JUSTICE IS CONFLICT

by

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ἐνδέυσαι χρῆ . . . δίσημον ἔρνην.

HERACLEITUS, FRAGMENT 80
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AT LEAST since 1970 I had been convinced that it was a mistake to look for a moral theory, or a set of propositions, that could serve as a justification, or foundation, of my political loyalties and opinions, which were, and which remain, the opinions of a democratic socialist. For me, as for many others, the political events of half a century had undermined belief in any discernible direction of historical change, or any known path of human improvement, and it seemed evident to me that my moral notions, and the political attitudes dependent on them, needed to be turned around, and turned toward a thoroughgoing skepticism and negativity. I came to recognize that my socialist sympathies, and loyalty to the political Left, were far from unreasonable, and not at all difficult to defend, in proportion as they were traceable to
emotions engendered by the persisting evils of human life: and poverty in all its modern forms is certainly one. My political opinions and loyalties, when challenged, did not any longer include or entail any generalizable account of a future ideal society or of essential human virtues. Rather, they pointed to the possible elimination of particular evils found in particular societies at particular times, and not to universalizable principles of social justice. It is necessary to turn toward the particular case and also toward the negative case, and only then one has sufficient grounds for political action. Arguing for general principles of social justice against traditionalists and conservatives, liberals and reformers had seemed always to be trapped in circularity, because the conclusions derived from their own arguments supplied the only criterion of rationality and acceptability that they were prepared to accept.

The second motive in revising the account that I give to myself, and to others, of my political sentiments is found in the concept of imagination. By slow steps, and partly from Vico’s Scienza Nuova, and partly from Kant’s Critique of Judgment, and from my own experience, I