ENEMIES OF HOPE

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Enemies of Hope

A Critique of Contemporary Pessimism

IRRATIONALISM, ANTI-HUMANISM AND
COUNTER-ENLIGHTENMENT

palgrave

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Preface

This book could have just as well been called *Enemies of the Enlightenment*. It has a filial relation to other volumes I have published over the last few years – *Not Saussure* (Macmillan, 1988, 1995), *In Defence of Realism* (Edward Arnold, 1988), *The Explicit Animal* (Macmillan, 1993) and *Newton's Sleep* (Macmillan, 1995) – taking up and developing themes and arguments figuring in those books. In one respect, *Enemies of Hope* is an explanation of why I felt so strongly about the often rather *recherché* issues dealt with by its predecessors: it exposes some of the passions behind their more detailed or technical discussions.

Enemies of Hope has no pretence to being a work of primary scholarship. In my discussion of both the Enlightenment and subsequent anti-Enlightenment figures it will be obvious that I have been heavily dependent upon secondary sources. No one with a life of finite duration could hope to be an expert on the entire *œuvre* of figures as prodigiously productive and diverse as Freud, Marx, Durkheim, Helmholtz, the contemporary structuralist and post-structuralist thinkers, or to have an intimate first-hand acquaintance with contemporary ethological, anthropological, archaeological, etc. writing. The only areas where I can lay claim to any kind of expertise are in twentieth-century American and European philosophical thought, the writings of post-Saussurean theorists, and modern biology and medicine. My greatest single debt is to the brilliant and passionate essays of Isaiah Berlin, whose masterpieces of scholarship, read or re-read when this book was well underway, changed its character dramatically, determining the content of the Prologue, helping me to see the underlying theme of the succeeding chapters and shaping the agenda of the final discussion. A not inaccurate, if rather inelegant alternative title for the entire book, could be *Yes-But to Berlin's 'Yes-But to the Enlightenment'*.

Reliance upon secondary sources is not as disabling as may at first sight be imagined, especially if the secondary sources are chosen with discrimination and one depends upon writers such as Isaiah Berlin and Dudley Young rather than, say, Paul Johnson or James Burke. For this book is predominantly concerned with how the writings of contemporary thinkers have entered into common currency and determined the received ideas and the 'self-image' (to use Alasdair MacIntyre's term) of the age. *Enemies of Hope* should be read as an argument, even a polemic, rather than an original contribution to the history of ideas.

In the pages that follow I take issue with a web of notions, attitudes and prejudices that have been important in Counter-Enlightenment thought over the last two centuries or so, and which seem at present to be again in the ascendant. Except in the first chapter, my focus is on twentieth-century Counter-Enlightenment thought, which is characterised above all by scepticism, or even hostility, towards the idea of a human being as a conscious, rational agent and of human society as susceptible to progressive improvement as a result of the efforts of conscious, rational agents. Out of this negative assumption, at the heart of the web, arise many disparate filaments: mockery at the hope of progress; rejection of technology; scornful dismissal of the claims of scientific truth and of the distinction between science and magic; contempt for the democratic process; a profound suspicion of rationalism, rooted in a debased view of the true nature of human beings; and a fixed and cynical belief that objectivity is a mere mask for vested interests and that the sense of justice and fair play is mere rhetorical mist.

I have written this book out of irritation with ideas that are often wrong and – since anti-rationalists implicitly claim a validity and scope for their own positions that even the most universalising rationalist would not dare entertain – pragmatically self-refuting. I believe that such ideas not only reflect the contemporary *Zeitgeist*, but actively – and adversely – influence it. Historians of ideas, properly exaggerating the importance of their special area of interest, would like to believe that large-scale philosophical beliefs are the motor of history. This is probably naive; but there is no doubt that ideas have a shaping force: they change history as well as being secreted and absorbed by it. Just as I do not accept that the horrors of the mass slaughter, or the persecutions, imprisonment and enslavement, of individuals in modern times, were incubated in classrooms where a post-Enlightenment secularised conception of humankind has been taught, I likewise do not blame Darwin for the brutalised social practices legitimised by the writings of the Social-Darwinists, or Herder for *volkisch* ideology that the Nazis invoked to justify their *Judenpolitik*. Nevertheless, I feel that the contemporary attack on Enlightenment values carries great dangers. At the very least, it is part of a process by which contemporary humanity is talking itself into a terminal state of despair, self-disgust and impotence. The self-congratulatory pessimism of many humanist intellectuals who have ‘seen through’ the pretensions of mankind, and dismiss science and, equally, the hopes of those who want to bring about a better future, is likely to be self-fulfilling. If we do not believe in the possibility of a better future – brought about by progressive and patient social reform, and by the application of ever-more effective technology – that future will surely not come about.

We have a responsibility to those who otherwise will be without hope to keep alive the hope of progress. To deny that hope, and to mock the agents and the means by which it might be fulfilled, is, as Peter Medawar said, the last word in meanness of spirit. Such meanness of spirit should not be allowed the last word.