victorian angst about being clerical or anticlerical and 2. Thatcherite angst about an overgrown university full of increasingly entitled academics increasingly publishing everything they could?

Yes, I think you may be right. My Cambridge (1963-73) was still not so very different from Oakeshott's. No undergraduate 'en suites', one loo per staircase, terrible food in Hall, no hot water in Trinity New Court till '64. Even in Oakeshott's time there were more than a few non-public-school types about, and I think in my time about half the students were from grammar schools (depending, I suppose, on the College). Cambridge certainly wasn't a toffs' playground, not even Trinity, though there were toffs, of course. One heard rather than saw them: distant sounds of braying and breaking glass at the end of remote corridors.

About publishing, a post-RAE example is what Glasgow and Edinburgh actually did, setting up subsidised reviews to use up each other's otherwise unpublishable rubbish. This was applying the principles of productivity to academe. Put your unread and unreadable books on the scales, and presto! hit the funding jackpot. There was not a lot of intense teaching before, any more than now, but as I have already said, this may not have been altogether bad. It made one think for oneself, with help from one's friends (often in other disciplines). There were some damnably clever people about.

JA: It was Oakeshott who suggested that Kedourie lecture on nationalism, leading to his book on nationalism, which shocked Gellner so much that it provoked Gellner into writing his own book on nationalism (where he adopted Kedourie's time-frame, i.e. it all happened in the late 18th century, but rejected Kedourie's explanation in terms of ideas, preferring, of course, social movements).

I knew Gellner slightly. He sent me a postcard from Leningrad of the Bronze Horseman, thanking me for my ‘very generous’ review (1988) in the *TES of Plough, Sword and Book*. I also met him at Scruton’s, and at an Oxford conference on education. I got arrested in Prague (1986) for carrying stuff out of the country for him. Oakeshott thought him an intellectual vulgarian, but was quite wrong. He was a lively, waggish provocateur, and good company (as was Oakeshott).

I only met Kedourie once or twice. He was deeply impressive and deeply serious, not to say severe (he certainly looked severe). Unfortunately he had no small talk.

JA: He had real punch, in his writing. Saw things simply and strongly. Probably Oakeshott thought of nationalism as being a variety of Rationalism.

It may feature in that list of Rationalist projects that he gives in the original essay (I haven’t it to hand). He and Kedourie thought it the kind of ideological nonsense, like racism, dreamt up by intellectuals. He would definitely have distinguished it radically, and rightly, from patriotism. (An analogy: patriotism is collective loyalty and self-respect, nationalism is collective vanity and boastfulness. The patriot empathises with the patriotism of other nations and cultures; the nationalist needs enemies, and seeks them out).

JA: I asked Maurice Cowling once if he knew what Oakeshott thought about the chapter on him in the first volume of *Religion and Public Doctrine*. Oakeshott had ten years to read it. Do you know anything about this?

No. Oakeshott was very conscientious about reading the books he had to review, but otherwise he was greatly tempted by the second-hand bookshop, as already mentioned. He must have read Maurice, though.

JA: I saw that the Oxford philosopher J. R. Lucas died only a year or two ago. Oakeshott reviewed his *Principles of Politics* in the 1960s. Do you know anything about a connection there? Lucas is famous for arguing against equality.

Yes, I do. His anti-egalitarianism is persuasive. He was a Fellow of Merton, and wanted Oakeshott to leave the London School of Economics and go there. Oakeshott was friends with G. H. G. Mure, the Warden, and a Hegelian, and Mure too wanted him. I asked his son Ed about this, but alas, it was just then that Lucas died, and the query with him. Lucas wrote an interesting thing about the Huxley/Wilberforce (‘Soapy Sam’) controversy in the nineteenth century.

JA: If you could get Oakeshott back up from the grave for half an hour, what would you ask him?

I would ask him why he wasted so much of his life chasing skirt, since it never made him happy. Which is what you would expect, if you foist an identical character on every likely young woman you meet, and come a cropper in exactly the same way every time. Einstein: ‘Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.’

Of course, when I spent an entire day with him in 1987, I knew nothing about his love life, except that, as Perry Worsthorne had told me, he ‘liked a pretty face’. So our discourse was not about such trivia—if trivia they were. But Oakeshott said in his notebooks that love (or what he mistook for love, namely infatuation) was the whole point of his life.

JA: Oakeshott makes much of momentariness and dream and myth in his writings: indeed, ‘escape’. I take this to be very nineteenth century: you know how Leavis thought poets like Arnold, Tennyson and Browning were poets of retreat and escape, no longer writing about politics as everyone up to Shelley and Byron had done. Oakeshott looks a bit like an intellectual equivalent of the same: a sort of late Matthew Arnold on Dover Beach.

Yes, I think you are right. I wouldn't call Browning an escapist, though. He's a bit jolly-hockey-sticks, an enthusiast for vitality (or as Pater would say, experience) for its own sake. (See Santayana's essay 'The Poetry of Barbarism'). And of course Oakeshott admired Huizinga on play, play being (in some views) an escape from earnestness (though on other views a rehearsal for life, not an escape).

JA: But, of course, in Oakeshott there is Pater too, and aestheticism.

Well, that lines him up with certain versions of 'escape'.

JA: Wasn't all that his reference to wonder, delight, poetry and love all about escape? 'Mistress, not wife', as he wrote when writing about history?

That's what he says, and I find it annoying, too much Jack-the-Lad (of a would-be upper-class kind). I'm a great believer in (appropriately circumscribed) sexual difference, and its meaningfulness, but not in 'male chauvinism'. ('Don't you bother your pretty little head about such things', etc.).

JA: You know that Pocock counter-quipped that history was not a mistress, as Oakeshott had suggested, but a wife.

Why does history have to be either?

JA: Perhaps history is better seen as a distant, sometimes forgotten, father-old divinity and regret—and a chastised and herded child—for education and remorse. What I am getting at is all the Paterian, aesthetic, externality in Oakeshott is a bit superficial, is it not?

I agree, Pater's view is interesting, but wrong. Did you know he taught G. M. Hopkins, by the way? Not sure one would know from Hopkins's poetry.

JA: I don't know if Oakeshott can really be called a Bloomsbury, though he inhaled the same smoke and sibilliance; his 'chasing skirt' was positively Wellsian.

I think he was after 'lurve', rather than, like Wells, sex. He was no commonplace Lothario, lounge lizard or debs' delight, nor a Don Giovanni. He seems to have identified himself most strongly with Wagner's fatal, helpless, tragic Tristan. Simon Oakeshott said he was 'fringe Bloomsbury', and he was of course a friend of Noel Annan, who was decidedly Bloomsbury, though not quite up to the hilt (albeit Provost of King's). Simon told me he went for brains rather than beauty, and it's true that none of his three wives was beautiful. The second was very clever, double first in English from Newnham, a much better poet than Oakeshott, but cripplingly neurotic. On the other hand he was besotted by Celine Jenkins and Pat Gale (later Mrs. Cowling), who certainly were beautiful. June Hooper was pretty too, and clever, and his mistress for four years (the other two said no, Celine absolutely, Pat after a trial run). But once he had June where he wanted her, he wouldn't introduce her to any of his intellectual friends, which is what *she* wanted. She told me he kept her locked up in a walled garden, like a princess of legend, Rapunzel as it might be, or the Sleeping Beauty.

JA: Do you think the relevance of 'Rationalism in Politics' has increased, decreased or sidestepped since 1962? Is irrationalism of the anti-constitutionalist, anti-rule-of-law, pro-populist sort more of a danger, or the technocracy-pseudo-socialism of the covid-warriors?

I think both of those things are very bad, and that a dose of Oakeshottian ‘anti-politics’ (so Havel characterised his own position) would be an extremely good corrective. But democracies feed (and decline) on promises, not on proven prudence or competence. And there’s nothing we can do about that, except foster real public debate and accountability. I am sometimes surprised, however, by the good sense of our fellow-citizens. (E.g. their response to Kinnock’s absurdly kitsch and prematurely triumphalist Sheffield rally in ’92. A distant bell rang in the depths of the folk memory, with the message ‘Nuremberg’. A pity all we got instead was Major).

JA: John Dunn has told me in the last few years that he regrets not taking Oakeshott more seriously at the time. I have the feeling that a whole generation bypassed Oakeshott, mostly for political reasons. When we now look at Oakeshott he seems quite mild and well-mannered, on the page: and yet, again, there is the Annan suggestion that Oakeshott was a ‘deviant’ along with Waugh and Leavis. Do you think he deserves Noel Annan’s sketch of him as a deviant?

Well, in his own time he was pretty much a one-off, if you call that deviant, ploughing as he did a (then) lonely furrow. He was a friend of Annan’s, as I expect you know. I hadn’t thought Annan was negative about him. You’re right that Oakeshott was nothing like Waugh or Leavis. Waugh was brilliant, but a proper reactionary, Oakeshott not at all. Leavis’s intellectual manners were barbaric. I have seen them in action, in a lecture. Denys (D. W.) Harding told me that Leavis was naturally genial, but learned them from his awful vindictive wife (a good critic, incidentally).

JA: Waugh and Leavis attacked others and were continually in feud; Oakeshott, by and large, is not known for ever having attacked anyone ...

Agreed.

JA: ... unless calling Isaiah Berlin the Paganini of the lecture hall was an attack. Maurice has a very funny line about how other people called Berlin not the Paganini but the Sgt. Bilko of the lecture hall.

Perhaps it was just the glasses. Actually, Philip Larkin (or Leo Salinger at Trinity) both looked much more like Bilko. Berlin, unlike Bilko, was not a scam merchant, though he could waffle with the best of them and contrive the most far-fetched and implausible connections, for example between de Maistre and fascism. Oakeshott’s introduction to Berlin’s LSE guest lecture was certainly cruel, and Berlin said it ruined the lecture, which his self-confident volubility had encouraged him, as usual, to busk impromptu. Oakeshott himself always used a script, and despite their similarity in outlook, was very different in character from Berlin, who successfully aspired to scale the pinnacles of the Establishment. I think, putting two and two together, but without any clear evidence, that Oakeshott probably, and unfairly, thought him an overrated, self-promoting windbag, and had determined to punish him for it. In later years Berlin told Shirley Letwin after an encounter with him at the Carlyle Club that he thought Oakeshott ‘slightly deranged’. So, though kindly by nature, Berlin had his revenge.

JA: Shaw was coruscating about plans to form a Shaw Society. What do you think Oakeshott would have made of the nature of his memorialisation? What sort of literary glory do you think he sought? To be read, obviously. But to be a name in textbooks?

I doubt it, if only because, like Halifax, he has no doctrine (except this, that there *is* no doctrine). But Simon told me that he suspected Michael hoarded all his correspondence with a view to someone’s eventually writing his biography. And he kept absolutely *everything*, even old tradesmen’s bills. (His LSE archive is simply gigantic).

JA: I mention him as much as anyone in my classes on politics. What is good about his thought is that he has a few neat-trick theories in his writing, but they always point to something a bit more profound, point to the hinterland. One doesn't get that with Rawls, which is why I think Rawls must fade. Plus, there is the matter of style. Rawls, for instance, lacks the literary bite of early J. S. Mill.

Rawls to my mind is pure stodge. I read the first hundred-plus pages, then told myself that was enough—I'd got the message (or rather the algorithm). His reputation derives entirely from his supposedly having 'revived' pol. phil. He should have let sleeping dogs lie, or perhaps rather die. The only good that came of it was Nozick's rebuttal, which was a jolly good read, even if dubious and impractical. He was much more intelligent than Rawls, and witty with it.

JA: Funnily enough, we have an essay in this anniversary edition by a young scholar, Beckett Rueda, on how Oakeshott reviewed an early Rawls piece quite favourably: since he thought Rawls was up to whatever it was Oakeshott thought he should have been up to. Later, on seeing *A Theory of Justice*, Oakeshott changed his mind. How do you think Oakeshott's reputation will fare in the future?

I haven't seen Oakeshott's review, and I look forward to Rueda's piece. Regarding Rawls, I can see only this rather tenuous connection with Oakeshott, that one consequence of the difference principle (namely, that inequality is preferable to equality if it benefits the disadvantaged more, as it obviously does) has been likened to a similar contention by the conservative Santayana, whom Oakeshott greatly admired. Whether Oakeshott actually agreed with the difference principle as a whole I much doubt. It is too much of a formula or litmus test, and its weaknesses are glaringly obvious. (E.g. why, when choosing behind the veil of ignorance, should we go for the faint-hearted precautionary principle, i.e. minimise our possible harms in preference to maximising our possible benefits? And anyway, isn't the whole basis of choice here rather selfish, even when extended to everyone, so that all are assumed to be equally egoistic?) But then, Oakeshott develops a similar hypostatizing habit in his later work (all those binaries).

I am not sure that Oakeshott in the future will be regarded as a political scientist, whatever that is, and whether or not there should or could be such a thing. (There is political experience, political knowledge, and political skill, but I'm doubtful that any of them deserves the name of *science*). I have never forgotten my first reading of 'Rationalism in Politics', the title essay, in 1967. I had been reading Orwell's essays simultaneously, and think of them as very much akin. Orwell called himself a 'democratic socialist', but, unless we take that to mean merely a 'social-democratic' supporter of the Welfare State, rather than the full Clause IV shebang, democratic socialism, as Solzhenitsyn said, is as credible as 'boiling ice'.

I think of Oakeshott nowadays largely as, like Orwell, a very acute and observant political and cultural psychologist, rather than as, as I have said, a systematic theorist *à la* Rawls *et al.* (Leaving out, for now, his non-political philosophy, in which his modal conception, in all its ongoing variety, and especially his reflections on historiography, is dominant, and cogent. It also informs the basis of his educational thinking, viz. relevance—by which I mean, not preoccupation with today's fashionable 'issues', but the avoidance of disciplinary irrelevance or *ignoratio elenchi*). His Rationalist is a recognisable, even central, contemporary type, and once he had alerted me to that element in my own graduate-studentish quasi-Marxism, I was a convert to Oakeshott and a defector from Leftism. The same Rationalist character, give or take, is identified by Orwell in *Down and Out*, before *Animal Farm* and *1984*, where (doubtless recalling Adam Smith on the 'man of system') he sees the know-all activist meddler or *Weltverbesserer* as an overstanding chess-player who regards his fellows as mere passive chessmen having no motive power of their own, and therefore ripe for manipulation, of course for their own (alleged) good. It is worth remembering that Orwell gave a positive review to Hayek's *Road to Serfdom* as early as 1944.

Now, Oakeshott thought Hayek guilty, in that same book, of semi-Rationalism, but they got on politely and well as LSE colleagues. Also the later Hayek, of *Legislation, Law and Liberty*, moved away from his earlier public-choice-style 'economism' in an Oakeshottian direction, call it political or anti-political as you

please (anti-politics being itself a political stance). He was much more conscientious in considering the detailed mechanics of political action and its consequences than Oakeshott, who, as I said earlier, took more of a make-do-and-mend view of things, doubtless recognising that so many consequences of principled policy were unintended and therefore largely unpredictable. So 'modelling', as it is now called, would mostly be a waste of time. Trust rather to experienced 'seamanship' to see the ship of state through, or rather, keep it afloat.