

## Chapter 2

### The visionary freethinker

*It is well to open one's mind, but only as a preliminary to closing it ... for the supreme act of judgment and selection.*

Irving Babbitt

**P**IONEERS of social change have never had an easy time of it, as Molière, another great literary artist, was well aware. Alceste, the main character of his *Le Misanthrope* (1666), is shown reacting in vain against the frivolities and insincerities of the idle rich in the Paris of Louis XIV and against the corruption of the contemporary legal system. Even his friend Philinte can find nothing more helpful to say to him than:

Et c'est une folie à nulle autre seconde  
De vouloir se mêler de corriger le monde.<sup>1</sup>

*And it is a folly second to none  
To want to become involved in putting the world right.*

Philinte thought that his friend, though correct in principle, was wasting his time trying to put right what were, after all, minor abuses. It would have surpassed the genius, even of a Molière, to have restrained within the limits of comedy the likely reactions to Alceste had he, like Jacques Turgot, Finance Minister of a hundred years later, or Henry George and Leo Tolstoy two hundred years later, proposed what amounted to a social revolution. Let us have a closer look at this human inertia and resistance to change.

The genetic inheritance of each individual human being is settled at the moment of conception, and is the sole determinant, barring accident, of his physical, instinctual,

intellectual and moral standing up to the moment of birth. From then on, society takes over, and begins to expose him to a variety of generally accepted practices, including those related to language, costume, habitation, deportment, schooling, religion – everything, in fact, that is a distinctive mark of human relationships at the particular time and place. The infant accepts most of this without question; but the time surely comes when he will question some of it, and test his own will-power against that of his parents, his teachers at school, his first employer, a policeman or anybody who comes along. The typical youngster may gain his way in one or two matters, and conform in the rest; but it is more likely that he will end by conforming in everything.

Beyond the immediate surroundings of each individual, there are the wider entities of the nation, the continent and the world. Few people will submit the customs of these to examination, especially such as are in line with the common inclinations towards reverence and awe, combativeness and recognition of territory and social hierarchy. Take a man into the incense-laden atmosphere of a church, and he will bow down and worship. Show him a uniform that he is to wear while fighting other people designated as enemies, and he will put it on. Take him to a coronation, or a state opening of parliament, and he will become a respecter of the 'powers that be'. Show him a notice saying 'Trespassers will be prosecuted', and he will back respectfully away.

This is not to say that there will be no dissidents; but that they will substitute in some cases their natural inclination for the behaviour that is expected of them. They will stay away from church; leave the battlefield, throw away their uniform and return home; break the law or a few fences, and either thrive by doing so or go to prison. What they will not do on the whole is sit down, imagine an alternative society and commit a plan of it to writing.

Such a course of action must have been particularly difficult in the civilisation of Europe and western Asia in the first decade of the twentieth century. It had existed for a thousand years, was supported by the combined influences of the school, the

sword and the altar, and was deeply ingrained in the consciousness of the vast majority of people. True it had had its setbacks of revolutions and wars, and offered far more in of material rewards to some than to others; but such things appeared to be part of the stuff of natural existence, and to question them appeared, and indeed to many still appears, akin to madness.

It is all the more remarkable, therefore, when there arises such a man as Count Leo Tolstoy, who looks with fresh eyes at every aspect of the world about him, as if he had just been born in the full possession of all his mature faculties, or as if he were a visitor from another planet, standing amazed before new scenes, unfamiliar thought processes, and strange ways of behaving. To compound the unlikelihood of the mere existence of this man, he had the capacity to embody his thoughts in a lively and virile prose that makes the reader gasp, both at the boldness of his pronouncements and at the modesty with which he himself regarded his abilities. Here, for example, is his friend and translator Aylmer Maude writing about a conversation held with him in about the year 1900:

'I divide men', said Tolstoy, 'into two lots. They are freethinkers, or they are not freethinkers. I am not speaking of the Freethinkers who form a political party in Germany, nor of the agnostic English Freethinkers, but I am using the word in its simplest meaning'.<sup>2</sup>

Maude explains that the kind of freethinker Tolstoy had in mind was the man who is not afraid to follow a line of reasoning to its logical end, careless of whether it clashes with existing social customs or interferes with his personal privileges or preconceived beliefs.

This definition, one would think, does at the very least apply to all those ranking as scientists, *people who know*. Even while all around them are manipulating or ignoring facts to suit their own purposes, surely the scientists will hold fast to the truth and nothing but the truth? Unfortunately, the answer is no, not always.

A particularly sensitive line of scientific enquiry is the one that concerns our human origins. It must by now be a very small minority that goes for its information about these to chapters 2 and 3 of the *Book of Genesis*; but very many more, even if they accept in principle the theory of Charles Darwin, shocking in his time, that the human race is a product of slow development from a type ancestral to ourselves and to other present-day primates, like to think that we are the culmination of a direct line of peaceful vegetarian animals, such as the chimpanzee on the whole is now. Perhaps we may have lapsed a little after attaining our present biological status, and taken to meat-eating and mortal quarrels on an ever-increasing scale; but all this is by the way. Our natural bent is to be harmless and virtuous. As Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), the philosopher who above all others supplied the theoretical basis of the French Revolution, so succinctly put it:

Que la nature a fait l'homme heureux et bon, mais que la société le déprave et le rend misérable.<sup>3</sup>

Nature made man happy and good, but how society depraves him and makes him wretched!

This is what many people like to think; and this is what Tolstoy, a life-long admirer of Rousseau, liked to think too; but, in his time, there was no more reliable information available. Had he still been alive in 1957, when it did become available, he would certainly have approved of its author, the free-thinking and iconoclastic Raymond A. Dart, Head of the Department of Anatomy at the University of the Witwatersrand in the Transvaal; and he would have made allowances in his theory of society, which nobody else has yet done to the satisfaction of either the academic world or the world at large, for an alternative estimate of human nature.

Dart<sup>4</sup> considered he had proved that creatures now generally accepted as human ancestors, namely members of the species *Australopithecus Africanus* (or *Prometheus*), had, between two and three million years ago, used certain antelope bones, not

only as weapons of the chase and butchery tools, but also as a means of settling differences among themselves. The evidence was that, at Makapansgat in the Transvaal, non-hominid fossil bones found in conjunction with those of the hominid included antelope bones of the types in question in much larger numbers than would justify any theory of random distribution. In other words, they were the result of intelligent and purposeful selection, not the remains of four-legged carnivores' meals.

Furthermore, numerous baboon skulls from the same period, found at this and other neighbouring sites, showed clear signs of fracture as a result of blows struck with the humeri (or upper foreleg bones) of antelopes. There was also a similarly damaged *Australopithecine* jawbone, indicating that murder with a blunt instrument was a possibility even at this remote time. This in itself may mean nothing, but, taken in conjunction with evidence<sup>5</sup> of organised fighting among Neanderthals in northern Yugoslavia, the testimony of early history, and intertribal warfare among modern primitive peoples, it could be highly significant. If there is a salient inbred tendency in man to be an armed killer, then any plan for a future society based on the unqualified assumption that he is naturally harmless and inoffensive is unrealistic. This is not to say that he does not also have diametrically opposed tendencies, which prevail with suitable encouragement. Unfortunately, it is too often the killer instinct that is encouraged.

Dart's thesis therefore deserved very serious consideration, but failed to receive it. Instead, the scientists to whom it was presented ignored his statistical analysis of the fossil bones, and dismissed the collection as the work of hyaenas, which it most evidently is not. In a precisely similar fashion, the philosophical works of Tolstoy deserved at the time, and still deserve now, the consideration of all who genuinely wish to help to bring about a better world. Instead, our deeply conservative society has chosen, on the whole, to misunderstand, misrepresent, or simply to ignore them. Apart from those bearing mainly on religion, which pose a negligible threat at present to those who benefit from social injustice, they have been allowed to go out of print in England.

But Tolstoy's denunciation of the injustice of land monopoly carried further implications. As the owner of large estates himself, he was working to undermine his personal position of privilege, and exposing himself to the accusation of being a traitor to his class. By preaching Henry George's remedy, he made it certain that the seal of official disapproval would be put on his economic thought.

As if all this were not enough, he identified the unfair distribution of land as the root cause of gross differences in the power associated with wealth, which could be maintained only by Nation/States based on violence. Such violence, applied by armed forces to subdue domestic unrest, to conquer foreign lands, and to secure foreign markets for goods unsaleable at home by reason of poverty, he demonstrated to be contrary to true Christian principles. Luckily for the Nation/States, they were, as he saw it, supported by perverted churches, who ignored the teachings of Jesus Christ in favour not only of dogma concerning his origin and destiny, but also of ritual designed to 'hypnotise' (his own word) the mass of the population.

In what follows, we shall attempt to conform to Tolstoy's method of freethinking by submitting his doctrines to analysis, and comparing them with the criticisms they have attracted. Were they valid at the time? What is their relevance to the problems of the present day? Tolstoy regarded his ideas as a rounded whole; and so do we. As a matter of convenience, however, we shall consider them separately, beginning with his conception of Christianity, which influences and controls all the rest.