## Political Change

1
However disgruntled or puzzled a social hierarchy may leave us feeling, we are apt to accept it out of a resigned assumption that it is too entrenched and must be too well founded to be questioned, that communities and the beliefs underpinning them are practically speaking immutable, that they are simply *natural.*

2
Many distinctive ideas have, over the course of history, been thought of as natural:

*'Natural' Ideas, 1857–1911*

'The real fact is that man in the beginning was ordained to rule over woman: and this is an eternal decree which we have no right and no power to alter.' Earl Percy (1873)

'There is more difference, physically and morally, between an educated European man and a European woman than there is between a European man and a negro belonging to some savage Central African tribe.' Lord Cromer (1911)

'The majority of women (happily for them) are not very much troubled with sexual feeling of any kind.' Sir William Acton (1857)

'As a race the African is inferior to the white man; subordination to the white man is his normal condition. Therefore our system, which

regards the African as an inferior, rests upon a great law of nature.'
Alexander Stephens (1861)

3

A political consciousness could be said to arise through the recognition that views held to be a priori truths by important voices in society may in fact be relative and open to investigation. These views may be declaimed with confidence, they may seem to belong to the fabric of existence as much as the trees and the sky, yet they are – a political perspective insists – made up by particular beings with particular practical and psychological interests to defend.

If this relativity is hard to bear in mind, it is because dominant beliefs typically take pains to suggest that they are no more alterable by human hands than the orbit of the sun. They claim to be merely stating the obvious. They are, to use Karl Marx's helpful word, *ideological*, an ideological statement being defined as one that is engaged in subtly pushing a partial line while pretending to be speaking neutrally.

For Marx, it is the ruling classes of a society who will largely be responsible for disseminating ideological beliefs, which explains why, in societies where a landed class controls the balance of power, the concept of the inherent nobility of landed wealth is taken for granted by the majority of the population (even by many of those who lose out under the system), while in mercantile societies it is the achievements of entrepreneurs which dominate citizens' visions of success. In Marx's phrase, 'The ruling ideas of every age are always the ideas of the ruling class.'

Yet these ideas would never come to rule if they were seen to rule too forcefully. The essence of ideological statements is that, unless our political senses are developed, we will fail to spot them. Ideology is released into society like a colourless, odourless gas. It is embedded

in newspapers, advertisements, television programmes and textbooks – where it makes light of its partial, perhaps illogical or unjust, take on the world; where it meekly implies that it is simply stating age-old truths with which only a fool or a maniac would disagree.

4

But the nascent political mind casts off politeness and tradition, refuses to blame itself for adopting a contrary stance and asks, with the innocence of a child but the tenacity of a trial lawyer, 'Does this have to be?'

An oppressive situation, which might have been taken as a sign that nature had condemned one to suffer in perpetuity, may – by being reinterpreted politically – be attributed to certain perhaps changeable forces in society. Guilt and shame may be transmuted into understanding and a quest for a more equitable distribution of status.

5

George Bernard Shaw, *The Intelligent Woman's Guide to Socialism and Capitalism* (London, 1928):

'You must clear your mind of the fancy with which we all begin as children, that the institutions under which we live are natural, like the weather. They are not. Because they exist everywhere in our little world, we take it for granted that they have always existed and must always exist. That is a dangerous mistake. They are in fact transient makeshifts. Changes that nobody ever believed possible take place in a few generations. Children nowadays believe that to spend nine years at school, to have old-age and widows' pensions, votes for women and short-skirted ladies in Parliament is part of the order of nature and always was and ever will be; but their great-grandmothers

would have said that anyone who told them that such things were coming was mad – and that anyone who wanted them to come was wicked.'

## 6

The group of people who perhaps most successfully altered their status in Western societies over the twentieth century was women – and the way in which a number of them came to feel entitled to question their positions provides a host of general insights into the development of a political consciousness.

Virginia Woolf began *A Room of One's Own* (1929) by describing a visit she had made one autumn to Cambridge University, during which she had decided to take a look around Trinity College Library – in order to consult the manuscripts of Milton's *Lycidas* and Thackeray's *The History of Henry Esmond.* However, as she was about to step inside the library, 'a deprecating, silvery, kindly gentleman' had appeared and 'regretted in a low voice that ladies are only admitted to the library if accompanied by a Fellow of the College or furnished with a letter of introduction'. In a minor key, Woolf had come up against one of the great stately pillars upon which the inferior status of women was founded: their disenfranchisement from equal rights to higher education.

Many women would have been hurt by the incident, but few were likely to have responded to the offence politically. Few were likely to have done anything other than blame themselves or nature or God for it. After all, never in history had women had the same rights as men to education. Had not many of the most important doctors in Britain and certain politicians in Parliament too made reference to women's biologically inferior minds, which stemmed from the smaller size of their skulls? What right, then, did any one woman have to doubt the motives of a gentleman who had turned her away

from a library, especially if he had delivered his message with apologies and a polite smile?

Woolf was less easily silenced. Performing the quintessential political manoeuvre, rather than asking herself, 'What is wrong with *me* for not being allowed into a library?' she asked, 'What is wrong with *the keepers of the library* for not allowing *me* in?' When ideas and institutions are held to be merely 'natural', responsibility for suffering must necessarily lie either with no one in particular or else with the pained parties themselves. But from a political perspective, we are given leave to imagine that it might be the idea, instead of something in our character, that is at fault. Rather than wondering in disgrace, 'What is wrong with *me* [for being a woman/having dark skin/no money]?', we are encouraged to ask, 'What might be wrong, unjust or illogical about *others* for reproving me?' – a question asked not from any conviction of innocence (the stance of those who use political radicalism as a paranoid way of avoiding self-criticism), but from a recognition that there is more folly and partisanship in institutions, ideas and laws than a naturalistic perspective allows us to imagine.

On her way back to her Cambridge hotel, Woolf therefore moved outwards from her hurt to consider the position of women generally: 'I pondered what effect poverty has on the mind; and what effect wealth has on the mind and I thought how unpleasant it is to be locked out and of the safety and prosperity of the one sex and the poverty and insecurity of the other.' She reflected upon, and felt doubts about, the feminine role-model she had grown up with: of a woman who was always, 'immensely charming and utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. If there was chicken, she would take the leg; if there was a draught, she would sit in it – in short, she was so constituted that she would never have a mind or a wish of her own, but prefer to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others.'

On returning to London, the questions continued: 'Why did men drink wine and women water? Why was one sex so prosperous and the other so poor?' Wanting to 'strain off what was personal and accidental in these impressions' of female subjugation, Woolf went to the British Library (into which women had been allowed for the previous two decades) and investigated the history of men's attitudes to women down the ages. She found a stream of extraordinary prejudice and half-baked truth delivered with authority by priests, scientists and philosophers. Women were, it was said, ordained by God to be inferior, they were constitutionally unable to govern or run a business, they were too weak to be doctors, when they had their periods they couldn't be trusted to handle machinery nor to remain impartial during trial cases. And behind this abuse, Woolf recognized that the problem was money. Women didn't have freedom, including freedom of the spirit, because they didn't control their own income: 'Women have always been poor, not for two hundred years merely, but from the beginning of time. Women have had less intellectual freedom than the sons of Athenian slaves.'

Woolf's book culminated in a specific, political demand: women needed not only dignity, but also equal rights to education, an income of 'five hundred pounds a year' and 'a room of one's own'.

7

The ideological element within the modern status-ideal may lack the shrillness of nineteenth-century pronouncements on race or gender. It wears a smile and lies in innocuous places, within the bric-à-brac of what we read and hear. And yet it retains an equally partial and sometimes prejudiced conception of how a good life should be led, which deserves greater scrutiny than it invites.

Messages emanate from society's ubiquitous statements and images to which we are less impermeable than we might think. It