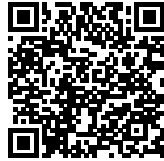




AN INTERVIEW WITH JONATHAN C.D. CLARK

Posted on July 1, 2020 by Zbigniew Janowski



Jonathan C. D. Clark, a prominent English historian of English history, a former Fellow of All Souls College, visiting professor in The Committee on Social Thought at the University of Chicago, and professor emeritus at University of Kansas. Professor Clark is the author of [English Society, 1688-1832](#), [Revolution and Rebellion](#), [The Language of Liberty](#), [Samuel Johnson](#), as well as an acclaimed critical and annotated edition of Edmund Burke's [Reflections on the Revolution in France](#), and, most recently, [Thomas Paine](#). Professor is here interviewed by Dr. Zbigniew Janowski, who has authored [How To Read Descartes's Meditations](#), [John Stuart Mill: On Democracy, Freedom and Government & Other Selected Writings](#), and [other books](#).



Jonathan Clark (r) with Zbigniew Janowski (l).

Zbigniew Janowski (ZJ): When I interviewed you twenty-six years ago, I titled our conversation "Civil Society, Toleration, and All That." Both topics were very timely. "Civil Society" was of utmost concern to the people in Eastern Europe, who only several years earlier had freed themselves from Soviet rule. Their primary goal was to rebuild "civil society," create social structures, free from ideological dominion. "Toleration," on the other hand, was more of a concern in Western countries, probably because of the rising pressure of what was termed "multiculturalism." The question of how to respond to contradictory opinions, different cultural assumptions, relativism of values, etc., naturally resulted in invoking the old idea of toleration. When I reread our conversation recently, I was struck by the obsolescence of these topics.

The last thing one can say about America is that it is multicultural. It may be multi-racial or -ethnic, but not multicultural. Ignorance of other cultures and nations, civilizations, knowledge of foreign languages, is dismal. If there is any content to the term "multiculturalism" in America, it means that there is a great number of ethnic restaurants, which Americans occasionally go to. It is not an exaggeration to say that today's America is totally monolithic.

The idea of multiculturalism and toleration runs counter to the official Politically Correct orthodoxy, which is based on the premise that only one set of views is right, and therefore we can dispense with tolerating opposing views. In fact, the attitude of the Left, or ultra-Liberals, is that tolerating opposing views is wrong because the opponents are morally wrong. Thus, we no longer need to tolerate others' views; we should actively fight them. Disinviting speakers to American colleges, shouting them down, canceling their lectures, firing people from their jobs for saying "one word too much," ostracizing public

figures for saying something that is not Politically Correct, is totally normal in American life.

Do you have an explanation as to what happened between the time we talked over two decades ago and now?

Jonathan Clark (JC): I have been trying to think of explanations, with little success. However, I have attempted a brief outline, in a thousand words, which is due to appear in the September issue of the UK magazine [Standpoint](#).

I suggest – to reply directly to your question – that multiculturalism is a new ideology. It claims to respect all cultures; in reality, it hands power to the elites that administer the practical arrangements for which the ideology serves as a smokescreen. Civil society, across much of western Europe and parts of the USA, was partly rebuilt by mass migrations; toleration was demanded in order to defend the new plural societies that mass migration (and other developments) were bringing into being; democracy was reshaped in order to defend in power the elites that administered the system. Hence one of the key phenomena of our time, most clearly visible in the universities but evident everywhere: the rise of the administrators in numbers, power, and wealth.

In the United States and Russia, the vast distances, and the difficulty of learning about other cultures, homogenize the population to a marked degree: this makes the control of these populations by the techniques still labeled 'democracy' much more effective than it still is, say, in the UK. There, the [referendum of 23 June 2016](#) that led to a vote to leave the European Union was, among other things, a powerful reaction against such trends.

ZJ: In 1991, [Francis Fukuyama](#) published an article in [National Interest](#) entitled "[The End of History](#)." The article was occasioned by the collapse of Communism in Eastern European countries, in 1989, and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, in 1991.

According to Fukuyama, the world exhausted its' ideological alternatives: Liberalism and free market economy appeared to be the future of mankind, the fulfillment of human aspirations. Almost everyone—except you, and I shall return to this point in a moment—subscribed to his idea. Today, thirty years later, Fukuyama's thesis, to use Marx's expression, belongs to the Dustbin of History. Looking through the lenses of contemporary events, it appears almost laughable, but it was not then; no one

ridiculed it, and, frankly, it sounded very convincing.

As a historian, how do you explain what is happening in the Western world? Are we witnessing a rebellion against Liberalism? Or, to put it in historical terms, is the rise of nationalism a response to the Enlightenment idea of universal human nature, the abstract nature divorced from tradition, history, religion, and man's need to belong to a community?

JC: I suggest that 'nationalism' is the proper name for a new ideology, coined in continental Europe in response to the French Revolution. Other ways of picturing the commonalities of the populations of differing polities had long been available, and still are. There is not, then, one thing called 'nationalism' that currently reasserts itself. Rather, populations reassert their identities against groups within (liberal elites) and organizations without (multinational bodies, like the EU) that assert the rival values of what they call cosmopolitanism.

"Liberalism" is a doctrine that has evolved many meanings since it was coined in the early nineteenth century; today it includes, quite prominently, the rejection of religion either as metaphysics or as identity, and the rejection of the claims to allegiance of the nation state. The quite narrow identification of liberalism with free trade seemed in 1991 to be very forward-looking; now, it seems more of a throwback to 1891. Liberalism has moved on in ways hardly anticipated in 1991.

ZJ: A few years ago, [Ryszard Legutko](#) published a book titled *The Demon in Democracy*. Its subtitle reads: *Totalitarian Temptations in Free Societies*. Legutko points out how similar today's liberal democracies are to former Communist—totalitarian—societies. Anyone who was born under socialism, as were Legutko and I, has the same reaction: "We have seen it before. How is it possible?"

History is repeating itself; before it was called socialism, today it is socialism's former rival—liberal democracy, which threatens us. It eliminates, through public ostracism and legislation, everyone who dares to be different, who dares to think differently. Under Communism, it was the "class-enemy," "enemy of the state"; under liberalism the enemy is called a "sexist, racist, homophobic, xenophobe, misogynist, ageist"—that is, the enemy of equality!

Once again, how, as a historian, do you explain the "convergence" of the two systems, which for a hundred and fifty years appeared to be inimical? Has Liberal-democracy become totalitarian, and if so

why?

JC: I suggest that the divergence in the meaning of liberalism, between freeing the individual from the community and identifying those unacceptable beliefs and actions that justified the intervention of the community, was there already in the work of [John Stuart Mill](#). The same contradiction was present in socialism. But with the ebbing tide of socialism since 1989, the long-standing problem within liberalism emerges into clear view. What is new, I suggest, is the enormous expansion of the language of universal human rights since the 1970s, and the scope this gives to the new administrative elites to exercise their power in the name of the coercive component of liberalism.

ZJ: Let me go back to our old conversation and remind you of what you said: "I think it is extremely unfortunate if Eastern Europeans or Russians imagine that the only alternative to the Communist state is a Liberal state. They will immediately go from one unhappy state form to another equally unhappy state form." You are a historian, not a prophet, but what you said in 1993 now sounds almost like a prophesy. Legutko's book, in which he draws parallels between Communism and Liberalism, is a perfect illustration of your claim about one "unhappy state form" traded for another "unhappy state form."

How is it that you knew what the Future holds for us, whereas everyone else had to wait another twenty-five years for history to unfold itself to fulfill your prophesy? Do you have a particular gift for prophesy? Did your study of history tell you Liberalism is bound to produce "an unhappy state" of affairs just like socialism did? If so, why?

JC: I claim no gift of foresight; academic history confers no such faculty. I had merely been taught to be a sceptic, to appreciate that everything changes, that there are no permanent secular truths, and that every secular ideology experiences a trajectory from inception through flourishing to decline. I also appreciated that although names (like 'liberalism' or 'democracy') remain the same, their content can change radically. These predispositions made me regard both communism and liberalism from the outside.

ZJ: Liberalism's unhealthy state was recently acknowledged even by the editors of *The Economist*. On September 15th, 2018, *The Economist* published "[A Manifesto](#)," their aim being to "rekindle the spirit of radicalism."

In it, we read: "Liberalism made the modern world, but the modern world is turning against it. Europe and America are in the throes of a popular rebellion against liberal elites, who are seen as self-serving and unable, or unwilling to solve the problems of ordinary people."

For *The Economist* this is profoundly worrying. We were created 175 years ago to campaign for liberalism—not the leftish 'progressivism' of American university campuses or the rightish "ultraliberalism" conjured up by the French commentariat, but a universal commitment to individual dignity, open markets, limited government and a faith in human progress brought about by debate and reform.

There is one minor point in the language of *The Economist*, which, I believe, is of historical significance: "radicalism." If I remember correctly, at your seminar in Chicago 26 years ago, you said something to the effect that the premise of "Radicalism" is the doctrine of the natural equality of all men. Can you comment on that?

JC: I forget what, exactly, I taught about 'radicalism' in Chicago in the early 1990s. But I adopted the position at about that time that radicalism was the proper name for a new doctrine, coined in England around 1820, combining programmatic atheism, [Ricardian economics](#) and universal suffrage. This term, too, has been used to cover a range of evolving positions, and is now too vague to be meaningful in the way in which *The Economist* wanted to use it.

ZJ: This leads me to my next question. It is hardly possible to have a conversation today without sooner or later using the terms "liberal," "liberalism," "democracy," or "liberal-democracy." This was not so in the 18th century. If I am not mistaken, the term "liberal" in the 18th century did not have a political connotation. Also, neither democracy nor liberalism can be found in Voltaire's *Philosophical Dictionary*, published in 1764. One is impelled to ask, how could the people of the Enlightenment go without using such words?

JC: Easily. They were preoccupied with other things, meaningful to them but largely neglected by us (we no longer share [Paine's](#) prioritization of kings and aristocrats, or his lifelong antipathy to Trinitarian Christianity). We need also to understand the term 'the Enlightenment' historically, as a term of historical art unknown in the eighteenth century and propagated chiefly since the 1960s.

ZJ: In your *Revolution and Rebellion*, you write: "To attempt to write the history of liberalism before 1820's is thus, in point of method, akin to attempting to write the history of the 18th century motor car. There were, of course, forms of transport which performed many of the functions which the motor car later performed, the sedan chair among them. Yet to explain the sedan chair as if it were an early version of the motor car, and by implication to condemn it for failing so lamentably to evolve into the motor car, is to turn a modern error of scholarly method into a failure of men in a past society." The origin of the term is obscure, but you trace the origins of Liberalism not to politics, but theology, and point to the teaching of theology at Oxford.

JC: This was an early expression of my rejection of the methodological error of anachronism. I later learned much more about what 'liberalism' was, when first formulated in c. 1820.

ZJ: Let me go back to *The Economist*. However well-intentioned *The Economist's* statement is, to me—someone who spent the first twenty-five years of his life under Socialism—it sounds like the statements made by the Communists. Each time, after a popular rebellion and crisis—be it the invasion of Hungary in 1956, or Czechoslovakia in 1968, events in Poland in 1971, the Solidarity movement in the early 1980s, and so on—the Communists would look for a scapegoat to blame. It was either the Party apparatchiks, the former Politburo members, the executive committees on high, middle and low level—but never the idea of Socialism. We were assured by the Communist Party that there was nothing wrong with the idea of socialism; the execution was imperfect.

When I read *The Economist's* "Manifesto," I recalled that Communist slogan: "Socialism Yes; Distortions No!" which can be reformulated: "Liberalism—Yes, Politically Correct distortions—No." "There is nothing wrong with the idea of Liberalism"; the problem, as the editors claim, is "the self-serving liberal elites" who let "ordinary people" down, just like the Central Committee of the Communist Party let "the toiling masses" down, or academic radicals.

What is happening now looks like a mirror image of what we have seen under Socialism. Even the language sounds the same.

Do you agree that there are very close parallels between the two ideologies? Would you also agree that if there is an explanation as to why they exist, it is because both Socialism and Liberalism are the twin children of the same parent—the idea of equality? They may have looked dissimilar for some time, in their childhood and adolescent stages, but when they reached maturity, they seem to act alike.

JC: I do agree that there are structural and procedural similarities. To discern their substantive commonalities one would need to explore the young Marx's work on religion, and here I defer to others. To understand liberalism, it would help to discern J. S. Mill's rejection of the Anglican orthodoxy of his day. I don't see 'equality' as an autonomous variable.

As to periodicals, I find the general stance of *The Economist* remarkably similar to that of the columnists of the *Financial Times* – this paper has evidently been captured by politicized liberals who regularly condescend to those who voted for Brexit in the 2016 referendum.

ZJ: Let me turn to the problem of academia, which, as it is constituted now, presents itself as a very serious problem, and the ideology disseminated therein permeates the society at large. Let me quote a fragment from an article by [John Gray](#), the author of many books on liberalism.

In his TLS (March, 27, 2018) article titled "[The Problem of Hyper-Liberalism](#)," Gray wrote: "For liberals the recent transformation of universities into institutions devoted to the eradication of thought crime must seem paradoxical. In the past higher education was avowedly shaped by an ideal of unfettered inquiry. Varieties of social democrats and conservatives, liberals and Marxists taught and researched alongside scholars with no strong political views. Academic disciplines cherished their orthodoxies, and dissenters could face difficulties in being heard. But visiting lecturers were rarely disinvited because their views were deemed unspeakable, course readings were not routinely screened in case they contained material that students might find discomforting, and faculty members who departed from the prevailing consensus did not face attempts to silence them or terminate their careers... Judged by old-fashioned standards, this is the opposite of what liberals have stood for. But what has happened in higher education is not that liberalism has been supplanted by some other ruling philosophy. Instead, a hyper-liberal ideology has developed that aims to purge society of any trace of other views of the world. If a regime of censorship prevails in universities, it is because they have become vehicles for this project." And: "When students from China study in Western countries one of the lessons they learn is that the enforcement of intellectual orthodoxy does not require an authoritarian government. In institutions that proclaim their commitment to critical inquiry, censorship is most effective when it is self-imposed. A defining feature of tyranny, the policing of opinion is now established practice in societies that believe themselves to be freer than they have ever been."

The way Gray formulates the problem it is reminiscent of George Orwell's [1984](#). However, for Orwellian Communist orthodoxy to work, one needed Ministry of Truth, Thought-Police, an army of informants,

brainwashing, and so on. In America, we need none of this! We police ourselves, we destroy history, remove monuments, decry as enemies everyone who is against equality, who is for hierarchy and standards of excellence, and we voluntarily confess "crimes."

There isn't a day that passes by without a public figure apologizing for a racist, sexist, or homophobic remark. Confessions are a daily routine in America. You are accused of a crime, you make a public confession only to disappear, just like in Orwell. Orwell did not invent the idea of confession; he got it from the Stalinist trials of the 1930s (described by [Arthur Koestler](#) in his *Darkness at Noon*). Another parallel between Communism and liberal-democracy! Except that under Communism, people were threatened with bayonets, torture, and death. Yet many of them—the dissidents and the majority of society—opposed it. Here we have no opposition, people confess freely. The majority is docile. Can you explain how we came to be where we are now?

JC: John Gray and I experienced the Oxford of the 1980s and 1990s, and drew similar conclusions from it; he has continued to observe the university world in the UK, as I have done in the USA. Part of my response is contained in my article soon to appear in Standpoint. I would add to your account of the USA the lasting legacy of New England Puritanism, the consequent 'paranoid style' that has been held to characterize US politics, and the Puritanical zeal to enforce confessions and persecute heretical opponents. The past is always with us, and people in the present do not escape their determinative heritage by claiming to be secular.

ZJ: [Heather MacDonald](#), a conservative American commentator of the Manhattan Institute, made a claim that the problem of today's America is that the infantile academic mentality has spilled over to the public realm. The language, behavior, and ways of thinking that were characteristic of academia 20, or even 30 years ago, is now the dominant mentality of adult Americans, who behave like children. I believe her analysis is correct. What appeared to be a childish mentality—culture wars, fights over Great Books programs (or classics), as we call it in the US, and similar "academic" issues, to which not too many people paid serious attention in the past—is now a prominent way of thinking in the US. Academia was never as important as it is now!

JC: American conservatives are condemned to grapple unsuccessfully with a major problem: what, exactly, would American conservatives conserve? By implication, their civic religion, which is essentially a tradition of world revolution. It comes in a variety of forms, more or less extreme. But it is true of this revolution, as of all, that it takes time to work out its full implications. A parochial and campus contest

over 'Great Books' was an expression of this, but not the cause. I find it difficult to think that but for certain tactical mistakes on US campuses 20 or 30 years ago, all would have been well. But I fully agree that such issues are often most clearly seen within the university world, now a very large one, as they were formerly most clearly seen in the coal mines and the shipyards.

ZJ: Besides [Allan Bloom](#) and [E.D. Hirsch](#), when the attack on Great Books started 30 years ago with the blessing from Jessie Jackson, who famously announced that "Western Culture's got to go"—who else would think that it matters whether you read your Plato, Aristotle, St. Thomas, Pascal, Marlowe, or Milton, Burke, Montesquieu, and Tocqueville? And yet, it does! It makes a difference whether you study serious thinkers or ephemeral authors, whose claim to fame is whether they are "supportive" of the "minority causes."

JC: It should make a great difference to students to discover that these thinkers, or thousands of others like them, did not anticipate the American civic religion; indeed that their values were often antithetical to it. Quite right, then, that today's cultural warriors work to block recollection of the past, and shepherd even History students into more and more modern time frames. But remember that 'western culture' or 'western civilization' are very much inventions of the twentieth-century United States, little known elsewhere; this says something of major importance about the long-term nature of the host culture.

ZJ: Today's academia, as you know, is the Mecca of un-thought. Gender studies, Women's Studies, all kinds of -studies replaced Departments of ... Do you think that we didn't pay enough attention to what was going to happen? Or, did we not realize how important academic disciplines are for the intellectual health of a nation? Were we simply too cowardly to stand up and stop the academic radicals from taking over universities?

JC: Many academic disciplines were undermined in the 1960s and 1970s by the Marxist and marxisant Left; but this is old news, and is largely forgotten by today's commentators. Future histories of the long term development of academe will need to explain what happened subsequently. Clearly, Marx himself hardly anticipated the developments you refer to. Nor did his followers into the 1960s, however subtle and intelligent; consider, as just one instance, the absence of such themes from [E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*](#) (1964).

Did the Pyrrhic victory of anti-Marxist positivist scholarship so weaken it that scholarship in many areas could evolve into interest-group advocacy? Or did many of those positivist scholars themselves seek to

promote their society's myth of origins, so that their own traditions of advocacy could be taken over and used against them? There is, of course, nothing wrong with studying gender, or the position of women in society, and the rest; indeed it is perfectly proper to do so. What has been marked has been the ideological freight that these movements have been made to carry.

ZJ: Your books abound in criticism and scholarly "attacks" on former historians. I take it to be a sign of a healthy intellectual atmosphere when scholars do it.

Let me invoke a few names: [Hobsbawm](#), E.P. Thompson, [Raymond Williams](#), [Christopher Hill](#), [Sidney Hook](#) or [Irving Howe](#) in America, and many others. They all were on the Left, or they were the Old Left, and one can hardly imagine the history of intellectual life without them. Whatever scholarly disagreements you may have with them, methodological problems you find in their works, you cannot, I dare say, claim that they were scholarly incompetent. Can one say the same thing about the proponents of the new -studies? Leaving aside the problem of comprehensibility of what they write, do the new studies advance our knowledge of anything, the same way that the Old Left inspired you to attack?

JC: You are right to think that I had considerable respect for the figures you mention: it was possible to engage with their work, whether one agreed or disagreed. The contrast is considerable with a number or present-day schools, and scholars, for whom a private language defends their enforcement of values in ways not open to debate. The prevalence of such assumptions explains how easy it is for dissentient arguments and individuals to be excluded from universities today. I am concerned that such abuses will only provoke an equally extreme reaction in the opposite direction. But at present the natural stance of people of my persuasion is often indifference to that which cannot enter into debate.

ZJ: As far as I know, you had your intellectual heroes, so to say, or at least people who influenced you, whom you admire. Let me mention three names of people whom you knew personally, and for whom, as far as I know, you have intellectual respect: [Peter Laslett](#), a Cambridge historian, author of the classic, [The World We Have Lost](#); [Edward Shils](#), America's greatest sociologist, whom, if I am correct, you met as a student at Cambridge, where you studied; [Leszek Kolakowski](#), who was your colleague and friend at All Souls College in Oxford, and [François Furet](#), an eminent French historian of the French Revolution, who invited you as a Visiting Professor in the prestigious Committee on Social Thought, at the University of Chicago. Can you say a few words about the way in which they impacted you, and how influential you think their works are?

JC: The task of historians is to commune with the dead, and I do just that with these great men. When teaching courses on historical methodology to graduate students in the USA, I would distribute photographs and obituaries of these and other such greats ([Butterfield](#), [Elton](#)) in the hope that my students would reflect on their work, and come (however distantly) to stand in the apostolic succession. Their effect on me was that of intellectual liberation; they did not ask me to follow their doctrine, but implicitly showed me how to escape the orthodoxies that were all around me when I was an undergraduate.

ZJ: You gained the reputation not only of being “an eminent English historian of English history,” but, if you don’t mind, “enfant terrible” of English history, which I take to be a high praise, and, given your contribution to the history of England, well deserved. Your [English Society](#) is a book that no scholar of English history can bypass.

JC: Historians are seldom good at reconstructing their own intellectual development, and I am sure that I would be well below average if I tried systematically to do so. As to the ‘enfant terrible’ phase, I can say that I came on the scene in the 1980s when modernism was breaking up, and its senior exponents found it convenient to blame others for this; it was easier, and safer, for them to revile their juniors than to understand what was happening. On reflection, there may have been other historians of my generation who were as infantile, or as terrible, but it would be ungenerous to name them. We all have our faults. At least I try not to criticize those who are junior to me in years, if I can possibly avoid it.

ZJ: In your works, you took on virtually every past historian of distinction: [Anthony Arblaster](#), [Harold Laski](#), [R. H. Tawney](#), [Christopher Hill](#), [C. B. Macpherson](#), and [E. P. Thompson](#), the author of a 100 page long “[Open Letter to Leszek Kolakowski](#),” which occasioned the latter’s famous rejoinder, “[My Correct Views on Everything](#),” in [The Socialist Register](#) in 1972.

Your [Revolution and Rebellion](#) was released in 1985, your opus magnum, [English Society](#), in 1986, when—I want to emphasize—you were only in your mid-thirties. Was it just you (your historical ingenuity, so to speak), or your Cambridge education that made you into the historian you are now? What is your background, experiences, schools, and, most importantly, what motivated you to rewrite the history of English society in the 17th and 18th centuries? I am not a historian, but have heard from others that, controversial as your thesis is, no student of 17th- or 18th-centuries can by-pass it? You “derailed” English historiography, didn’t you?

JC: Others must judge. But I may have been in the right place at the right time when it came to the intellectual developments that you refer to. Especially, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century English society played a key role in the twentieth-century account of modernism. At least I criticized my seniors, who were all too able to defend themselves by the means normally employed in academe.

ZJ: Your name, like that of [Roger Scruton](#), is associated with the term "Conservative"—conservative in the British or continental sense. I remember, however, that in a short piece you wrote for a Bulgarian journal named Panorama more than two decades ago, you said something to the effect that the labels of Conservative, Liberal, Radical, only complicate our understanding of history, and that you hope that we can get beyond them. But one could say that, in so far as they persevere in existence, they point to our cultural and political legacy, whose origins can be traced to the French Revolution of 1789.

The old labels—Liberal and Conservative—assumed, however, new names: Politically Correct and non-Politically Correct. In today's language, the first one means the enemy of sexism, racism, misogyny, homophobia, xenophobia, ageism, and chauvinism. As an ideological weapon, they are much more effective than the old labels, and serve to morally discredit the opponent. In the past, you could be a conservative or a liberal, without being accused of moral wrongness. Today, if you are not Politically Correct, you are not against the "phobias" and "isms," which means, you are in the "moral wrong." Would you agree that they are much more potent than the old labels?

JC: My project was always to understand these old labels historically, rather than to defend or adopt any one of them for myself. Certainly, to understand them historically is a profoundly subversive enterprise. Perhaps the recent discrediting of the claims to timeless applicability of the political language new in c. 1815-48 is one reason why a variety of present-day reformist or revolutionary initiatives meet with such ineffectual opposition from political parties calling themselves Conservative.

ZJ: Could we say that those labels literally mean blindness to all differences? Do you think that, in so far as those terms aim at erasing differences, they are the children of the idea of equality, and to be against equality is to be in the "moral wrong"?

JC: Such labels are intended to claim that those whom they identify are possessed of a coherent ideology. But were they, and are they? I am skeptical about that; everything changes. I am also cautious about accepting ideologies on their own terms: for me, equality is a theological position, to be debated as such.

ZJ: Could we say that, to the degree that the terms I used are operational, the legacy of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution is still very much alive, and that we're seeing the unfolding—perhaps for the last time—of the consequences of the 1789 events?

JC: One might say that as we better understand the history of the American and French Revolutions, and of eighteenth-century thought (not 'the Enlightenment'), we are emancipated from the mythologies that grew up to sanitize these things. Perhaps that merely frees us to make different sorts of mistake.

ZJ: If I am correct, one of your major historical claims, which also explains the American Revolution, is that the doctrine of equality of all men (all Men are created equal) comes from those thinkers who were most eager to attack the Anglican doctrine? Secondly, the American Revolution has little to do with democracy. As you point out, the idea of universal suffrage arises much later. Can you elaborate on these points?

JC: For my thoughts on these difficult matters, please see my book [*Thomas Paine*](#). There I accept that equality is an idea the origin of which needs to be explained; it does not itself explain the American Revolution. The same is true of the idea of universal suffrage. But to make these points in simple terms is insufficient; the point is to substantiate them. I look forward to a debate.

ZJ: Another topic or term which occupies today's social and political conversations is nationalism. If I am not mistaken, your claim is that nationalism, as we understand it today, is a product of 19th century cultural and political vicissitudes, and that the 18th century form of nationalism is not applicable to our understanding. Is it correct to say that the basis of nationalism, under the "[*ancien régime*](#)," is law and religion?

JC: Law and religion, as systems of ideas shaping shared historical experience. I suggest that 'blood and soil' nationalisms were continental European innovations of the early nineteenth century; I do not subscribe to them.

ZJ: When did we start using the term "nationalism" and why? Given that under the Ancien Régime the sense of nationality was different, what are the consequences of it?

JC: Later than we think. The consequences? If patriotism led to war, nationalism additionally led to

genocide.

ZJ: Let me ask you about the American Revolution. Was it a revolution? As far as I know, you have very unique interpretation of what it was and why it happened. Can you explain your position?

JC: It began as a revolution in a much older sense (as the term was applied, for example, to the change of government in England in 1688). But it ended as an unanticipated social upheaval, the extent and implications of which were not fully appreciated until events in France after 1789 could be reflected on. The term 'revolution' remained; its content developed fundamentally.

ZJ: Other terms, very closely related, which I would like to talk about are hierarchy and privilege. Today, they sound like an echo from a foreign land. Both terms, however, belong to the history of the world and our Western tradition, and were alive and well not long ago (roughly two hundred years). Can you explain what happened? How did they fade away?

JC: I used to explain to my American students that the difference between US and UK society was that UK society seemed very formal and hierarchical from the outside, but that once you were inside you appreciated that it was remarkably informal and egalitarian. Whereas US society made a great profession of informality and casualness, but was in reality rigid, authoritarian and stratified. Paine's critique of hierarchy and privilege allowed elites to disown the terms, but retain the things.

All societies are built around hierarchy and privilege. The difference is who enjoys these things and what their premises are. Today, the highest paid employees of US universities are the sports coaches.

ZJ: Let me take you back to the mid-1990s. You may not remember, but I want to remind you of a small incident. I visited you at All Souls College in Oxford, where you gave me a tour through the College. All Souls is not open to visitors, and if you want to see the beautiful courtyard, you can peek through the cast-iron gate. I said to you, "Jonathan, I heard that as a fellow you have a right to walk on the lawn." To which, you responded, very sincerely, and in a somewhat agitated voice, "I have a privilege."

Every time I hear the word "right," I recall this little incident. What you said struck me as something so rudimentary, and yet I, and ostensibly many others, have never thought about it. We stood on the grass while the porter was taking a picture. There were a bunch of tourists looking at us through the openings

in the gate.

What I understood is that a privilege is a right based on merit, limited to a small group of elect people; whereas a right is a privilege extended to everyone, regardless of merit. If all people had the right to walk on the lawn in All Souls, the lawn would be destroyed within a week, and thus the idea of a right to walk on the lawn would be flawed.

To use an analogy, would you say that one of the gravest problems of the world today is the idea of rights? Everybody has a right to everything regardless of merit, which must lead to the destruction of institutions, just like the lawn.

Recently, a few schools in the US abolished distinctions, and the SAT (Scholastic Aptitude Test, which is the basis for admissions in many schools) is under attack. One can be pretty sure that it will be done away with, and then we will have no criteria to distinguish between students of greater or lesser intelligence, and low-level students will have the same right to attend prestigious schools as the high-level ones.

All this leads me to my question: can a civilization go on living if we do not return to the idea of privilege, merit, and thus hierarchy, which it would naturally recreate?

JC: Please [see my piece](#) in *Standpoint* magazine.

Implicitly, I am recommending a return of the meaning of rights to older ideas of privilege. The language of universal human rights, I suggest, is less and less effective in delivering good things to suffering humanity.

ZJ: Would you agree that the biggest fear of modern Western societies is inequality? It appears that all social and political structures aim at bolstering equality, and that any allusion to hierarchy or merit is met with dread?

JC: Inequality is everywhere in present-day advanced societies. The question is how it can be made acceptable to a wider public opinion. Today, it is hidden by the liberal rich from the traditional poor

chiefly by geographical distance. This defence cannot be relied on.

ZJ: Let me take you back to the beginning of Western history: Plato's Athens.

In his *Republic*, Bk VIII, Plato says: "I suppose that when a democratic city, once it's thirsted for freedom, gets bad winebearers as its leaders and gets more drunk than it should on this unmixed draught, then, unless the rulers are very gentle and provide a great deal of freedom, it punishes them, charging them with being polluted and oligarchs."

"Yes," he said, "that's what they do."

"And it spatters with mud those who are obedient, alleging that they are willing slaves of the rulers and nothings," I said, "while it praises and honors—both in private and in public—the rulers who are like the ruled and the ruled who are like the rulers. Isn't it necessary in such a city that freedom spread to everything?"

"How could it be otherwise?"

"And, my friend," I said, "for it to filter down to the private houses and end up by anarchy's being planted in the very beasts?"

"How do we mean that?" he said.

"That a father," I said, "habituates himself to be like his child and fear his sons, and a son habituates himself to be like his father and to have no shame before or fear of his parents—that's so he may be free; and metic is on an equal level with townsman and townsman with metic, and similarly with the foreigner."

"Yes," he said, "that's what happens."

As Plato explains next, anarchy follows, which ends by the appearance of a tyrant who reintroduces order. The lesson we learn from the Athenian philosopher is that equality works like an acid, which dissolves hierarchy or authority, and produces anarchy. Tyranny is the natural outcome of democratic equality.

Looking at the West, and America in particular, everywhere we see signs of greater and greater lawlessness and dissolution of authority. Plato, probably, would not have a problem recognizing what the Future holds for us. Since your historical expertise made you somewhat of a prophet when we talked twenty-six years ago, what is your prophesy for the future?

JC: That anarchy and stability are not an either/or choice; it is a question of degree. Statistics of gun-

related homicides, and of citizens shot dead by the police, are useful indicies of the degree to which anarchy is already with us. The authority of parents over children is hard to measure, but contemporary observers remarked on the transformation in this respect brought about in the [Thirteen Colonies](#) by the Revolution. I suspect that the future tends to be like the present, only more so.

ZJ: You are English. An overwhelming majority of the population in the UK is fond of monarchy. Partly, I presume, the reason is the deep-rooted English attachment to tradition; partly, because of the personality of the Queen, who fulfilled her role with incredible dignity for over half a century. However, my question to you is of a historical nature. Given the mess in which your country has found itself with Brexit, shouldn't we have doubts about the efficacy, or even the validity of a parliamentary system (the same can be said of the US Congress, which can hardly pass any piece of legislation, and is always stuck in a gridlock)?

JC: The UK constitution is flexible, and continually changing. I would not be surprised if it changed in significant ways to adjust to exit from the EU. Members of the UK Parliament have fallen into considerable disesteem for their handling of this matter; the monarchy will survive, but many of them may lose their seats. Whereas the US Constitution is relatively inflexible, and members of Congress very hard to remove; this does not bode well.

ZJ: One cannot imagine a similar situation if we lived under constitution or limited monarchy. There are quite a few countries in Europe which have monarchs: Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Spain, Belgium and the Netherlands. I doubt many people would take my suggestion seriously, but don't you think it's time to reconsider our intellectual assumptions about political systems?

One could cherish, as did John Stuart Mill in the 19th-century, and the American Founding Fathers (particularly Jefferson, who was extremely hostile to monarchy), the idea that democracy is the hope for the future, and will eliminate monarchy's problems. However, when you look around, it appears that we have too much of it, and Plato would agree with us, saying that we are heading toward anarchy.

JC: I would suggest that the US system, combining the roles of head of state and head of the executive, has created a post that almost no-one has the talent to fill (cf. the position of Roman Emperor).

ZJ: Thank you Dr. Clark.

The [image](#) shows, "A Private View at the Royal Academy," by William Powell Frith, painted in 1883.

The Polish version of this interview appeared in the January issue of Arcana.

