

# A Runaway World Revisited

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by Eric John

To review Dr Leach's Reith Lectures, *A Runaway World*,<sup>1</sup> is not a straightforward task. It is not possible to take up the many points on which they invite comment or provoke disagreement without first defining one's position towards the blanket disapproval with which they were greeted when originally delivered, and noting the implications of this opposition. The lectures were meaty and intentionally provocative: contrary to their author I think they make better reading than listening simply because there is too much to take in by the ear alone: which makes it all the sadder that so much comment was lavished on them as radio talks and so little in their printed form. Reith Lectures have, of course, proved controversial in the past but none has provoked quite the response these did, and this must, at least in part, be explained by timing and the topic.

The whole conception of the Reith Lectures assumes a hierarchical public opinion with a narrow apex definable largely in terms of who knows who but predominantly drawn from certain professions and the public service and the so-called quality newspapers, transmitting downwards through the universities, the colleges of education to eventually the secondary modern schools, the right opinions and the tolerated areas of disagreement. Quite suddenly in the last three years this hierarchical structure has started to break up and voices quite outside the old establishment, more strident, much less informed, but sometimes more passionately concerned have started to make themselves heard and been shown to carry weight. One may cite the obvious example of Mrs Mary Whitehouse whose attacks on the BBC seem quite likely to have more social consequences than all the Reith Lectures put together. Mrs Whitehouse is no more 'established' than a senior mistress in a secondary modern school; ten years ago she would have been ignored, now she is a force, and it is no coincidence that she was one of the earliest and most forceful, and most ignorant, of Dr Leach's critics.

Mrs Whitehouse only represents one section of the new movement concerned to crack the enamel of urbanity with which the establishment had coated the public opinion of the last generation. One ought, I believe, to link her with what at first sight appears a very different kind of dissent coming from the self-styled radical left. In *Slant* (No. 20, April 1968) under the initials IC, appeared this comment on student revolt: 'Too much energy is wasted on the Aunt Sally of university structures, when the real and insidious

<sup>1</sup>BBC Publications, London, 1968, 17s. 6d.

enemy lies in the libraries—those heaps of the accumulated detritus of bourgeois civilization through which the student is urged to wade like a conscientious coprophagist. It is here that he is finally reduced to the voyeuristic contemplation of the ideas of others.' One notices in passing the imagery of excretion, the meaningless 'voyeuristic'—if there is such a word—the vulgar alliteration and the adolescent passion for unusual words. What in the average university library qualifies for the dung the conscientious student feeds on? In IC's university the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* obviously; Shakespeare, *Scrutiny*, the *Origin of Species*, the *Summa Theologica*, Marx's pamphlets, the *Tractatus*? If this passage has a meaning it is an incitement to burn other people's books. This is what I call fascist: the resemblance of IC's attitudes to the university library and Mrs Whitehouse's to the BBC is perfectly obvious.

This is why it is so dangerous to talk of a new radical right opposed by a new radical left. What divides them are no positive values, they have none, but the code words and slogans of what they deny. The hate words and the approval words are different but both have this in common. They turn away from the world in which we all have to live to a fantasy world they find utterly delectable because it is home-made for themselves and their like-minded friends. Both are basically authoritarian and utterly hostile to any attempt to cope with the world as it is. It is because Dr Leach breaks brutally and on the whole justly into these fantasy worlds and bids us contemplate the real one, that he has roused such opposition.

He quotes in his introduction as a kind of text, a remark of Sir Peter Medawar to this effect: 'One thing we might all agree upon is that all heroic solutions to social problems are thoroughly undesirable and that we should proceed in society as we do in science. In science we do not leap from hilltop to hilltop, from triumph to triumph, or from discovery to discovery; we proceed by a process of *exploration* from which we sometimes learn to do better, and this is what we ought to do in social affairs.' What the *Runaway World* is about is the defence and extension of this opinion. It is, at the moment a very unfashionable opinion when more and more turn to Herbert Marcuse or Randolph W. Bourne and other heroes of the same kidney or with Mr Powell to the Athanasian Creed interpreted in the light of Samuel Smiles. The new ideologues want heroic solutions and would scarcely admit that a serious discussion of social issues was possible on Dr Leach's terms. But let us be clear here what is at stake. Because Dr Leach insists on sitting down in front of the given facts this does not mean that serious social issues are all reduced to the level of a decision as to whether 'we' shall build a new motorway or a barrage across Morecambe Bay. Social engineering properly considered raises questions of the deepest principle in a way that makes their answers important for what we do and what we are.

The blunt facts are these. In the next two generations, provided there is no nuclear war, the World's population is going to increase by roughly the amount it has so far taken several millenia to produce. We have about forty years to cope with a rise in population all previous generations could deal with more or less at their leisure. It seems to follow that whether we like it or not, whatever changes in the social and economic structure come about, we are going to have to go on living with the drearier impedimenta of industrial capitalism for a long time to come. Mass-production, moralizing about productivity, large or small brick boxes to put people in, sordid rows about how much old-age pensioners should get and how much for mentally-handicapped children, are here to stay. We cannot tell all this to stop and go away whilst we think of something better, a return to the 'old' virtues or a leap into a large-scale urban version of Fidel Castro's Cuba. The best that is likely to happen is that these things may be made more tolerable by changes in the social and economic relations of industrial society, with the compensation that enough of its products may be diverted to the underdeveloped nations to keep hunger at bay and destroy the need for voluntary charity. The worst, it seems to me, is that on one excuse or another social morality will be abandoned, as the history of Nazi Germany (now being re-written and blurred over by radical right and left) shows is quite easy. The tidy-minded inoffensive people keep the ledgers whilst the odd sadists do the dirty work. I mean that we may well see a series of final solutions, for which the coloured population of the US seem an obvious first choice. What is not going to happen is that we shall move happily back into a rather more prosperous version of Victorian domestic bliss or forward into the brave new world of student anarchism. In this kind of situation it is Dr Leach's strength that directs us to look at man in his context, to the relevance of his social groupings for understanding what is happening and the means by which these can be changed in genuinely, objectively progressive, directions.

He is, of course, a sociologist, as he stresses, but it is relevant to mention what he does not, that he is primarily a social anthropologist—the author of a remarkable book on the Highland peoples of Burma. To the outsider social anthropology is much the most serious and disciplined of the social sciences and much the most illuminating for the humanities in general. Every social anthropologist has personal experience of a society radically differently ordered from his own: the effect of this experience is necessarily to widen one's notions of what is possible, of what looks absolute but turns out to be relative. It is this above all that disconcerted many of the listeners to the original lectures. Some of what Dr Leach said seemed like old doctrines of ethical relativity modern philosophers are confident they have long ago sunk in logical contradictions—modern philosophers being reluctant to learn the lesson that logical

contradictions are about as much use in destroying satisfying doctrines as airguns would be in shooting down jets. To the more philosophically-minded then, Leach seemed perverse: to those like Philip Toynbee in *The Observer* who claim to believe in moral fundamentals he seemed downright depraved. Now in his contentious fourth lecture 'Men and Morality', Leach went further than I should in emphasizing the relativism of forms of moral life. But I do not think it would be difficult to make his argument fit to meet any reasonable philosophical objection without altering the import of what he had to say in any important particular.

We have here one of the facts of social life that we all, especially the Christians, must learn, the sooner the better. Of course there are fundamental and constant features of the moral life but they do not exist in a void. The absolute element in morality is closely related to the basic facts of 'birth, copulation, and death' universal in all societies. But the anthropologists have shown beyond rational doubt that birth, copulation, and death do give rise to radically different rules of conduct and patterns of behaviour. They have not proved that *all* ethics are relative but they have proved that we are in danger of manufacturing standards appropriate to and derived from largely urban societies and assuming these to be absolute. In other words the boundaries between a sensible absolutism in ethics and a sensible relativism allows a much bigger sphere for the relative than we have been accustomed to think. To the romantic young and the cynical old alike, it seems incredible that happy families composed of one husband and several wives some of whom happened also to be step-mothers of their husbands could possibly exist. But the anthropologists have shown that they can and do.

The trouble arises because the more sophisticated turn to contemporary philosophy for help here, and contemporary philosophy works in an atmosphere of logical enquiry and a concern for scientific method, which are both all right in their place but, alas, they seldom seem to know their place. Plainly it makes no difference to formal logic if Hitler be substituted for Socrates in the standard textbook paradigm: which shows the limitations of formal logic. Likewise in discussing the problem of differences in social custom, clearly if one takes examples such as the fact that Jewish ritual taboos preclude the eating of meat and drinking of milk at the same meal, whilst Catholic rules of abstinence are quite different, these differences are trivial compared with the common arbitrary choice of foods for prohibition. Under the influence of logical and scientific practices this is easily thought to suffice: so long as the form of the argument holds what does the particular content matter? But it does matter in this case. No doubt fundamental to all peoples is some rule of marriage but what makes *which* particular rule of marriage is what decides who shall be happy and who shall be miserable. The implications of different rules of marriage are particularly important for Christian

theologians. This is because so much contemporary moral theology goes on about the family. It was Dr Leach's scathing comments about the nuclear family that provoked Mrs Whitehouse to such a bad temper, and it seems to me that not only she is under quite a mistaken impression about what the family means in Christian tradition.

Christians are faced with the Bible which shows very clearly that Christian morality has to deal with a changing and developing conception of the family. In the light of Solomon and all his glory, one cannot dismiss polygyny as just what one would expect from a lot of savages. By the time of the Gospels the Jewish family was different from that of David and Solomon but none the less if the holy family was not at all like that, the older modes were not repudiated. The evangelists were careful to point out that Jesus was part of their lineage and 'their' family. Likewise it is obvious that the family of the Gospels and the early fathers was a very different thing from the modern nuclear family. That is, although for example the holy family, a father, a mother and one child—I am assuming that Catholic tradition is correct here—looks like a modern family unit at first sight, it was in fact very different. The modern nuclear family is essentially a set of personal relationships. The traditional social functions the family performed, the care of its sick members, the problem of its aged members, the education of its young, is now done by professionals outside the family. What is more, the kindred group—the brethren of Jesus—was much more necessarily involved with the basic family unit then than it is now. The modern nuclear family does often enough have personal relationships with uncles, aunts, cousins and so on, but this will be very largely on a basis of personal choice in the same way that non-family friends are chosen. It seems to me that we talk very glibly about the family *per se* when it is in the highest degree doubtful if there is a family *per se* at all. We have to cope with the application of the values of Christian personal relationships to a form of family fairly new and in no sense absolute. It seems to me that Dr Leach has done a service by forcing us to look at his nuclear family without the sentimentality of a pseudo-tradition with full awareness that it could actually develop into something rather different: indeed that it would be better for everybody if it did.

It was this refusal to treat the family as an eternal verity and his consequent disenchantment with its current shape, especially his comment on the 'tawdry secrets' of modern family life that raised the most fuss. Most of his critics assumed the 'tawdry secrets' to be sexual: significantly most of them were drawn from the kind of family that has inherited or early acquired capital. No-one who has lived in a nuclear family meeting all its wants out of income would have much difficulty in realizing that Dr Leach meant hire-purchase indebtedness, mortgage payments and the like. One could go further and point to the lust for status that seems an integral part of the

modern family and its fantastic capacity for inventing quite arbitrary status symbols and making their pursuit a primary object in life. One could cite here the way the ethos of the nuclear family lies behind the neuroses about racialism, the terror many parents have that their daughters will marry a black man. This is, to my personal knowledge, widespread in places where the likelihood of the children even meeting a black man is remote. (As a curious aside it is apparent from conversations that it is daughters marrying black men, not sons marrying black women, that is the most usual form this neurosis takes.) Obviously there is enormous amount to be said and learnt about the connexion between modern racialism and the nuclear family but a mere indication must suffice here. Look for instance at the recent history of words like secondary and grammar in education. 'Secondary' originally meant what followed primary or elementary education, but has now come to mean inferior education, as, in the light of the status with which it endows its products, it is. How much of the row about comprehensive education is about educational standards at all? How much about the rights of nuclear families to have privilege and status on the rates?

I have been here deliberately impressionistic and extreme but I do not think I have distorted seriously what are coming to be increasingly the basic facts of social life in modern industrial society. Nor is social change and things going wrong any new experience for Christian moralists. But at the moment there seems a frightening complacency about what is going bad now and a persistence of social teaching directed towards insubstantial if not illusory problems. Part of the trouble is the confusion already referred to between a morality based on absolute insights into the nature of man and woman, and a morality like Euclid's geometry of absolute rules deduced from first principles. One has only to look at the present mess over contraception to see this at work. It seems plain that many people find it worrying that the Church should change her mind, and it is interesting to find the Church's *volte face* over usury cited with approval or embarrassment by many of the disputants. If I am right the trouble here is as much the use of the wrong model of moral principles as a quarrel about real moral issues. Take the usury case. The Church did not in any serious sense change her mind or her teaching. The traditional teaching about usury makes perfect sense in a rural, under-capitalized society. The transition to an urban society in which there was spare capital available for investment without the social ill-consequences money lending had in a village community obviously required a different casuistry. This, I take it, is what men like St Antonino with first-hand experience of places like renaissance Florence provided. They did not change the traditional teaching which would, I imagine, be as valid and valuable in parts of modern India, say, as it was in the rural world of the early medieval Church. Surely if Christian morality

is to mean anything it means the scrutinizing of certain moral principles in the light of the social context of the day?

Yet many articulate middle-aged Catholics still argue as though social morality was about resisting the encroachments of the state, and that the world of Orwell's 1984 was just around the corner if the nuclear families do not stop it. Dr Leach has a good point apropos social order here illustrating the way middle-aged middle-class people get the basic social facts wrong. He points out that by any real comparative standards with the world as it is, we live in an exceptionally orderly society, although this is not as our middle-classes see it. Elderly ladies are sometimes attacked in modern England, though not very often; but after all, in some parts of South America old ladies as a matter of course carry little, sharp, axes in their handbags to deal with attackers. Some years ago the late Canon Peter Green told in the *Guardian* how he remembered seeing as a boy in Southampton a brawl outside a public house in which a man was left dead in the gutter, no-one, least of all the police, taking any notice. In Manchester at the turn of the century it was evidently considered daring for a member of the middle-class to walk in districts like Ardwick in broad daylight. It seems to me that beliefs in the omniscient state are of the same order of confusion.

One of the symptoms of this confusion was the belief that at the top of the State lived a creature called power which was kept in a cupboard in the cabinet room. One H. Macmillan and then one H. Wilson were supposed to be very good at putting it to useful and profitable work. We have seen just what the mass inertia, what the mass grumbling from the nuclear families, can do to this mythical power. The real social problem is surely the rapid dissolution of the social structure to meet the appetites of the nuclear family. What are trade unions now but devices to serve the interest of the nuclear families of the lower and middle income groups, with a consequent decay of the kind of social solidarity that once constituted the working-class?

We need only look at what is happening to standards of social justice and the way grumbles can force governments to give away their deepest principles. What has the present Government done that was at once so necessary and so unpopular as to increase family-allowances? Look at the South African governments' policies of *apartheid*. Are they really policies in the same sense as those that made up the Welfare State were? That is pieces of social engineering worked out by people as expert as could be found, then taken to the electorate, explained and taught, and found in the end persuasive. I do not think so. With all the talk about the philosophical bases provided by this or that politician, what *apartheid* amounts to is the raising of suburban attitudes towards black neighbours to the level of government action. Politicians who are felt to be sound on this can have office for the asking: their competence in matters of rational

decisions on pressing political questions does not matter: no matter how able a man was he would never have the chance to exercise that ability if he were not committed to keeping the blacks in their place. Look at the effect of the Unionist issue in Ulster: leaving aside the issues of principles, look at men. Fifty years of Ulster home rule and defence of the Protestant *apartheid* have produced a heap of monumental political incapacity in the Unionist Dunciad rare indeed. The politics of prejudice produce the politicians to match. We are seeing not the rise of an omnicompetent state but an increasing caste system between whose layers the law of the jungle seems increasingly likely to prevail. At its centre is a kind of *lumpen bourgeoisie* led in the English case by Enoch Powell. It is not 1984 we need to study but *Last Exit to Brooklyn*.

It seems to me then that it is on the theme of the relation of the family to society that Dr Leach provokes us to think most usefully, and I have not concealed my opinion that modern Catholic social thinking is sadly lacking at this very point. Dr Leach is not, of course, concerned with that and he has many other things to say, some of them wrong, I am sure, but all of them worth considering.

These are details, though important ones. Where, I think, the crux of the debate Dr Leach poses is reached is in quite a different place from that most of his critics chose. For anyone writing from my position, from my profession, naturally Dr Leach's contempt for history and tradition are impossible to accept. I do not think, however, that it is simply prejudice that makes me take issue with him here. If these *Lectures* have a persistent fault it is a certain insouciance, a certain unawareness of the strength of the institutions they are criticizing and an apparent blindness to the power for evil development they contain. This insouciance, if that is a fair name for it, seems to me not to be a personal foible of Dr Leach's, but the kind of disease which is to sociologists what housemaid's knee is to housemaids.

In his fifth lecture he sums up what he thinks is wrong with our educational system in this way: 'Education is concerned with the passing on of tradition, so we tend to think of the teacher as a wise old man, and a good deal of prestige still attaches to the teaching of history and ancient philosophy. This would be fair enough in a stable conservative society. Amongst the Australian Aborigines, for example, many crucial pieces of information about the environment—such as the location of waterholes, weather-lore, and the habits of animals and plants—are treated as a form of esoteric knowledge known only to a small circle of very old men whose secrets are passed on bit by bit to the younger members of the tribe in the course of a long series of initiations.' He thinks in our society only the 'computer men' and such-like know what is worth knowing. It is this caricature of history which would be widely shared by English



sociologists, and the subsequent dismissal of tradition from the sphere of social values, that makes up what I mean by insouciance here.

Of course the teaching of history and ancient philosophy in English universities bears no resemblance to this caricature. An obvious and recent example is Ryle's book on Plato, which, whether it is right or not, is plainly exciting, and far from trivial, and shows the way a traditional teaching on a traditional subject can at the same time be revolutionary and iconoclastic. The point about tradition is that it is not an accumulation of lawyers' precedents but a way of advancing into new fields without falling flat on one's face in the process. Tradition is necessarily partly conservative, for it is only from what we really know that we can advance at all, but since tradition is not a singular thing but a collection of relevant, connected but separate, things, it must be open-ended if it is living at all. Astonishment as well as conservation are essentials in any tradition, as any competent historian could show from his own chosen field. Now some of the advances into the unknown are made by re-interpreting the past. What else does the work of a de Lubac or a Congar, which paved the way to an *aggiornamento* of Catholic theology, consist of but comparing present theological experience with what the fathers said—and producing something as novel as it is traditional in the process?

Now sociologists, with the honourable exception of Professor Evans-Pritchard and his school, will not accept that historians have anything relevant to say about society at all. In exciting and brilliant books by men like Radcliffe-Brown or Nadel, one gets accounts of the irrelevance of history which suggests that they have never read any other history book except *1066 and All That*. Even in the more sophisticated polemics of Dr Leach's master, Claud Lévi-Strauss, one finds Gobineau on the French revolution cited as an example of how differently and how superficially historians treat social questions compared to sociologists. If a historian were to hold up sociology to ridicule by reading some of the sillier bits of Sir James Frazer or Margaret Mead, M. Lévi-Strauss would be entitled to complain of injustice. Has he never heard of Febvre on the French Revolution or Marc Bloch on Feudal Society?

Of course historians study social structure as much as sociologists do, not all of them, and few of them quite all of the time, because they have a somewhat different problem. Sociologists do their field-work in a few months or a couple of years at the most and then draw their conclusions about the relevance of what they found in the social structure of their chosen society. In other words, they take snapshots of their societies. Historians usually study processes: that is, they take a movement, the English Civil War in the seventeenth century, for instance, and try to find where it came from and where it went to and with what consequences. The historian always has hindsight,

he knows from the start that Charles I is going to fail and that Cromwell's success or failure is going to be a knotty problem to solve. He also knows that however one looks at the social context it won't explain all that happens and indeed that the social structure may change quite rapidly because of the intended, or more probably the unintended, consequences of actions taken by individuals in certain key roles. This introduces a dimension into the historian's work quite absent from the sociologist's. If I were a social anthropologist I would always be haunted by a dream that I had done my field-work in France about 1785. I should call my book *Custom and Conflict in French Provincial Life* and it would be all about the way feudal privileges, those dovecotes and that corvée, kept society balanced and coherent by providing just the necessary conflict: there would be chapters on the nobility, how the division between those at Versailles and those in the country kept the kind of rivalry that prevented the non-nobles from taking a wholly anti-aristocratic stance, with the lawyers providing the right amount of social mobility and so on. It would be published on the day the Bastille fell and reviewed in the learned journals as the news of Louis XVI's execution came through. Historians paint portraits and portraits are obviously less 'scientific' than photographs, and although bad portrait painters can sink much lower than bad photographers, none the less a camera, even in the hands of a Cartier-Bresson, cannot do what a brush can in the hands of a Rembrandt.

I do not want to pursue a quarrel of learned clerks here, although it is a quarrel important for more than academic dovecotes. I want to point out that one cannot cut off the past quite like this. One of the social facts we have to live with is the astonishing myth-making capacity men have and its intimate connexion with changes in fundamental social attitudes of the kind closely followed by changes of social behaviour and necessarily of alteration in the social structure. I would cite Christopher Hill's superb essay on the Norman yoke as an example as to how the interpretation of what happened in 1066 had an important bearing on the ideology of the one great civil war in English history. I mean this as a sort of middling example; one could go lower to the sad state of Ulster and the rather different version of William III current there from that found in the pages of Macaulay. No doubt the Ulster setting is a battle for scarce perks in an unaffluent society and that battle would be likely to take unpleasant forms without religious bigotry. But it is only religious bigotry that can explain the precise and the peculiarly vicious form it takes in Ulster now. At a very highly sophisticated level one may cite Sir Lewis Namier's famous re-interpretation of the eighteenth-century political system. Its influence seems to me to have been as pernicious as its distinction as pure history was high. It has contributed decisively to the higher cynicism about politics, the contempt for principles and the open acceptance of the pursuit of office

and patronage as ends in themselves, that has become so pervasive. I do not think without Namier, either the Harold Macmillan we knew or the Harold Wilson we have would be conceivable.

This myth-making capacity has its implications for social engineering. In our own day the speeches of Enoch Powell show it in action at a pretty low level, as indeed do the sermons of the Rev. I. Paisley. But this sort of thing cannot be coped with by what Dr Leach would call scientific means. The historian can provide a sort of rational disinfectant which is a help but however carefully a scholar proves that there was right and wrong on both sides in the first Irish troubles, he won't get much attention from a Paisleyite. This form of social activity can only be met in the field of morals and values, one hopes non-violently, but plainly sometimes this will not be possible. It is at this point that I feel that Plato was more penetrating than Sir Karl Popper—who is quoted with approval in Dr Leach's introduction—and it is at this point that the Reith Lectures seem too simple and optimistic. One may make the point by going back to both Dr Leach's and my beginning, the quotation from Medawar about not looking for heroic solutions. What perhaps neither he nor Leach allows for is that their kind of piecemeal social engineering calls for heroes of execution if not of invention, and in our world it would seem, tragic heroes. One recalls the Kennedys and Martin Luther King, all men of comparatively moderate opinion seeking to achieve a little piecemeal social engineering. It is in the light of some such line of thought as this that I would think that Dr Leach's kind of evolutionary humanism to be inadequate and would defend some traditional Christian attitudes that with all their moth-balls seem to have more relevance.

This, then, is a book worth reading. I should suggest it might be read together with Herbert McCabe's *Law, Love, and Language*, which is strong precisely on the points where Dr Leach is weak. Indeed, it is noticeable that the sniff of the real world is a good deal stronger in the friar's book than it is in the don's. Finally, there is a curious and moving, almost Goethean, attitude to nature in Dr Leach. It comes out strongly in his very absolute moral stand about the Aldebra business and elsewhere in his sense of man's kinship with the animal and vegetable world. It makes me want to agree with Dr Leach and to suggest to him a little Goethean pessimism. It was, I think, Goethe who said, 'Mankind can stand anything except a series of fine days'; which might be taken to mean that the affluent society of its own beautifully selfish workings isn't going to solve all social problems, and that these are going to get a good deal darker before they get better.