

The nature of liberal civilization: a discussion between Sidney Hook and Bertrand Russell

The British Broadcasting Corporation presents a conversation on the nature of liberal civilization between Dr. Sidney Hook, well-known educator and philosopher and Chairman of New York University's Graduate Division of Philosophy and Psychology, and the eminent British philosopher Bertrand Russell.

Hook: Our theme, Russell, is the nature of liberal civilization, and the problems which it confronts today. All sorts of definitions of liberal civilization have been offered, and I suppose we don't want to take too much time exploring definitions. Well, I want to propose a definition of liberal civilization as one in which there is a free market of ideas and in which there is a belief that the play of intelligence will lead to equitable solutions of problems more readily than by the use of force, tradition, or similar instruments. Now, from the belief in the free market of ideas, it seems to me that, as liberals, we are committed to a defence of the right of heresy, because one never knows when a heretical idea may turn out to be a valid idea. We cannot make the assumption of absolute truth, and so I've very often tended to identify a liberal civilization with a belief in the right to heresy. But now, unfortunately, our modern society differs from the society of fifty or seventy-five years ago in that on various occasions we have encountered movements designed to destroy free society and with that the right to heresy. And these movements distinguish themselves from the revolutionary movements of old in not being outspoken and honest in their declaration that they wish to substitute a different kind of society, but they have taken a conspiratorial form. The heretic is a man who honestly defends unpopular ideas and prepares to take the

consequences for it. The conspirator is one who works by stealth, who works outside the rules of the game and today, as in the Fascist and the Communist movements, works on behalf of a foreign power which has declared its purpose as being the destruction of liberal civilization, which it regards as decadent. And I maintain that our moral obligation in political life is to the toleration of dissent, no matter how heretical, not to the toleration of conspiracy, no matter how disguised; and our practical problem is to find ways of implementing that distinction. But I would like to know whether you accept this distinction between heresy, to which I say yes, and conspiracy, to which I say no.

Russell: Yes, up to a point I accept it. I'm not quite sure but what I should go even further than you do in the way of things not to be tolerated. I should say, for example, that if there were a political doctrine of which the chief tenet was the assassination of the heads of states, that you would have a certain right to suppress that doctrine, in so far as it went in for assassination.

Hook: Only in so far as there was a clear and present danger that some would carry out the assassination.

Russell: Quite. So that I don't think that it's altogether the distinction between a conspiracy and a doctrine. And I should go further and say this, that even supposing that a man is a heretic and a conspirator, you ought to be able to distinguish his conspiratorial activities from his other activities, and allow him his other activities, and only catch him up when you find him being a conspirator.

Hook: I agree with you. That is to say, that if a man professes Fascist ideas, or if he professes Communist ideas, I think that he should be treated as a heretic, and be given an opportunity to present them in the market-place of opinion. But if he joins an organization with a declared objective of infiltrating into strategic posts in the government, if he assumes a Party name and then professes to be something different, then I should say that he is a conspirator—not necessarily a political conspirator, but that he is playing outside the rules of the game in the particular profession or the particular branch of the service in which he is to be found. I would say that a conspirator would be treated, then, differently from a heretic. For example, as far as government service is concerned, it is true that a man's ideas would have to be taken into account if he had a policy-making post. But leaving that out for a moment: if a person was a conspirator and owed a primary allegiance to a foreign government, then I should agree with Mr. Attlee, who substantially once said that a primary allegiance to a foreign government renders a man unfit for service in his own.

Russell: Well, I think that's perfectly true. If you're thinking of posts in which the man can influence, there are a great many government posts,

minor government posts, in which a man's opinions really don't come in, and it doesn't very much matter what they are; in the important posts I agree it does matter.

Hook: Oh, I would go beyond that, Mr. Russell. There was a case of Judith Coplon in the United States who had a very humble post as clerk in the Department of Justice, and she was in a position where she had access to a great deal of very important information. I imagine the man even who empties the trash-paper basket in the atomic energy plant, although he doesn't make policy, would certainly not qualify for his post if he was a member of the Communist Party. Don't you?

Russell: Well, I should entirely agree about that, yes, certainly, where there is a real danger. But there are quite a number of things where there isn't any great danger,

Hook: I agree.

Russell: and where you don't need to bother.

Hook: Like Veterans' Relief, for example.

Russell: And, of course, I suppose, in so far as you and I, Hook, are not in agreement, it isn't on a principle, but on the degree of damage to liberty which is worthwhile. And there I think we probably do disagree. I mean I think

Hook: Yes.

Russell: we should—I should say that it's worthwhile running real risks in order to preserve a certain amount of liberty.

Hook: I would agree with that. But you see, if you put it in terms of degree, then we would have to discuss specific cases. We are committed primarily, as liberals, to a belief in freedom and to those institutions which make freedom vital. Then we must also, if we leave that, be concerned with the security of those institutions. And then from case to case we have to make certain decisions. But we need certain principles to guide us in making these decisions, and too often we find people substituting just slogans for analysis. It's not enough to say one believes in freedom, and not enough to say one believes in security; one must try to work out a set of operating principles implemented by human beings, and intelligent human beings we hope, that would maximize the amount of freedom in a society and the amount of security.

Russell: Yes. You see, I think that the moment you allow that certain infringements of liberty are permissible, which I do admit in the theory—the moment you allow that, and the moment you put your policy into the hands of utterly ignorant and brutal people (which you will have to do if it is to be a practical policy), in that moment you make it quite certain that very grave evils will result that you never intended.

Hook: Do you believe that it's inevitable that ignorant and brutal people implement such a policy? I have to some extent, not altogether,

admired the way in which in Great Britain some of the security rules have been followed. To my surprise I find that some of the safeguards which exist in the United States are not found in Great Britain. For example, at security hearings a man is not told about the information in the files, and he is not given the opportunity to have counsel in such a hearing. In the United States, however, he is given more information—not perhaps enough—and he has a right to have counsel. But nonetheless, you have administrators who very often, despite the absence of these safeguards, are perceived, on the whole, on the whole intelligently, whereas our personnel perhaps is not so successful. But I mean, I draw from that the conclusion that one must develop intelligent civil servants. And there is nothing in the nature of man which makes it impossible to him to apply these difficult rules more and more intelligently, learning from experience.

Russell: Well, that depends a little upon the nature of the thing. Now, one of the things which, of course, which have turned European intellectuals into critics of recent American activity more than anything else, is the visa policy, the McCarran Act; and there if such an Act exists—which I don't think it ought to do, but if it exists—it is essential that in applying it to men of considerable intellectual eminence, the judgement should be a judgment by their peers and not by ignorant policemen.

Hook: I couldn't agree with you more, Mr. Russell, and as you know I have spent a considerable amount of time in advocating, together with millions of other Americans, the amendment or the repeal of the McCarran-Walter Immigration Act. And I have hopes that the worst provisions of this act will disappear. In fact I had some heartening news that some eminent men with heretical opinions who have been denied visas in the past have been granted them. Though I think we will not differ about that. But I'd like to pursue for a moment the further implications of this distinction between heresy and conspiracy as regards government employment. Because if it is true that there is no room for conspirators in the government of a democratic society in posts which involve policy-making or access to information, then it necessarily follows that one has to undertake the unpleasant task of discovering who the conspirators are.

Russell: Yes, up to a point you do, but only up to a point. Most liberal-minded people in Western Europe think that the fear of Communism in America is excessive. Not that they don't think just as ill of Communism as Americans do; they think just as ill of it. But they think that the danger of it at home is not nearly so great as Americans think it is.

Hook: Oh, I do not think that most Americans are under the impression that the Communist movement is a *domestic* danger, and that the

Communists threaten to take over the government. No, I think that most Americans correctly regard the American Communist movement as part of an international movement—in fact, *completely subservient to the interests of the Kremlin*. Now, as you know, the American Communist Party has no mass roots in the United States. The workers are completely indifferent to its doctrines and propaganda. The result is, that the American Communist Party on the whole engages in activities which are not public but secret. If you have 50,000 people who are under orders to infiltrate into strategic positions, even though they do not constitute a domestic danger they certainly constitute a threat to security, when their relationship to another foreign power is considered. And today, especially, I think you would grant, Russell, where atomic warfare may break out at any moment, where the instruments for mass destruction have reached a point in their development where two or three days, or even a week's activity, may mean victory for one side or another, to have 10,000 or 15,000 people in the government who owe their allegiance to the Kremlin is rather, if not frightening, alarming.

Russell: Well, I don't say they should be in the government; I mean the government is a special thing. But there is in America a very widespread attitude to keep them out, not only out of the government, but out of the universities, out of a good many firms in private business, out of all sorts of places; and I think that one ought to wait to catch the man out in some actual conspiratorial activity, which it should be the business of the police to find out.

Hook: You don't think that the declaration of intent, for example, to do something which is wrong or evil, may not sometimes be sufficient to exclude a man from access to a position of trust and confidence?

Russell: Now let me take an illustration from a different field. The Catholic Church holds, and continues to hold, that where it has the political power to do so it is justified in persecution. Most of us don't agree to that. But I should not say that that is a reason for not employing a Catholic.

Hook: I would agree. And if a man had a similar view, let's say a Communist view, that the Communist society is superior to the democratic society, I think he should have the right to present that point of view. But, if a man were a member of a group in which he was told to use a secret name, and in which he was told to use a position of authority in the class-room—I'm quoting now—"without exposing himself", to make propaganda for the Party line, then my objection to him would be professional, not merely political. Well, let me put it another way, Russell, from still another field. Suppose you wanted to hire a cashier, and you discovered that this cashier was a member of a group which had

declared its intention of, oh, piecemeal expropriating its employers. Now, would you wait until you detected the man in the act of rifling the till, or would you say: "Now look here, if you're a member of that group voluntarily, then I think you're not professionally qualified for this post. We won't send you to jail for it, but find some other employment, but not as a cashier."

Russell: Yes, I think that would be perfectly valid in that case. But there is a general feeling, I think, in America that all Communists, or all people who belong to the Communist Party, are much more constantly engaged in conspiracy than in fact they are. Some of the intellectual Communists do very little conspiring.

Hook: Well, I think to a certain extent you are right, but if you studied the statutes of membership in the Communist Party you'll discover that they have a control commission which purges its ranks every six months of the year on the ground of inactivity or disobedience. And I should like to read just a small exchange between Mr. Browder, who was then head of the Communist Party, and a member of Congress on this. The Central Control Commission of the Communist Party in the past, when it was safe, used to publish a list of the members who had been dropped. And the question to Mr. Browder was the following: "In numerous instances we have a notation of the Central Control Commission that the expelled member 'refused to carry out decisions.' That is in line with your explanation of the relationship between the Communist Party of the United States and the Comintern?" Browder: "Exactly." "A member must carry out all decisions of the Party or be expelled from the Party?" is the next question. The Chairman asks: "Is that correct, Mr. Browder?" Mr. Browder says: "Yes, that is correct." Mr. Starnes: "A Party member does not have any latitude or discretion on the matter—he has to carry out orders?" Mr. Browder: "The Party member has to carry out orders."¹ Now if this is true, isn't there a *presumptive* evidence that a man who is in the Communist Party, under instructions to do something dishonourable, will carry out those orders?

Russell: In what respect, and I should like you to explain this, in what respect does a member of the Communist Party differ from, say, a Catholic priest? Is there any difference?

Hook: Yes, in terms of the *kinds* of authoritarianism for which they stand. That's the first difference. The second difference is that a Catholic priest, in my experience, is usually open in his beliefs. He calls himself a Catholic priest, and he doesn't call himself a Unitarian; whereas mem-

bers of the Communist Party very rarely will admit openly that they are members of the Communist Party.

Russell: Now look here.

Hook: Just one other point. There's one other great difference. I do not believe that Catholic priests should be employed by the government in any position which requires *policy-making*. And I do not believe that Catholic priests should be employed as teachers in *public* schools. Do you?

Russell: Well, I don't like to see them in those posts, but I should certainly not make a law to prevent them from being there. I shouldn't dream of it. I want to make another point, which is this: that all that has been done in America has been to catch out people who *avow* that they are Communists. And the methods that are employed by the McCarran Act or what not catch out those who *avow* it, and don't catch out those who don't, and that is one of the sillinesses of it.

Hook: Well, on the contrary, Mr. Russell, there are very few people who do *avow* that they are Communists. I sometimes have been tempted to say, if only you could find a person in the United States in recent years who in answer to a question, "Are you a member of the Communist Party?", would reply, "Yes, and I'm proud of it." Why, it's so different from what the old Socialist and Communist movements used to be. You recall the concluding sentence of Marx's *Communist Manifesto*, where Marx says we refuse to conceal our views and publicly proclaim such and such. But every member of the Communist Party who's been asked whether he is a member, who has been asked "Have you engaged in espionage or in sabotage?", has replied: "I refuse to answer that question on the ground that my truthful answer would tend to incriminate me."

Russell: Well, now, that seems to me to bear out, what I've been very much criticized for saying, that there is a reign of terror in America, because in England the Communists I know *avow* that they are Communists quite openly and make no bones about it.

Hook: There is another interpretation possible. It might be that in the United States, instead of this being evidence as [to] a reign of terror, that the Communist movement is a conspiratorial movement, and they do not dare to tell the truth. I am confident, well I'm not confident, but I wonder whether an Englishman or a member of the English Communist Party, if asked "Have you engaged in espionage against your own government?", would reply, "I refuse to answer on the ground that my truthful answer would tend to incriminate me"? Now, if he answered that, I wouldn't say that was a sign of terror going on. I would say that this is a presumption,

Russell: Yes.

Hook: a presumption that the man has something to hide.

¹ Quoted in Sidney Hook, *Heresy, "Yes," Conspiracy, "No"* (New York: John Day, 1953), pp. 28-9.

Russell: But may I say you are evading my point, which was not will a man avow conspiratorial activity, but will he avow membership of the Communist Party. You say that in America Communists will not avow membership of the Communist Party. In England they will.

Hook: Well, they will not avow it because the next question is, is whether they have engaged in conspiratorial activity, and they want to conceal the information. Because if it is, if they *have* engaged in this activity, naturally protective measures will be taken against them and their associates. The reason that they refuse to answer these questions is not because they believe in freedom; it's because they do not want to make public their activities—doesn't stand the light of the day. But if you ask a Socialist what his belief is, if you ask a Democrat, a Republican or even a Catholic, what his belief [is], they will publicly proclaim it. And that is how the Communist movement differs today from the revolutionary movements of the past and from other heretical movements. And I should have imagined that one would understand that in Great Britain, too.

Russell: Well, you see, I think that the conspiratorial character—though I know that the Communist authorities want to keep it up—is very largely encouraged by this attitude of anti-Communists, and that the conspiratorial character will grow less and less if there is not this attitude of suspicion. You begin to feel rather silly if you keep up this attitude when there isn't the correlative attitude on the other side.

Hook: Now, I'm sorry to have to take issue with you. As I understand you, you are saying that if there were no suspicion, there were no attempts to expose these conspirators, if a country was more liberal and more democratic, the Communists would not engage in conspiracy. Now I'd like to read to you a passage from Lenin, than whom there is no more authoritative person. He says: "In all countries, even the freest, 'legal' and 'peaceful' in the sense that the class struggle is least acute in them, the time has fully matured when it is absolutely necessary for every Communist Party systematically to combine legal with illegal work, legal and illegal organizations.... Illegal work is particularly necessary in the army, the navy, the police, and elsewhere. In all organizations without exception ... (political, industrial, military, cooperative, educational, sports), groups or nuclei of Communists should be formed ... mainly open groups but also secret groups."² Now this, Russell, I think is proof positive that the Communists do not distinguish between what they regard as a democratic or non-democratic (in quotes) form of government. They are conspiratorial, and they have instructions to organize in a conspiratorial way even in England.

² Quoted in Hook, p. 23.

Russell: I know they have those instructions; that isn't my point. Those instructions, given by Lenin, were produced in his psychology by having lived under a police state. And when people live for a long time in an atmosphere of freedom, although they may hold in theory just these same views that you've been quoting, they don't hold them with the same virulence or with the same force. And I think—to come to a general thing which I want to end up with—I think this *atmosphere of fear*, although there may be certain grounds for it, the atmosphere of fear is *disastrous*, and it has consequences that are terrible, such as the alliance with Franco and with Chiang Kai-shek. It means that you ally yourself with all the same sort of evils anywhere else, provided they'll say they are on the other side.

Hook: Well, I don't think you took that position when Great Britain allied itself with the Soviet Union against Hitler. I think you're confusing a philosophical issue with a political issue. There are times when one must recognize a policy of a lesser evil. I'm not approving our alliance with Franco; but under certain circumstances I would say that although Tito is a totalitarian, whom I heartily disagree with, I would be prepared to support Tito against Stalin if *a consequence of that support would be the strengthening of democratic institutions*. It seems to me, Russell, that I'm as opposed as you are to an atmosphere of fear. I also believe that there is a problem which has to be faced. And that if McCarthyism is defined as irresponsible exaggeration, then there are many people in addition to McCarthy who are guilty of McCarthyism.

Russell: Well, I think that's true.

*You have been listening to a programme on the nature of liberal civilization between Dr. Sidney Hook and Bertrand Russell. This programme came to you from the London studios of the British Broadcasting Corporation.*³

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