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SOME COMMON FALLACIES IN POLITICAL THINKING

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I WANT to discuss and illustrate in this paper certain fallacies which we are all very liable to commit in our thinking about political and social questions. Perhaps "thinking" is rather too high-sounding a name to attach to the mental processes which lie behind most political talk. It is at any rate thinking of a very low grade, for a considerable proportion of such discussion in Press and Parliament and private conversation hardly rises above the intellectual level of disputes between boys at a preparatory school.

The first fallacy which I will consider is this. There is a very natural tendency for a person to base his judgments about present trends and future prospects on the quite recent history of a quite small part of the world, in particular on what has happened in his own country during his own and perhaps his parents' lifetime. Now the features which he notices in this restricted segment of space-time, and which he makes the basis of his political and social judgments, may depend on a concatenation of circumstances which have seldom occurred before, are unlikely to happen again, and perhaps never existed outside a small area. This may well lead to an unjustified optimism or an equally unjustified pessimism, and in any case to ill-founded judgments.

I suspect that all Western Europeans and their relatives in the United States are now, and have been for a century or so, particularly liable to commit this fallacy; and I suspect that Englishmen are even more exposed to it than their neighbours on the Continent. I will now try to explain and illustrate these statements.

Consider, e.g., the extreme peculiarity and the exceptional favourableness of conditions in England as compared with most other parts

of the world from, say, 1066 to 1914, and in particular from 1800 to about 1900. In the first place, while practically all continental nations were repeatedly subject to invasions, which brought the horrors of war home to most of their inhabitants, England was free from foreign invasion, and, except on a very few occasions, free from any serious risk of it. The only wars within England were civil wars, and it may fairly be said that they were on a small scale and conducted with reasonable humanity in comparison both with simultaneous operations on the Continent and with present-day practice throughout the world. I am sure that this long and singularly happy experience has tended to make Englishmen oblivious to the irrational hatreds and rivalries, the bitter and justified mutual fears and suspicions, and the ever-present temptations to fanaticism and cruelty which are normal to the inhabitants of a large part of Europe and of Asia. It tends to make them regard as normal a degree of kindliness, straight-dealing, good sense, and readiness to compromise in all political relationships, which in fact is and always has been most uncommon. It is inevitable that calculations and expectations based on such illusions should often break down. We are then very liable to complain that we live in peculiarly evil times and among peculiarly ill-behaved neighbours; when in fact the times and the neighbours are much as they have always been, and it is we who are judging them from a very narrow and exceptionally lucky historical and geographical basis.

Still confining our attention to the peculiarities of fairly recent English experience, we may next consider how utterly exceptional was our economic position from about 1780 to about 1914. We had a very hard-working populace and highly enterprising employers, vast stores of easily exploitable coal and iron, and a very favourable geographical position on the edge of Europe and facing the New World, and we were in control of a considerable proportion of the richest undeveloped lands on earth. We built up a highly organized industrial and commercial system before anything like it had developed elsewhere. So for a long time we could sell our manufactured goods throughout the world without serious rivalry and could import cheaply food and raw materials. During this period we were able to make enormous investments in every part of the world, so that, even when the initial advantages which we had enjoyed over other nations had greatly diminished, the income which we received from these made up for the decreased rate of profit on our foreign trade.

Now it seems to me that the very natural mistake of regarding as normal and permanent this quite exceptional and temporary state of affairs, which in fact lasted for about four generations, caused Englishmen to make frightful mistakes of policy and continues to

bedevil all our affairs. We committed the extraordinary error of thinking that, because free trade had suited us in that peculiar situation, it would inevitably be adopted by other nations; whereas the very facts which made it convenient to us made it inconvenient to them, and forced them to adopt protective tariffs. Under the influence of these beliefs we let our agriculture, which had been the finest in the world, go to ruin, and our population swell inordinately and crowd into towns. We banked on peace as something normal, whereas it has never been more than an interlude in European life, and we made our system more and more vulnerable to the direct and the indirect effects of war. Never perhaps in history has a community so whole-heartedly put its shirt on the wrong horse. We sold our heritage for a mess of pottage, and now the pottage is eaten and the mess remains.

It is a striking instance of the power of the fallacy which I am illustrating, that in 1946, when the conditions had plainly changed catastrophically and permanently to our detriment, a large proportion of the electorate and apparently many of the leading politicians of both parties believed that we could both improve our standard of living and diminish our hours of work. I suppose that the more responsible politicians and at any rate some of the less stupid of the trades-union leaders have by now ceased to believe this palpable nonsense. But, to use an excellent word coined by the late Lord Keynes, the process of "de-bamboozling" their followers is a very slow and painful one. Even now, when England has twice defaulted for vast sums to the United States, and when our not very exalted standard of living is precariously maintained by the sale of our foreign investments and by American doles, ungraciously granted and ungratefully accepted, a majority of the English wage-drawers still live in Cloud-Cuckoo Land. They still believe that higher real wages for less effort are just round the corner, and that they would be realized to-day were it not for the machinations of that mysterious entity "They" which has replaced the old-fashioned Devil in popular imagination.

Let us next consider an example of this fallacy which is common both to Americans and Englishmen. This is the very usual belief that what we know as "democracy" is a suitable article for export and a form of government which all and sundry could and should adopt. For my part I prefer to avoid the word "democracy" altogether, for it has become little more than an emotive noise with the minimum of cognitive meaning. What in practice it means for us is roughly this. It means that legislation and administration are subject to the control of a representative assembly, chosen at fairly frequent intervals by almost universal suffrage exercised by an electorate organized into two nearly equal political parties. It is assumed that

the electors record their votes and that the representatives conduct their discussions without serious interference from the executive or from powerful individuals or groups. It is further assumed that the magistrates hold their offices independently of the executive, the representative assembly, and the electorate; and that they habitually make their judicial decisions, even in matters which directly concern the government, in accordance with existing law and without being subject to pressure either from the executive or the populace.

Now I am not concerned to discuss the merits and defects of this form of government. What I do wish to emphasize is that it presupposes a certain very special kind of historical background and contemporary conditions; that these are absent in the greater part of the world; and that there is not the faintest reason to believe that it is a practicable form of government for most peoples at most times. Even if it be, as I think it probably is, in the abstract a less undesirable form of government than most of the known alternatives, it does not follow that it is the best form for those peoples in whom the necessary conditions for its success are lacking. It may be better to have a worse kind of government, suited to one's traditions and situation and national character, than a better kind imported from abroad which is a grotesque misfit. I will now develop this point in rather more detail.

So far as I am aware, this kind of government has never worked even moderately well except in Great Britain, Scandinavia, Holland, Belgium, and Switzerland, and in those non-European lands which were first peopled by emigrants from certain of these parts of Europe and are now occupied by their descendants. It is difficult to say with confidence that it has worked decently in France, and one can say with certainty that it has been a fiasco in central, eastern, and south-eastern Europe. One hardly knows whether to laugh or to weep at the naïvety of the common American belief that it is a suitable system of government to impose upon Japan; and our own talk of "educating Germany for democracy" seems to me little less ludicrous.

Judging from English and Swedish experience, I should say that a necessary historical background to this system is a long process of political development from pre-Christian times, in which kings, nobles, farmers, burghers, churchmen and lawyers all played their part, and in which men became accustomed to reach decisions by discussion and on the whole to abide by those decisions even when they went against their wishes and immediate interests. In both Scandinavia and England, though in different ways, the very ancient and quasi-religious respect for traditional laws, as something binding alike on rulers and ruled, for the authorized exponents of

those laws, and for the courts in which they gave their decisions, has been immensely important.

Two other important conditions, which have existed in England and Scandinavia but are lacking in many parts of the world, are these. In the first place, the population is or believes itself to be racially homogeneous, and it is practically homogeneous in its religion or irreligion. How important this condition is may be seen by comparing the histories of the two neighbouring islands of Great Britain and Ireland. Secondly, there has not been a hopelessly deep cleavage between different classes of society, and above all there has been no violent revolution leaving embittered memories behind. It seems to a foreign observer that French political life, e.g., is poisoned by traditional hatreds and loyalties going back to the revolution, from which we are luckily free. I would add, for what it is worth, a certain degree of calmness and phlegm in the average Englishman, Dutchman or Swede which contrasts with the excitability that one seems to notice in many other races.

I think that it would be rash to assume even that this system will continue to work tolerably well in the lands in which it is native, now that the conditions have become so unlike those under which it grew up. A system which developed and flourished in a comparatively small society, mainly occupied in small-scale agriculture and handicraft, may easily break down when that society has enormously increased in numbers and has grown into a predominantly urban collection of factory and transport workers, shop assistants, clerks and minor government officials, largely dependent upon foreign trade. But, however that may be, it is plainly most dangerous to assume that it can be transplanted and will flourish in societies in which the essential historical background has never existed and the essential contemporary conditions are wholly lacking.

Finally, I will take an instance of this fallacy which is probably common not only to Englishmen and Americans, but also to most Western Europeans. This consists in taking as normal the peculiarly favourable economic conditions which prevailed in Europe from about 1850 to 1930, and assuming that, apart from occasional setbacks, they will continue and even grow more favourable. If I am not mistaken, that relatively fortunate economic situation, and the marked rise in the standard of refinement, decency and humanity which it made possible, depended on very special conditions which seem unlikely to recur in the foreseeable future. For a short period the resources of food and raw materials available to Europeans increased at a much greater rate than the population which could exert an effective demand upon them. This happened through the rapid exploitation of the virgin lands of America, Australia and Africa, and the simultaneous development on a vast scale of methods of

cheap and quick transport and of cold storage. As a part of this unusually favourable situation huge numbers of men and women were able to relieve the pressure of population in Europe by emigrating and settling in these empty fertile lands, where their labours not only supported themselves but also produced a surplus for those whom they had left at home. I do not see how anything closely parallel to this can happen again to Western Europeans. On the other hand, the population of these new lands has grown and will continue to grow. Their demands for food and raw materials will increase, and so too will their power of producing cheaply and efficiently all the manufactured goods that they need. They will thus have less and less to export to Europe and less and less inducement to take European manufactured goods in exchange. So far from the economic conditions which prevailed in the world during the lives of our grandfathers and fathers being normal, they may be compared to a tidal wave which has left Western Europe in general and England in particular stranded high and dry on a shelf on the face of a cliff, from which it is impossible to climb up and hard to climb down without disaster.

I could easily give other examples of this fallacy of taking temporary and local conditions as permanent and world-wide and basing one's political judgments and actions on that assumption. But it is time to mention and illustrate other common fallacies. I shall take next a bunch of them which it will be convenient to group together under the name of "causal fallacies," because they all involve a reference to causation though some of them involve other notions beside.

Quite apart from all metaphysical questions, the notion of cause is a complex one which needs a fairly elaborate and subtle logical analysis. It would be inappropriate to enter in detail into this here and now; it will suffice for our present purpose to say that the statement that C causes E sometimes means that C is a *necessary* though perhaps not sufficient condition of E, sometimes that C is a *sufficient* though not perhaps necessary condition of E, and sometimes that C is a set of conditions which are *severally necessary and jointly sufficient* to produce E. Now popular talk about this causing that does not clearly distinguish these alternatives. It is very common, e.g., to start from the fact, which may be quite trivial and even tautologous, that C causes E in the sense that it is a necessary condition of E; then to take for granted that C causes E in the important and doubtful sense that it is necessary and sufficient to produce E; and then to infer various far-reaching practical conclusions from this.

An example is the assertion, often made with a great flourish of trumpets by pacifists, that armaments cause war. Since war in-

volves, by definition, a conflict between the armed forces of nations, it is a tautological proposition that armaments are a necessary condition of wars. From this nothing follows except the platitude that, if all nations simultaneously disarmed and remained disarmed, there would be no more wars. This does not give the slightest guidance as to what a particular nation should do, if it is practically certain that at least one fairly strong nation will retain its armaments. It is obvious that there are situations in which a diminution of armaments by a certain nation or group of nations increases the chances of war, whilst an increase in their armaments diminishes it.

This example illustrates another very common causal fallacy. It is alleged, rightly or wrongly, that if all the members of a certain class, e.g. all nations or all the individuals of a certain nation, were to act simultaneously in a certain way, certain very desirable results would follow. It is concluded that each member of that class ought to act in that way, regardless of whether the rest do so or not. This is crazy logic and crazy ethics. Often it is not enough that even a large majority of the members of the class could be relied upon to act in the way suggested if one or a few were to set the example. One of the greatest difficulties of social and political life is that the pace is inevitably so largely set by the most backward and most evilly-disposed individuals and communities. The existence of a single powerful aggressive fanatical nation, like pre-war Germany or present-day Russia, is enough to make it suicidal for other nations to reduce their armaments. And the existence of a comparatively small minority of criminals or lunatics or abnormally inconsiderate individuals within a community compels all its other members to take precautions and to support punitive and preventive measures which they would gladly do without.

Another common causal fallacy may be called for shortness the "extrapolation fallacy." It may be described as follows. It is known or reasonably conjectured that a change in a certain direction has produced predominantly good results. It is then uncritically assumed that further doses of change in that direction will produce still further predominantly good results, and that it is desirable to administer these additional doses as soon as possible. It is forgotten that almost any change involves at least some loss in some respects as well as gain in others, and that it often produces certain positive evils which would otherwise not have existed. The gains may well overbalance the losses, and the main positive goods may well be greater than the collateral positive evils, until the process has gone a certain length; but the losses and the collateral evils may begin to predominate if it is carried further. Again, even if it be desirable on the whole to continue a certain process further in the same direction, it is often most undesirable to do so with the maximum possible speed. People

who would benefit from a slow development, to each phase of which they had time to adapt themselves or to adapt their children, may be merely bewildered and demoralized if the pace becomes too hot for them.

All this is admirably illustrated by the transition from handicraft to large-scale mechanized production and the continued application of new scientific discoveries and techniques to the conditions of daily life. Up to a point there is clearly an enormous gain in handing over to machines much of the heavy drudgery of human work, in making possible the rapid transport of goods and persons over long distances, and producing and distributing food, clothing and other necessities and even luxuries on a scale which would otherwise have been impossible. But it is plain that there are great and increasing disadvantages to be set against this. The most obvious, and the one which lies not far at the back of the minds of all of us nowadays, is the almost unlimited power of destruction which the later developments of this process have put into the hands of individuals and communities much below the level of intellectual, moral and political development at which they can be trusted not to misuse it. I have little doubt that any benefits which mankind may have derived from the invention of the internal combustion engine are heavily outweighed by the fact that it has made the bombing aeroplane and the submarine warship possible and actual. It would be platitudinous to enlarge on the disasters with which mankind is threatened by the most untimely discovery of a means of releasing atomic energy.

I suspect that the only recent advances of applied science on which we can still on balance congratulate ourselves are in the regions of biology and medicine. But we must not forget that each branch of science and technology is so intimately linked with all the others that the advances which we welcome would be impossible without the conditions which have led to those which we deplore. It is the same great tree which bears the poisonous berries, the refreshing fruits, and the healing balsams, and it may even happen that some of its poisons are an essential ingredient in some of its wholesome products. (Cf., e.g. the use of the products of atomic disintegration as tracer elements in medical research.)

In this connection it may be worth while to note the following fact. Sometimes the development of a certain social trend leads to results which almost all decent and sensible people deplore. Yet the development of that trend in any one society may make that community so powerful in relation to others that they are compelled to follow suit and to impose it on themselves if they will not be rendered impotent and perhaps have it and even worse things imposed on them by others. Large-scale industrialization and the great increase of urban population which accompanies it are a case in point. This is

a development from which a nation with a reasonably small well-distributed population and a comfortable balance between agriculture, fishery, manufacture, etc., might well pray to be delivered. But those nations in which such a development takes place become so powerful from a military and economic standpoint that they can and do dictate the conditions of life to all the others.

It will be of interest to consider some of the less obvious disadvantages of a too great or too rapid industrialization. In the first place, it is a very serious loss indeed that most men and women should spend their lives utterly out of touch with the sources in nature from which their food and clothing and raw materials ultimately come; that men should no longer have the pride and pleasure of exercising their natural and acquired skill in making entire articles for use or ornament with their own hands and with comparatively simple tools and machines; and that women should no longer be good cooks and housewives and seamstresses, but be content to buy ready-made food in tins or take meals in public restaurants. Leisure is very dearly bought at the price of becoming and knowing oneself to be a mere cog in a complex machine, with no resources in oneself, no pride or pleasure in one's work, and nothing to fill the vacuum except smoking and drinking reduced to a semi-conscious routine, listening to mechanical music, witnessing and betting on athletic contests in which one never participates, and enjoying vicarious sexual thrills as a spectator at a cinema or as a reader of the police news in the Sunday paper. Yet this is, in fact, what the leisure gained by industrialization means for a large proportion of its beneficiaries. Moreover, as industrialism develops, and with it the population grows and becomes more and more urbanized, relief from drudgery is paid for by increase of nervous strain, by the unhealthy tiredness engendered by travelling long distances in crowded conveyances from and to one's work, by the deafening noise and filthy stench of mechanized traffic, and so on.

Industrialization has already destroyed and continues to destroy natural beauty on a vast scale. But there seems good reason to think that it has begun to undermine itself by destroying the natural fertility of the soil and the natural balance of plant and animal life over huge areas of the earth. Nor is this the only way in which its inordinate development cuts away the branch on which it sits. I would venture to suggest that it engenders a psychological condition which in the long run may well be fatal to it. What I have in mind is this. As the organization of industry becomes more complex the connection of individual diligence and efficiency with economic or social reward becomes more and more remote. So, too, does the connection of individual slackness and incompetence with economic or social disadvantage. The remoteness of this connection tends to

be increased still further by the methods of taxation and the social welfare legislation which are characteristic of communities in which the balance of political power is in the hands of the wage-drawers. Now there is no evidence for, and much evidence against, the view that the average person under normal conditions will work hard and strive to be efficient in intrinsically uninteresting tasks when not under the stimulus of direct economic or social advantage or disadvantage to himself or his family. A rapidly decreasing number of wage-drawers still have the habit of working hard and efficiently as a kind of hangover from an earlier and simpler social system and the customs and standards of values which accompanied it. A few persons will always do so because they are made that way. A considerable number will do so for short periods under the stress of some crisis which appeals strongly to certain social feelings, e.g. when their country is visibly in danger of immediate defeat in war, or when a revolution is taking place or a new system which appeals to their emotions has lately been set up. But I see no reason whatever to believe that any but very direct and visible motives of economic gain or loss to themselves or their families can be trusted to call forth continued efficient work at dull tasks in most men at most times. Yet the system will not provide a high standard of living and leisure unless it can call forth steady continuous effort in the employees while they are at work, and enterprise and inventiveness and readiness to take risks on the part of the directors, whether they be private individuals or State officials.

I find it hard to believe that the communists have discovered any permanently effective alternative to the direct economic incentives which are now ceasing to operate in Western Europe and will probably in time cease to do so in America. At the moment they enjoy all the advantages of a religious revival combined with such a crisis-mentality as evoked prodigious efforts in England in 1940. Even so, this has to be supplemented by the daily terror of the concentration camp and the political witch trials, and has to be stimulated by increasingly strident propaganda, in which self-adulation and anti-foreign war scares are mingled in a welter of nonsense and mendacity which can rarely have been equalled in the long history of human folly and wickedness. If these things have to be done in the green leaf, what will be done in the dry when the Church Militant shall have become the Church Triumphant? I cannot but suppose that even Slavs eventually become inured to this stuff, and that it will become less and less effective as a stimulant in the dull, daily, irritating round of work in factory and field and mine. Then nothing will remain but naked terror, and I doubt whether this is an efficient method of stimulating production in the long run and on a large scale. I wonder what proportion of the populations behind the iron

curtain even now are occupied as policemen, prison warders, *agents provocateurs*, and in the hundred-and-one other non-productive tasks involved in building the New Jerusalem.

For these reasons, quite apart from the high probability of a catastrophic upset in the near future through atomic and bacteriological warfare, I suspect that industrialism, like fermentation, generates by-products which gradually check its development and might even bring it to a not very stable state of equilibrium. I cannot pretend to shed many tears over this. I do not view with any enthusiasm a millennium in which there would be no square inch of the earth's surface that did not stink of petrol and humanity and re-echo with the blare of the wireless loud-speaker discoursing mechanical music, enunciating platitude or nonsense, and ingeminating hatred.

It is high time to turn now to another common causal fallacy, viz. that which has been called *post hoc ergo propter hoc*. From the nature of the case it is extremely difficult to say with any high degree of reasonable confidence whether a certain factor did or did not contribute to an important extent to cause a certain other factor in social or political phenomena. This is because it is practically impossible to isolate the facts to be investigated, to find really parallel cases, to devise and perform experiments intended to answer definite questions, and so on. But fools cannot be restrained from rushing in where logicians fear to tread; and, if some fairly outstanding social phenomenon A immediately preceeded some other fairly outstanding phenomenon B in some part of the world at some period in history, they will promptly generalize and conclude that A is necessary and sufficient to produce B. It will be entertaining to consider some examples of this.

I have heard it cited as an instance of the truth of Karl Marx's economic theories that they enabled him to prophecy that great wars would happen with frequency in the Western world, that they would be increasingly destructive, and so on, and that we have seen this prophecy abundantly fulfilled. As if wars had not been a regular occurrence in the history of Europe and the rest of the world throughout recorded time; as if they had not always been waged with the maximum resources available at the time to the belligerents; and as if those resources had not enormously increased through industrialization and applied science. How can any particular theory be verified by foretelling what could have been foretold with confidence on almost any theory or on no theory at all?

Another example concerns "democracy" in the Western sense of that word. It is often said by political speakers and writers in England and America that the superior efficiency of our system of government is shown by the fact that we defeated the non-democratic Germans in two great wars. The fact is that Germany came within an

ace of defeating us, and that in both wars we had as an important ally Russia, a country which was in 1914 and is now at the opposite pole to all that we understand by democracy. The really relevant factors were that Germany, by stupid diplomacy, blundered into war with too many strong nations at once; that England was an island and the United States far too remote to be attacked; and that the combined industrial resources of these two countries, if once they were given time and opportunity to deploy them, were enormously greater than those of Germany. It should be added that nothing but the imbecility of the governments of England, France and the United States, due to their dependence on the votes of ignorant and ostrich-like electors, who wanted nothing but a quiet life and would not read the signs of the times nor listen to those who could, made it possible for Germany to re-arm and indulge in a second world-war after its defeat in the first. I think it might fairly be said that the main achievement of Western democracy between the two wars was to prevent those who knew what ought to be done from doing it in the economic and the military spheres and in that of international relations.

A consequence of fallacies of this kind is that what may roughly be called "parliamentary government" has acquired a prestige among peoples who have never experienced it and are most unlikely to be able to practise it successfully, which makes them eager to adopt something that looks like it whenever they emerge from tutelage. We have seen plenty of examples of this in central, southern and south-eastern Europe, and we are now witnessing more and bigger ones in the near and the far East. A little later on I fully expect to see a similar result arising from similar causes in connection with the communist system as practised by Russia and its satellites. It seems to me that the fact is that under almost any imaginable system of government which was not completely imbecile North America would have become one of the wealthiest and most powerful communities in the world. Under almost any imaginable system of government, not completely imbecile, the Russian empire, with its vast and as yet hardly scratched natural resources, will become at least equally wealthy and powerful. In the one case the credit has gone to the system which happened to prevail in North America, in the other it will no doubt go to the system which happens to prevail in Russia. We shall be told, and many of us will believe, that this immense wealth and power is "due to" communism, just as we have been told and many of us believe that it was "due to" democracy in the Western sense. In each case there is very little rational ground for believing that the system of government is much more than a fly on the wheel. Any government which kept internal order over these vast empty rich territories and avoided defeat and invasion, and

which either allowed individuals or companies to exploit the natural resources or undertook that exploitation itself on a large scale, would secure much the same spectacular results in these exceptionally favourable conditions.

I will consider one other causal fallacy, which often leads to governments or individuals being unfairly blamed or extravagantly praised. Suppose that there is a critical situation in which a government or a leading statesman has a choice of one or other of a comparatively few practically possible alternative courses of action, *A*, *B* and *C*, including among these the possible alternative of doing nothing and letting events take their course. Alternative *A* is chosen, and we will suppose that the state of affairs which ensues is admittedly much worse than that which immediately preceded the decision. Then it is very common to hold that a wrong decision was made, and to blame severely the individual or the government which made it. Now of course such a judgment may be justified in some cases. But in most cases a whole nest of fallacies is involved. In the first place, even if a different decision would have had a more fortunate sequel, it does not follow that the maker of the actual decision was blameworthy. Before we can decide this we must know whether, in the situation in which he was placed and with the information which was available to him at the time, he might reasonably have been expected to see that the consequences would be much worse than those of some other alternative which he might reasonably have been expected to contemplate as possible. The mere fact, if it be a fact, that *we* can see all this *after* the event may have very little bearing on this question.

Secondly, the mere fact that the state of affairs which followed the choice of alternative *A* was much worse than that which preceded it is not sufficient evidence that the decision was mistaken. It may be that the ensuing state of affairs would have been much worse than the preceding *whichever* of the alternatives had been adopted, and that the results of adopting any other would have been still worse than those of adopting *A*. Men find it very hard to admit that there are situations in which *all* possible alternative developments will be changes for the worse, and where the wisest decision that can be made will do no more than minimize the inevitably ensuing evil. Suppose that we tacitly and unjustifiably assume that there are no such situations. Then we shall automatically conclude that there *must* have been some alternative open to the maker of the decision which would have averted the evils which in fact ensued and would not have been followed by still greater evils. And so we shall judge that the actual decision was mistaken. But there is no reason whatever to accept this premise, and therefore there is no reason to accept any such judgment as a conclusion from it.

It is on such grounds as these, e.g., that the decision of the British Cabinet to go to war with Germany in 1914, or the agreement made by Mr. Chamberlain with Hitler at Munich, has been confidently asserted by many persons to have been unwise and to have redounded to the discredit of those concerned. Naturally I express no opinion here on the *truth* or *falsity* of these judgments. What I do contend is this. Most of those who make them with so much confidence have not begun to realize how many questions would have to be raised and settled before they had a shadow of justification for their assertions. Moreover, some of these questions can never be answered even approximately, for they involve conjectures about the consequences which would have followed if other alternatives had been chosen.

The last fallacy that I shall consider is of a very different kind. It is more trivial than those which I have noticed above; but it is so common and has such an inhibiting effect on many worthy persons that it seems desirable to mention and expose it. It is this. A citizen of country *A* condemns some contemporary public action or institution in another country *B*. Thereupon a fellow-citizen gets up and says 'We did the same', and produces in support of his assertion some public action which was taken or some institution which existed at some time in the history of their common fatherland. This is supposed by many to provide some kind of answer to the criticism on this action or institution in the foreign country. At any rate it is often felt to be relevant and embarrassing by the critic himself, and the fear that such remarks might justifiably be made often prevents scrupulous persons from condemning publicly incidents in foreign countries which they cannot but deeply disapprove in private.

It is obvious that there must be a number of suppressed premisses at the back of such an argument, and when one tries to make them explicit one sees that it is so hopelessly confused that nothing coherent can be made of it. I think we should all admit that a person ought to feel, and very often will feel, uncomfortable if it can be shown that at the same time he strongly condemns x and approves or tolerates y when the only relevant difference between x and y is that the former occurs in a foreign country and the latter in his own. Even this, however, would not show that he is mistaken in condemning x. The fact that a man is inconsistent in his judgments or his emotions does not show that a particular one judgment is false or a particular one emotion is misdirected. Sin is not less sinful when it is Satan who condemns it; and he has the advantage of expert knowledge. But suppose, as is very often the case, that a man not only condemns x in the foreign country but also quite consistently condemns similar actions and institutions in the history of his own country. Why on earth should the fact that something similar to what he condemns in another country exists or has existed in his own be thought

to show that it is not worthy of condemnation? And, if he equally condemns similar acts or institutions in the history of his own country, why on earth should be feel embarrassed or diffident in publicly condemning them when they exist in a foreign country? Is bestial cruelty in contemporary Russian labour-camps any less evil because there was bestial cruelty in English slave-ships in the eighteenth century? And must an Englishman, who deplores that incident in English history and whose ancestors abolished that evil after a long and arduous Parliamentary struggle, hang his head in embarrassed silence and refrain from calling slavery and cruelty by their name when practised on a vast scale by foreign countries which claim to be the moral leaders of mankind?

I have assumed so far, for the sake of argument, that there really is something in one's own country which is closely or exactly parallel to that which one condemns in another country, and I have shown that even on that assumption this method of rebutting or silencing criticism is logically worthless. But in nine cases out of ten the alleged parallel will not survive a moment's critical inspection. Often it is merely verbal, as it would be, e.g., if one said that England made use of concentration camps in the latter stages of the Boer war and therefore Englishmen have no right to criticize the use of concentration camps by Germany or Russia. Often the only parallel which can be found to a present-day practice in a foreign country is something which formerly existed in one's own and has long since been abolished there by the efforts of reformers and is now condemned by everyone. Any attempt, e.g., to regard the harsh treatment of factory workers and of paupers in England in the early nineteenth century as a relevant parallel to present-day slave-labour in Russia and its satellites would be open to this criticism. The upshot of the matter is that I should advise anyone to whom this kind of argument is addressed either to pay no attention whatever to it or to answer the fool who uses it according to his own folly.

It is time for me to bring my paper to an end. It is not a cheerful paper, for I do not find mankind in their social and political relationships a cheerful subject to contemplate. Gibbon, who knew something of history, described it as mainly a record of the crimes, the follies, and the misfortunes of mankind. I see no reason to think that it will be fundamentally different in this respect in future from what it has been in the past. I suspect that there will always be, as there have always been, relatively infrequent and not very persistent oases of prosperity and culture in a desert of penury, ignorance and unthinking brutality. And at every stage any experienced and intelligent statesman will have occasion to repeat Axel Oxenstierna's words to his son: "Behold, my son, with how little wisdom the world is governed!"