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Politics. A Very Short Introduction

Chapter 6

How to Analyse a Modern Society

How should we visualize a modern state? The more complicated the world becomes, the harder it is. But we may approach the problem by remembering that most civil associations, when they weren't ships of state being steered, have been bodies politic. Political associations must have a head, or ruler, to govern, and arms, or warriors, with which to defend themselves. Counsellors are deliberative, messengers the nerves, and agriculture the belly of this complex body, as the Roman patrician Menenius Agrippa argued when (as Plutarch tells it) he persuaded angry farmers that they must not rebel against the senatorial head. Shakespeare often used this image of the body politic, and illustrates the point with another, musical, metaphor, in the famous words he gives Ulysses in *Troilus and Cressida*:

*Take but degree away, untune that string
And hark what discord follows. Each thing meets
In mere oppugnancy.*

The image of the state as a body conveyed that it was a unified corporate structure, in which each element must play its part in an overall harmony. Individuals and groups within the state were meaningless except as the creatures of their society. The relation of part to whole, as St Thomas Aquinas put it, was that of imperfect to perfect.

Christianity was an earthquake which shook the foundations of this conception of civil harmony, but the remarkable thing is that for fifteen hundred years the ruined classical structure stayed in place. Following Machiavelli, we have noted that the tension between the ideal of civil harmony on the one hand, and the rather turbulent adversarial practices of public life in Greece and Rome on the other, were one source of liberty. Yet the ideal of harmonious obedience never quite capitulated to the realistic view that the modern state is an equilibrium of divergent forces. Christianity exploited the idea of harmony even while also undermining it, partly by demoting politics to a merely temporal instrument for sustaining peace and worldly justice, and partly by making the care of each individual soul the fundamental thing in life.

Christianity taught Europeans to live within a divided society, and some of them have been trying to restore the lost unity ever since. The individual Christian found himself part of not one but two corporate bodies, the Church and the civil community, *sacerdotium* and *regnum*. Medieval law was also remarkably fluent in responding to an active and vigorous population by establishing further legal bodies, such as guilds and universities, of which the individual was a part. These bodies within bodies, as it were, accustomed Europeans to the transformations of modernity. The new sovereign state, while from one point of view simply an assemblage of equal subjects under a sovereign, was also a complex, highly articulated body.

The essence of modernity lay in the development of this new sentiment of individuality: the disposition increasingly to guide one's life by one's own talents and inclinations rather than to fill the place into which one had been born. The pioneering work of individualism was done in the sphere of religion, where pursuing one's inclinations – here decked out in the drapery of a newish thing called 'conscience' – was less a right than a duty. The Reformation left many people stranded under rulers who imposed a religion unacceptable to their inclinations, and they migrated. Some, like the Pilgrim Fathers, set up completely new societies which could reflect in full measure what they took to be right, while others tried to turn England, or Scotland, or the Swiss states into godly places according to their lights. But other inclinations, such as to make money, or risk one's fortune, or go soldiering, or devote one's life to art, were also part of this dissolution of traditional stabilities. It was particularly in the cities that individuals came to insist on pursuing their own inclinations. The climax of this movement came in the nineteenth century, when millions of Europeans, shopping, as it were, for the kind of state that best suited them, emigrated to the New World. Just such a pursuit of opportunity built the Americas, but even more significant was the drift all over the Western world from the countryside to the cities.

These mobile and self-dependent individuals could no longer plausibly be seen as merely contributory parts of one single body of activity. They were certainly subjects and citizens, but they also had private lives of their own, and a great number of social activities for which the state was merely an umbrella. In the early modern period, then, state and society came explicitly to be distinguished. Aristotle had defined man as a political animal, but already for Aquinas in the thirteenth century, man was political *and social*. By the seventeenth century most social contract theorizing distinguished the beginnings of society on the one hand from the construction of the state on the other. Society could even be imagined as an autonomous mode of association.

Society, then, was born out of the *state*. It was by no means the last type of association to detach itself from the state by such a process of abstraction. The growth of European commerce revealed that human beings also played roles as producers, distributors, and consumers of commodities. In this role, they often seemed like puppets on the strings of price. Money had often seemed to political philosophers a potential source of corruption, while rulers had given much thought to ways of extracting it from their subjects. By the eighteenth century, it became possible to think of individuals not merely as subjects, or as social beings, but also as participating in another distinct associative relationship: political economy, or more simply, the *economy*.

The remarkable thing about the economy was that it seemed to be a system largely independent of the will of the participants. In this respect, it interestingly resembled nature as it was coming to be revealed by science, and was strikingly different from social and political life, in which unpredictable human decisions were the rule. The

movements of economic quantities were determinate, at least in principle. When the price of a commodity rose, consumers bought less of it, which tended to bring the price down again. Commodities in short supply infallibly rose in price so long as demand remained constant. There flashed upon the minds of some thinkers the idea that here, in economics, was to be found the key to a real science of man. The great Isaac Newton had demonstrated that the earth was a planet moving in a solar system according to exact laws. In 1776, Adam Smith published *The Wealth of Nations*, which exhibited the economy as a system of abstractions behaving in a similarly law-governed way.

Since this new system of relations resembled the Greek household writ large, it was called an 'economy' from the Greek *oikos*. The modern economy was called 'political' in order to distinguish it from the ancient household, and its great achievement was not only its rising prosperity but the fact that this was achieved by free labour, not by slaves – something which many were soon to regard as evidence for the morally progressive character of European civilization. Progress was the result of reason, which could analyse the processes of production into ever simpler component parts, the mechanization of some and the repetitive performance of others yielding great gains in efficiency. Early economists gloried in this achievement without being carried away by its possibilities. They knew about diminishing returns to all improvements, and the speculations of the Reverend Thomas Malthus, according to which most populations were doomed to live at around subsistence level, gave economics a dismal reputation. What was actually to transform the human condition was the accident of a highly rational and inventive collection of people in England finding themselves on top of large coal reserves. Water and wind merely supplemented human muscle, but coal-power set in motion the progress towards a push-button world. The genie of limitless human possibility had been released, and there is no doubt that it inflamed the minds of those who thought about politics.

In particular, it was the sovereign powers of Europe which saw in technological advance ways of pursuing their central project of increasing the extent of their dominions. This project primarily led them to chance their fortunes in war, a hobby which often led to national bankruptcy. The policy of national aggrandizement suggested that trade between nations was a competition for the acquisition of wealth. International trade was seen, in the jargon of a later period, as a zero-sum game: anything I win must be your loss. States therefore tried to monopolize trade, keep industrial techniques secret, protect their industries from competition, and rationalize the nation's productive resources, including human capital. This application of reason to economic competition was called mercantilism, and it was not a great success. It so happened that the British, whose dynasty was less able to impose central direction upon trade, also grew richer faster than anyone else. They increasingly left commerce unregulated, following the principles elaborated by Adam Smith according to which trade benefits

both parties.

By the end of the eighteenth century, then, Europeans had learned to understand themselves as subjects and citizens in the state, as members of classes, institutions, religions, or status groups in society, and as producers and consumers in the economy. They were also beginning to learn that they were the bearers of a *culture*. Rationalism had taught them to regard themselves as part of humanity, possibly sharing in what were soon to be called 'the rights of man', but now romanticism made them take notice of the fact that each people spoke a specific language or dialect, enjoyed particular culinary tastes, customs, manners, artistic inheritance, and much else. A culture was a kind of spiritual rather than political body (the German word *Volksgeist* hit the nail on the head) which expressed itself in poetry and song and was a unique modification of human possibility. The larger states at this time equipped themselves with national artists – Dante for the Italians, Cervantes for the Spaniards, Rabelais and Racine for the French, and Shakespeare for the English. Smaller cultures sometimes had to fit themselves up with this apparatus from scratch: devoted teachers wrote down and formalized the language, artists created literature and images, and historians a national legend.

The modern body politic thus turns out to be not one but a number of bodies. If we add mind, as constitutive of psychology, then in state, society, economy, and culture we have the conceptual ground-plan of the social sciences. Each association, as a concept, sustains a vast superstructure of theory and classification. But our concern is rather with the fact that these self-conscious associations set the scene for the dramas of modern political conflict. They provide a grid from which many powerful theories of politics can be constructed.

Until the economy and the state have been distinguished, for example, there can be no modern theory of socialism, which is a reflection on the relation between politics and the economy. Again, until culture had been distinguished from society, nationalism would have made no sense. Nationalism is the doctrine (espoused by figures as various as Mazzini and Woodrow Wilson, and animating such peoples as the Czechs, Serbs, Irish, Basques, and Bretons) that every culture ought to be self-determining. This doctrine must be distinguished from the sloppy usage of 'nationalism' to signify the passionate solidarity of established states in their quarrels with others of their kind – a quite different phenomenon. This confusion has yielded the mistaken theory that, since all conflict is caused by nationalism, the way to peace lies through the abandonment of national sovereignty in favour of the rule of international authorities.

Those who theorize these abstract associations are also tempted to simplify them by supplying a single dominant motive for each. *Homo politicus* for example is driven by power, *homo economicus* by the selfish desire for wealth. Society (sometimes shadowed by the rather more sentimental term 'community') stands for solidarity, the economy for division. It should not need to be emphasized that the whole range of human motives is

in fact at play across the whole spectrum of modern association: power gets entangled with culture, idealism with politics, sport with economics, and so on. Fallacies arising from simple identifications of motive and association have long rampaged through both the theory and the practice of modern life, and this is no place to analyse them. One central point may, however, be made.

It concerns the expression ‘self-interest’, which has a complicated history, and within the moral structure of modern life refers not to the moral vice of selfishness but to the *duty* which an individualist society imposes upon its members to be self-moving and to avoid becoming a burden on others for their needs and resources. For some people, of course, this is impossible, and for many reasons, but unless most people were capable of behaving in this kind of self-interested way, modern societies would change into something different. Self-interest, of course, in no way excludes or conflicts with our duties to be considerate and helpful to our neighbour and to others with whom we come in contact. Indeed, unless we are independently self-moving we can be of little use to them.

Can we argue that any one of the four forms of association is more fundamental than the others? This is perhaps the founding question of modern political philosophy. The more profound thinkers such as Hobbes and Hegel, in their very different ways, insist that the state is fundamental as the condition of all else. It was against this view that Karl Marx revolted, in making economics the determiner of the course of politics, and in absorbing everything into an extended sense of the term ‘society’. It was Marx who most spectacularly explored one intellectually irresistible possibility arising from the grid we have described: namely, the idea that one or other of these associations *determines* the others. ‘The mode of production of material life’, wrote Marx in 1859, ‘determines the social, political and intellectual life process in general.’ He went on to claim that the material transformation of the economic conditions of production ‘can be determined with the precision of natural science’. The search for this knowledge, if it exists, has been the philosopher’s stone of modern social science, and we are nowhere nearer finding it. Some sceptics believe it is not there to be found.

A certain unreality haunts those political activists who argue that some other form of association is more fundamental than the state. This results from the paradox that what they actually seek is the power of the state in order to embark on a programme of social, or cultural, or economic transformation of the very spheres which their theory proclaims to be more fundamental than the state itself. If the superficial can determine the fundamental, something goes awry with our theory. The paradox finds its practical expression in such events as communists creating absolute power instead of abolishing the state they purport to regard as a mere façade, or African nationalists speaking on behalf of non-existent nations in order to become the government which will impose the cultural uniformity that actually *creates* the nation on whose behalf they purported to act

in the first place.

All of these strange endeavours respond to a nostalgic yearning for the return of the unified body politic from which the modern state emerged. Classical republicans resented Christianity because it divided allegiance between secular and civil authorities, socialists thought that we were all torn apart between the individualistic imperatives of the workplace and communal allegiance to the state, nationalists that our cultural identity had been muddled by the oppression of alien rulers, and so on. The concept of alienation is one influential diagnosis of what ails us, and a great deal of modern politics is the doomed attempt to put Humpty Dumpty together again.

Chapter 8

The Experience of Politics:

I. How to be an Activist

Those who study politics are called political scientists, and we must presently consider politics as a science. First, however, we must look to what it is that scientists have to study: namely, the actual experience of engaging in politics.

This experience is sometimes compared to theatre. Politicians and actors certainly belong to related tribes. Much of the architecture of public life recalls the Classical inspiration of the Roman forum, especially that of Washington. In London, the Houses of Parliament, rebuilt in the middle of the nineteenth century, have been appropriately described as ‘a basically classical structure with neo-Gothic detail’. The architecture of the Kremlin and its communist embellishments reflect the remoteness and grandiosity of despotism. French public architecture is imperial in its grandeur. That the British prime minister lives in a more or less ordinary house in a more or less ordinary street reveals something of the studied casualness of British public life.

These are the national theatres of politics, but most political drama, even in a televisual age, takes place in local and regional offices, in dusty halls and on windy street corners where electors can be harangued. Politics has its own logistics: it requires agents, premises, contacts with printers, a pool of supporters, money, and generally, as the condition of all these things, an established political party. The rich and famous are sometimes inclined to start a party from scratch, but it is a difficult option. The typical route taken by the ambitious politician is from the periphery to the centre, and each step of the way resembles a game of snakes and ladders.

The politician needs, for a start, the same kind of knowledge as the concerned citizen; just more of it. What American politician could move a step without a close knowledge of the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and many of the decisions of the Supreme Court? Knowledge of history is indispensable, supplying a range of memories,

references, and metaphors without which political talk is unintelligible. From the War of Independence, through the Civil War, to the very songs and slogans of the American past, the politician must be able to pick up the references, many of them highly local, which constitute the culture of those whom he seeks to represent. He must know how the Senate and Congress work in detail, not to mention the way in which the states relate to them. Much of this is low-level, slightly tedious, descriptive material, but without it the politician's understanding hardly rises above gossip.

Traditions of politics vary greatly. In beginning by contrasting politics with despotism, we have already suggested that there is an immense gulf dividing the possible ways of ordering a society. The very idea of what a human being is, and what is due to men, and especially to women, will in many countries be remote from what is believed by the average reader of this book. A tradition is something 'handed down' from one generation to another, and (perhaps re-described as 'political culture') must be the central object of understanding in any political system. It is composed of many strands, and what people say about the state may give very little sense of the reality of politics. A population long accustomed to being exploited by tax collectors, for example, has an attitude to the census, to governmental forms, and the rhetoric of leaders quite different from that which used to be found in European liberal democracies. In some traditions, people are sanguine about what can be changed, in others cynical and fatalistic. The very language in which the thoughts and sentiments pass down over the generations reveals a conceptual structure which affects political possibility. All languages have some analogue for 'justice', for example, but there are many variations on this broad theme – such as the idea of fairness – which can only be imported from other languages. Even European languages which are culturally similar to English do not yield a genuine translation of the subtitle – *Justice as Fairness* – of John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*. Again, the Chinese character for 'freedom' connotes slipperiness and egoism rather than the courage and independence with which Europeans associate the term.

Most political knowledge generalizes experience. The politician cannot help but learn a great deal from the past, and especially from exemplary heroes and villains. Machiavelli recommended a close attention to the great deeds of ancient Rome, but modern history is not a whit less fertile in suggestive examples, and certainly much more revealing about our own political traditions. A British politician, for example, must know something of Magna Carta, Roundhead and Cavalier, Whig and Tory, the Reform Bills of the nineteenth century, the contrasting political styles of prime ministers such as Melbourne, Peel, Disraeli, Gladstone, Churchill, Attlee, and Wilson, not to mention the events of the twentieth century. Much of this will be legend, and what is heroic to some will be deplorable to others. A Labour politician might regard Ramsay MacDonald's formation of the National Government in 1931 as an act of treason to the

party; a Conservative would treat the event quite differently, and would certainly see it as less important. Politicians train for the real world by endless talk about past landmarks and present possibilities, and they do so in a special language of their own. Thus 'appeasement' is no longer in politics the name of a type of response to someone's discontent, but refers to a dispute about foreign policy in the 1930s. For several decades after the Second World War it denoted an episode of shame and cowardice. Then came revision, an attack on the reputation of Churchill, the great critic of appeasement, and the argument that Britain's lone stand against Hitler in 1940 had merely delivered her into the hands of the rising empires of the USA and the USSR. It is very seldom that events stand still for long, and the paradox is that the past is nearly as opaque as the future.

For the aspiring politician in a country such as France, the past hangs more heavily than it commonly has in Anglo-Saxon countries. The French Revolution split France profoundly, largely along religious and secular lines, and the Nazi occupation left memories which determined political allegiances for the rest of the century. Irish politics has been similarly haunted by memory. The United States has, in general, been more fortunate, though the legacy of the Civil War has been bitter.

Since politics is talk, political skill requires wit, and politicians are remembered for their phrases. Winston Churchill is remembered both for the speeches which articulated 'the lion's roar' during the Second World War and for a string of witticisms, some of them malicious, like his description of Clement Attlee as 'a sheep in sheep's clothing'. Lincoln's political success came from his wisdom, but it is hard to imagine his political skill without his dazzling capacity for oratory. These men all belong, of course, to a vanished time when citizens attended like connoisseurs to long and complicated political speeches. Gladstone once took four hours to introduce his budget to the House of Commons – fortified, it is said, with raw eggs and sherry. That culture has been destroyed by the trivializing effect of radio and television, which provide such abundant distraction for the mind that politics must be fitted into a much smaller space: the 'sound-bite'. The sound-bite belongs to the simplified world of the slogan and the banner, but this does not diminish the need of the politician for the phrasemaker.

In modern democracies, a politician is a spokesman for some broadly based opinion, and what he or she hopes to become is the holder of an office. *Spokesmanship* and *office* are the polarities within which the men and women who go in for politics must live, and each reveals much about politics.

Spokesmanship is representation, and modern government must be conducted by representatives rather than by the citizens themselves because legislative enactments, often some hundreds of pages long, are too complicated to be mastered without unusual skill and attention. But the representative function of the politician begins long before policies emerge. It is the skill of constructing a position which will appeal to many

people because it can harmonize conflicting desires. The superficial critic of politicians can see the vagueness and indeterminacy which are certainly often necessary for this, but generally fails to appreciate the trick of finding some essence of an issue that can unite different opinions. A skilful politician resembles a magician in his capacity to set an object before the mind of one audience, while keeping it invisible to others, sometimes in the same hall. Simpleminded rationalists sometimes stigmatize this characteristic of politicians as nothing but support-seeking duplicity, and journalists have taken to ‘decoding’ their speeches and disclosing the supposed ‘message’ behind the words. Better understood, this technique is the tact which allows people with very different judgements and preferences to live together in one society; where it fails – as, for example, in the difficulty Canadian politicians have had in projecting a ‘Canada’ that would accommodate Francophone and Anglophone opinion – then society moves to the brink of dissolution. American politicians finessed the division over slavery for as long as they could, for they suspected that the real alternative was civil war, and they were right.

Constrained by his representative function, the politician is further circumscribed by the responsibilities of his *office*. The raw brutalities of power are largely converted into the suavities of authority, and it is important to distinguish these two phenomena. The outsider is often impressed by the power of those who hold important positions in the state, but power, while attractive as a kind of melodrama, is mostly exaggerated. The office of a prime minister or president is constitutionally limited, and idealists quickly find that their capacity to improve the world requires whole streams of concessions they would prefer not to make. As Harry S. Truman remarked: ‘About the biggest power the President has is the power to persuade people to do what they ought to do without having to be persuaded.’ The power of an office is merely the skill by which a ruler can use his authority to get the right things done. Otherwise, when people talk of ‘power’ they merely mean the pleasure an office-holder may get from a purely personal exercise of will, which is basically a trivial thing. Most trivial of all is the pleasure in being the constant focus of attention in public places, and the capacity to please – but also to frustrate – the ambitious people by whom the politician is surrounded. It can no doubt be exploited for illicit purposes. President Kennedy notoriously used his prestige as president to induce large numbers of women to sleep with him, though since he was also handsome and rich, he hardly needed presidential prestige for that. It may be that, like the kinds of political groupie the Hungarian writer Arthur Koestler talked about, some of them ‘wanted to sleep with history’. Such power is not a thing possessed by the power-holder, but a moral relationship between the power-holder and the person over whom the power is supposedly exercised. Where it is a form of corruption, it involves the corruption of both parties.

The fact that persuasion lies at the heart of politics has one central implication: the

reasons a politician decides upon a policy are categorically distinct from the reasons by which he publicly defends it. The two sets of reasons may overlap, or they may not, but in neither case need we conclude that politics is a cynical business. The reason lies in what we may call the *dimensions* of a political act. One such dimension concerns the practicality of the act in question. Will it have the desirable effects expected of it? What are its costs, and possible longer-term consequences? For the government to guarantee everyone an old-age pension, for example, will certainly alleviate hardship, but it will also have economic consequences because the incentives to thrift and saving will diminish, and that will affect the economy. The real test is the long term. As the nineteenth-century journalist Walter Bagehot observed, one cannot judge the consequences of any reform until the generation in which it was passed has left the scene.

A second dimension: what is the consequence of pursuing this particular *type* of policy? It will infallibly become a precedent used in arguing for further policies of the same type. If it fails, there may be demands that the policy be pursued even further, rather than abandoned. When central direction of some economic activity produces anomalies, for example, the typical demand is that further central direction should be invoked to deal with the anomalies. Another dimension: what effect will this policy have on the short- and long-term prospects of its promoter? The promoter here is both the individual and the party legislating the policy. The Welfare State, for example, created in Britain after 1945, diffused benefits widely over the electorate, and its short-term effects might therefore have been to increase support for the Labour Party which carried it out. In the event, this did not happen – Labour lost the 1951 election. More seriously still, some welfare measures of the period have been thought to have ‘gentrified’ the working class and detached them from the Labour Party. As politicians sometimes say, nothing fails like success.

A typical form of cynicism revolves around concepts such as the ‘public interest’ or the ‘common good’. It is easy to discredit such terms by pointing out that nearly every act of government will have both good and bad consequences for different sets of people. But it is to mistake the meaning of public interest to think it can be judged in terms of individual costs and benefits. Ideas of this kind are formal terms of political argument whose specific meaning can only emerge from the public debate itself. They are the necessary formal conditions of any political advocacy. It would be absurd for a politician to say: ‘I want to do this because it is good for *me*.’ Such a line would provide no reason why anyone else should do it. No doubt there is a vague sense in which everything any politician advocates is the best thing for him in the circumstances, but this does not at all mean that he is a hypocrite out for nothing else but personal benefit. There is plenty of self-serving conduct in politics, though it is reasonable to think that politicians are generally more rather than less public-spirited than the rest of us. That

may not be much, of course, but it is something.

None of this is to deny the lowness of much of politics. A certain craftiness is essential. To know, for example, the rule whereby when votes are equal in a committee, the motion is lost, tells the crafty politician whether to frame a precarious motion in negative or in positive terms. For if, opposing the policy, he frames it in positive terms, and the vote is tied, then the motion is lost and he gets what he wants. In the 1994 Euro-elections in Britain, one candidate got thousands of votes from an unsophisticated electorate by calling himself the 'literal' (rather than liberal) democratic candidate. To have a name beginning with the early letters of the alphabet gives a candidate a slight but measurable advantage from the dimness of some citizens who simply fill in the ballot-paper from the top down. And no one called 'Kennedy' can fail to pick up extra votes in many American states. The main delinquencies of politicians, however, arise from highly prevalent human vices: cowardice in failing to challenge the fashionable opinion which the politician senses is wrong, fear of being thought stupid, desire to take up a virtuous-seeming posture, a preference for the comfortable option when the politician knows that the chickens will come home to roost some time after he has left the scene, and so on.

Politicians form a kind of club, sharing a culture in liberal democracies which cuts across party divisions. Friendships, for example, are often warmer *across* parties than within them. Certain ideas are always dominant in this culture, and some of these ideas may run counter to the opinions (known here as prejudices) of the people at large. In recent times, capital punishment, multiculturalism, and international idealism are examples of this class of idea, and politicians sometimes confuse them with the quite different thing called principle. The significance of this fact is that in certain respects politicians as a class constitute an oligarchy whose tendency is at odds with that of the population it rules. This oligarchic tendency is even more pronounced in countries whose electoral system requires voters to support party lists. When the gap between what politicians admire and what the people want widens, the general stock of politicians goes down, and they are recognized less as representing than as trying to hoodwink the people. The familiar ambiguities of politics become explicit sophistry. This is, of course, a dangerous situation in which opportunities for demagogues multiply.

The politician facing the question: how may my policy be commended to my audience? will think more of his audience than of his own introspections. Sometimes that audience will be colleagues, sometimes his own party, and sometimes the electorate as a whole. We may assume that he is persuaded of its wisdom, but the reasons which seem decisive to him may well not be decisive to others. The problem of persuasion is to find the reasons that will be decisive to the audience. In doing that, the politician must take off from whatever common ground he shares with them. The first act in persuasion

is for the persuader to convince his audience of his fellow-feeling with their broad aims, and only then can he commend his own policy as something fitting in with those aims.

What this account of persuasion suggests is that the politician must be a special type of person, one capable of keeping his deepest convictions to himself. The rest of us can shoot off our mouths to our hearts' content, indulging in that massive new pleasure the modern world has invented, being opinionated about matters on which we are ignorant. The politician must generally consider the effect of his opinions on his likely future, and requires a special kind of personality structure. But it should not be concluded from this that a politician is simply a hypocrite. Such a person is engaged in a high-risk occupation in which he must always be looking to future developments. Opportunism is certainly part of the talent, but unless the politician has genuine convictions – both moral convictions, and convictions about how things are likely to move – he will lack the clear profile which is usually necessary for the greatest success. Statesmen – the highest grade of politician – are those who can balance inner conviction with the talent of turning every opportunity to advantage. Charles de Gaulle called for resistance to Germany from London in 1940, and withdrew from French politics in 1946, taking risks in both cases which could have doomed him to obloquy and insignificance. Churchill's stand against appeasement in the 1930s might have been a mere swansong to a moderately successful career. A Barry Goldwater who took disastrous risks in bidding for the presidency in 1964 turned out to be preparing the soil for the Reagan victory of 1980. The secret of politics is to care about success, but not too much.

Chapter 9 The Experience of Politics: II. Parties and Doctrines

Participating in liberal democratic politics means joining or supporting a political party. It means taking sides about some central political issues.

W. S. Gilbert got it bang to rights when he wrote in *lolanthe*:

*I often think it's comical
How nature always does contrive
That every boy and every gal
That's born into the world alive
Is either a little Liberal,
Or else a little Conservative!*

Gilbert was talking about nineteenth-century Britain, of course; in other countries

the names and the emphases would be different. American Democrats and Republicans are perhaps not as distinct personalities as Liberal and Conservative, and twentieth-century Britain would require attention to the Labour Party. Further, we must remember that the actual names of political parties are opportunistic: mere names, not descriptions of doctrine. Republicans are no less democratic than Democrats, and Democrats just as republican. But Gilbert was right in thinking that in modern politics liberal and conservative tendencies are basic, and also that everything tends to reduce to two.

Certainly not one. Political scientists long accepted the terminology of 'the one-party state', but only because they were confused. The very word 'party' implies that there must be another party of the same basic kind. The essence of politics is debate, and there must be something to debate *with*. A party that monopolizes power and talks only to itself, like the ruling communist parties of the twentieth century, can only be totalitarian, which is to say despotic, and therefore quite distinct from politics. In every liberal democratic state, then, there will generally be two dominant parties, with several others on the margins of political power, not to mention a host of political sects which sometimes compete at elections. This sketch of the opinionative reality of a modern state needs to be completed by recognizing that parties are closely connected with a miscellany of pressure-groups, interest groups, vocational organizations, public relations firms, lobbyists, churches, and any other body which from time to time feels the need to influence the decisions of an increasingly ubiquitous state.

Parties seek to win elections, but this does not quite mean to 'capture the power of the state'. Indeed, it happens just as much that the state captures *them*. Policies that sound impressive in electoral rhetoric can turn out to be invitations to disaster once the incoming ministers discover their implications. The experience of government tends to mitigate the noisy contrasts of political debate, for government is a limited and responsible business while democratic politics is a game in which teams vie for victory. Risks must be taken, there are winners and losers, favoured candidates lose the race to rivals whom no one had taken seriously before, and all this constitutes a spectacle which inspires and enlivens partisans. As Edmund Burke expressed the benefits of competition in politics: 'He that wrestles with us strengthens our nerves and sharpens our skill. Our antagonist is our helper.' The basic constitutional point is that the electorate can 'throw the rascals out'.

Gilbert thought that political partisanship was innate, and there may indeed be some universal disposition which supports political tendencies. The American philosopher William James suggested that human beings are either tough-minded or tender-minded, and some have thought socialists, with their talk of compassion, to be tenderminded, while conservatives, who these days tend to support the free market, are tough-minded. This is not a view which will long survive a close inspection of contemporary political leaders.

Sometimes the complexity of parties is identified with the abstract issue of promoting or resisting change. Changes may, of course, be good or bad according to judgement, but conservatives have a generalized disposition to dislike change as such, while liberals welcome it. This distinction in turn is sometimes given a biological basis: the young are eager for change, but grow more conservative as they age. Certainly it is true that the young are significantly different in politics, being given to investing their boundless enthusiasm in ideas of social transformation – as did the Young Turks, the Bolsheviks, Mussolini's Fascists, Hitler's Nazis, and the youthful enthusiasts of the 1960s. This is not, on the face of it, a reason for encouraging the political engagement of the young!

Alternatively, parties may be identified with interests, so that the rich are conservative while the poor are liberal or socialist. The modern version of this classical understanding of politics derives from the Marxist idea that modern states are the arenas of a concealed war between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. The idea suffers from two major disadvantages. The first is that in a war, one side seeks the total defeat of the other, whereas political debate, being a form of sport, is a type of competition in which each side *needs* the other. Just as you cannot play football without a competing team, so you cannot engage in politics without competing parties. The idea of the class war is therefore a covert way of recommending an end to politics and its replacement by leaders who will bring about the one true community. The second disadvantage of the idea that political parties merely reflect interests is that very significant numbers of workers vote for conservative parties while many rich and middle-class people espouse radical programmes, including the redistribution of wealth in the name of equality. Political scientists who start off with this idea have spent a lot of fruitless time scratching their heads over such phenomena as the blue-collar Republican or the Tory working man. The reality is that politics is about persuasion, and no brute fact about voters reliably tells us how they will think or act.

These ideas all help to illuminate aspects of a complex and shifting scene, and they mitigate what is the most plausible error in the understanding of parties: namely, to identify them with doctrines, sometimes called ideologies. Principles and programmes are important in politics, but both are trumped by circumstance. The problem is that circumstances are so infinitely various that the student of politics is forced to attend to doctrines which at least have some degree of intellectual coherence. In many cases, doctrine is almost the only guide we have as to how policy is moving; in any case, it has an intellectual attraction of its own which makes it worth study, however clear one must always be about its limited role in the actual exercise of authority.

The reader will have noticed that we have so far recognized liberalism and conservatism, but given only glancing mention to socialism, in some respects the official doctrine of left-wing parties in modern politics. In disentangling this area, only

the most delicate footwork will do, and part of the argument will be incomplete until we deal with ideologies in a later chapter. Let us deal with the matter narratively, and base ourselves on British experience, which has been widely copied.

While division into party or faction has always been found in politics, and Cavalier fought Roundhead in the middle of the seventeenth century, the first recognizable political parties in England were the Whigs and Tories, who distinguished each other as enemies in 1679 over the bill to exclude James, Duke of York, from the throne because he was a Roman Catholic. Tories tended to believe in order and obedience, while Whigs, an aristocratic faction, based politics on the consent of a limited electorate as expressed in the institution of Parliament. Success in English politics over the next century nevertheless still depended largely on royal favour, and it was long before parties became respectable, and the institution of an opposition an integral part of the constitution.

The philosopher of the Whigs was John Locke, whose doctrines that government must rest on the consent of the governed, and that men have a natural right to life, liberty, and property are the basis of one version of liberalism. They were brilliantly echoed in the American Declaration of Independence of 1776, which talks of the inalienable right to 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness'. Here, then, was a doctrine which challenged the inherited traditional ways, and appealed to the disposition to reform both politics and society. The claim to be free from whatever restraints cannot meet the test of reason may plausibly be seen as the claim which has built the modern world, and for this reason the term 'liberalism' has acquired two meanings: first, as a specific political tendency in modern politics to be contrasted with conservatism and other doctrines; and second, as the archetypical attitude to which *all* modern European politics belongs.

The actual name liberalism only came into currency in the 1830s, the decade of political naming, in which socialism and conservatism also acquired their present names. But already by this time British politics had bifurcated in response to the defining event of modern politics. That grand question was how to understand what began to happen in France in 1789. Charles James Fox, one of the leading Whigs, believed that the French were at last following the path England had taken back in 1688; his friend Edmund Burke thought that the French revolutionaries, deriving their destructive policies from the abstract principles of the Declaration of the Rights of Man, were a new and thoroughly bad phenomenon. They were abandoning tradition in order to subject France (and soon Europe) to the brutalities of an abstract blueprint which must, Burke believed, destroy humanity. Burke's response to the French Revolution anticipated all the arguments used in the West against communism. Both the French and the Russian version of utopianism ended by drenching their countries in blood. Burke had predicted that this would happen in France long before the first head rolled off the

guillotine.

Burke in effect founded conservatism by his diagnosis that liberalism as a political doctrine of reform found it hard to distinguish itself from doctrines of social transformation which, in their vain and destructive search for a perfect society, would destroy politics altogether. The basic arguments are brilliantly laid out in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790). What further entangled the understanding of politics with the confusions of despotism was the currency of the distinction between left and right. Originating as a metaphor based on the seating of factions in the French revolutionary assembly, left and right came to stand for revolution and reaction, two concepts which Burke and other exponents of politics would regard as equally unpolitical. According to Burke, politics is based, rather, on the concepts of preservation and reform, and it takes off not from abstract ideas of social perfection, but from the circumstances of the present.

What, then, of socialism? It arises from the fusion of two nineteenth-century phenomena: first, the idea that society is basically a factory whose products ought to be equally distributed among those who work in it, and second, the actual enfranchisement of the new class of industrial workers in the course of the century. Socialism finds its distinctiveness in its concern for the poor, and it seeks to legislate policies such as the redistribution of wealth and state provision of welfare which will equalize conditions of life. It is hostile to luxury and the idleness of the rich.

What is it that distinguishes socialism from liberalism and conservatism? As a doctrine of reform in a modern society, socialism would seem to have more in common with liberalism's bent for reform, and indeed in Britain the Labour Party rose under liberalism's wing and eventually replaced the Liberal Party as the self-declared party of reform. On the other hand, it was the Conservative Shaftesbury who introduced the Factory Acts in the 1840s, and conservative governments which after 1951 continued and extended Labour's Welfare State. When in 1985 British coal-miners went on strike against a Conservative government which wanted to make the mines economically efficient, the Labour Party had been supporting an essentially conservative policy of subsidy in order to preserve the mining villages.

This is a common situation. Parties steal each other's clothes and poach each other's supporters as part of the great game of politics, often with relatively little concern for doctrinal consistency. Liberals who used to stand for free trade became defenders of subsidy and protection with the so-called New Liberalism of the 1890s. Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government after 1979 was accused of betraying conservatism and espousing classical liberalism. Circumstances so change the colour of politics that what looks to a party like the right policy in some circumstances may look completely different a generation later. One of the most fascinating facts of modern politics is the failure of a successful socialist party to emerge in the United States. The Democratic

Party has, of course, adopted many of the policies that would be called 'socialist' in Europe, and 'liberal' as an American political term means something far closer to socialism than its European counterpart. For almost any justification of policies will be abstract, and in new circumstances, will commit a party to more than it really wants. When that happens, policy or doctrine (and sometimes both) will have to be adjusted.

In actual politics, the formula that liberals, broadly, favour reform, and conservatives stick with tradition, points us in the right direction, but no more. In any case, it leaves us with the problem of socialism. Is socialism a tendency no less profoundly entrenched in politics than liberalism and conservatism? Or is it a movement which, transcending the ups and downs of political life, aims at something much grander than politics: a permanently better society? The basic point, we may suggest, is that socialism may refer either to belief in a fully just society, or to a political tendency to favour egalitarian and redistributive reforms when possible. Whatever it might be like, a fully just society would need no serious politics; it would be one of those projects of perfection which we shall call ideologies and which we shall discuss presently. And this is what the term socialism commonly signifies, especially to its adherents. That is why it has acquired a genuinely political partner, often called social democracy, where the addition of democracy signifies the political commitment which recognizes that the state is an institution that must respond to the current tastes and desires of its members, and therefore that any conception of a finally perfect state is incompatible with the very activity of politics itself.

Chapter 10

The Experience of Politics

III. Justice, Freedom, and Democracy

Politics, being largely talk, must dramatize itself. A king is in some sense just one human being among others. Civil order in a monarchy requires that we *dramatize* what it is to be a king, and this is the point of crowns, thrones, sceptres, guards of honour, regalia, and other symbols, some of which are used by the prime ministers and presidents of our own egalitarian times. Most political expression is metaphorical. The state, we saw, was a *body politic*. We may now consider it as a ship. The ship metaphor lies behind the very word 'government' which comes from the medieval Latin *gubernaculum*, a rudder. Politics is the art of navigating the ship of state. By what signs should the steersman steer?

The obvious answer is: he should be guided by *ideals*, distant beacons of excellence at which we should all aim. Ideals are often the concepts by which political parties identify themselves. Conservatives, for example, owe a general allegiance to tradition, liberals to freedom, socialists to equality. But the supreme navigational tool of politics,

trumping even these, is the thing called 'justice' which in the first masterpiece of political philosophy, Plato's *Republic*, was the regulative virtue which determined the place of all the other virtues. The actual word justice comes from the Latin *ius*, which covers both law and right. In his famous dialogue, Plato began by showing that justice meant giving every person his due, but went on to demonstrate that this formula meant nothing until one could explain what was due (or owing) to people. This required nothing less than sketching the entire structure of a *polis*. It turned out that justice on Plato's view was fitting people into the place in the state for which their natures equipped them. Rulers were thus revealed as philosophers, for only philosophers possessed a rational understanding of human nature. The basic principle was complementarity. Workers, warriors, and philosopher-rulers must each stick to their own tasks.

Plato's republic is sometimes taken to be a utopia, that is, a picture of some ideal condition, but this is a mistake. For one thing, desires differ, and there is no reason why I should find your desires admirable, or you mine. What is merely desired has no intellectual force, whereas what is *desirable* moves the argument on to an objective plane beyond desire. More profoundly, however, justice is an ideal, and nothing in the complex real world in which we live can actually *be* an ideal. In navigational terms, justice is a star to steer by, and when you steer by a star you don't aim to arrive there. This point is sometimes made by saying that justice is a normative concept, which means that we ought to take our bearings from it. To say that justice requires a certain policy, or that some existing situation is unjust, is to propose action. When we talk about justice, then, we might be describing an ideal, sketching a utopia, stating a grievance, or advancing some policy, or indeed doing a variety of other things. The essential thing about justice and other ideals is that they function in many different ways, and it is important always to ask in any particular case which function is being performed.

Is it just, for example, that the right to vote should be limited to people with property, or to adult males? Is it just that one nation should be ruled by another? Is it just that the state's religion should be enforced on everyone? These questions have been passionately debated in terms of justice, and different answers have been given in different generations. It is obvious, then, that the content of justice will at least to some extent depend on current opinion. It happens that most people will have a clear answer to each of the questions I have used in illustration, and will therefore be tempted to think that human beings move steadily from narrower to broader and more defensible ideas of justice as time goes by. This is one of our most satisfying illusions. All that experience actually seems to demonstrate is that each generation is pleased to discern that it has at last arrived at decently absolute moral and political judgements.

However democratic a state's constitution may be, for example, the participation of

its citizens goes up and down according to nothing more profound than circumstances. The citizens of Classical times participated in politics more than those in the Middle Ages; and the citizens of Italian cities early in the Middle Ages more than those in the later period. Things swing back and forth. Recent generations have tended to make an absolute out of the belief that moral standards are relative and all cultures are equal, fondly imagining that this, at last, is the wisdom of the ages.

Politics is endless public disagreement about what justice requires. Aristotle taught that instability in constitutions is caused by the passion for equality, and went on to characterize justice as a state in which honour and office are distributed according to the contribution different groups make to the welfare of the *polis*. Numbers, wealth, and merit must all find a place, and a true polity would include both democratic and oligarchic elements. Here the philosopher is merely telling us what justice is. He is not giving advice on how to achieve it, and his formula would hardly be of much use if he were. And that reveals to us yet another way in which an idea like justice can function: it can supply a philosophical explanation of what we already know. For there is one great defect of the navigational metaphor we have been using: it suggests that justice is to be found in some place we have not yet reached. This is quite wrong. We already know what justice is, and our societies already are, in certain basic ways, just. If this were not so, we could not recognize it. Justice is, in other words, not merely something ahead of us and useful in navigating; it is also something behind us which tells us both what we are and where we have come from.

That is why political life is full of people demanding justice on some point or other. With new ideas or changed circumstances, conditions which previously seemed natural come to provoke demands for reform, and justice is the formula for demanding reform. In that rhetorical role, the term can be cheapened and trivialized. Available to everybody with a demand or a grievance, it can focus passions which lead to a descent into civil disorder. Whole societies can collapse into civil war because two sides whistle up the idea of justice to support their contentions. It happened in the United States in 1860, and Hobbes thought it caused the English civil war. He therefore followed another philosophical tradition, which plays down justice as the basis of order and insists that the real issue is peace. Assigning the absolute responsibility for deciding what is just to the sovereign, Hobbes described the just man, with brutal formality, as '*he that in his actions observeth the laws of his country*', thus denying the validity of people consulting their consciences in order to discover some higher justice in conflict with current public policy. It is not that philosophers such as Hobbes did not care about justice, or conscience. 'What are kingdoms without justice, but great robberies?' asked St Augustine, for whom earthly justice could be nothing better than a pale imitation of heaven. It was simply that they thought of justice as inflammable material ignitable by the sparks of passion, and therefore best kept under philosophical lock and key.

The way in which ideals function in political talk may be illustrated by the ideal which we may call indifferently either *liberty*, after the Roman god Liber, a version of Dionysus, or *freedom* after the Germanic term meaning those, dear to the head of the household, who were not slaves. Freedom functions above all as a term of self-identification: identifying, for example, classes of people who do not have a master, and sometimes republican constitutions without monarchical authority. Its broadest meaning distinguishes those ruled politically from those ruled despotically, and it was this meaning to which the West appealed in calling itself 'the free world' as against the despotic rule of communist parties in Russia and elsewhere. Here, then, we have an ideal term towards which we do not need to navigate because (as with justice) we have it already. Our task, rather, is to keep in good repair what we already have.

The most obvious way to construe freedom is negatively: it means not being restrained. In political contexts, this means not having to live one's life under a ruler who has arbitrary powers. It is an easy sophism, however, to argue that if freedom means not being restrained, and if I am, as it were, restrained from doing what I want by lack of money, then poverty is unfreedom. In this way, the term 'freedom' can slip into 'power' and we are well launched on the road towards positing some benign despot who will abolish poverty and equalize our power. Again, Hobbes was no less suspicious of freedom than he was of justice, and he defined it very carefully as 'the silence of the law'. One was free, that is to say, where no constraining legal rule obliged one to conform. The more familiar European tradition, however, has been to define freedom as the condition of living under the rule of law, by contrast with subjection to arbitrary command. Yet even this sensible view conceals possible problems. If freedom is nothing else but the absence of restraint, then how can we be free at the point where a law restrains us from doing what we want? This was the view taken by Hobbes, and his follower Jeremy Bentham, but the point at issue requires us to realize that a law (by contrast with a command) is purely abstract and leaves the discretion unfettered. Most people, for example, are not powerfully constrained by sanctions against solving one's problems by murder. They grow up instinctively excluding it as an acceptable option.

As they cruise life's boundless and bottomless sea, the passengers on the ship of a particular state might well decide that they want to steam towards something they do not yet enjoy, or enjoy but imperfectly. Such a decision assumes that all can enjoy the ideals that attract them.

This is a profound mistake. The reality is that our character and our culture at a given time limit what is possible for us; only certain sorts of people can enjoy certain sorts of ideals. Criminals, for example, are not very good at justice, though they often have remarkable capacities for honour. Again, the Western ideal of freedom is irresistibly attractive to many in other civilizations, but depends on forms of self-control which are not easily acquired. Reckless and visionary theorists have persuaded many to

discern a destination adjacent to freedom called 'liberation' and it has induced excitable passengers on leaky ships of state to agree to violent changes of direction. Some have foundered, and not surprisingly, because as Rousseau and others have pointed out, when slaves revolt, they will not create a free society, but merely change their masters. The paradox of freedom is the fact that it can *only* be a possession we already have. As an ideal to navigate by, it must always be an illusion.

The ideal of democracy has many features similar to that of liberty. Beginning life as a humble constitutional term, it has grown so big that it threatens to take over the territories of both freedom and justice. It is easy to illustrate the simpler ways in which democracy might do this: no one can be free, Rousseau argued, who does not participate in making the laws under which he lives. Rousseau himself was too sensitive a philosopher to move directly from this proposition to the idea that only democracies are free (he thought democracy a constitution requiring gods to work it), but many others have. There are many ways in which democracy might digest justice, though the idea that only democracies are just would have the implausible implication that all but a tiny handful of societies in history have been unjust.

Democracy supremely illustrates the way in which political ideals have in the modern world expanded beyond the arena of the state and been set up as criteria of value in those other associations which (as we saw in Chapter 6) constitute modern life. A democratic *society*, for example, might be thought a contradiction in terms, but has come to mean a society in which everyone leads the same kind of life and disposes of similar resources. A democratic *culture* is one liberated from élitist standards of what constitutes beauty. Sometimes there is even talk of democratizing the *economy*, which generally means turning factories into worker cooperatives. Even manners can be democratic, and democracy was the term the French historian Alexis de Tocqueville used to describe the American society which he thought would supersede the aristocratic customs of Europe.

The societies in which Westerners currently live are all in basic ways just, free, and democratic. These terms, when elaborated by philosophers, plausibly describe our philosophical foundations. But each of these terms can be refined by philosophers and rhetoricians (each in a different way) so as to shimmer before us not as customs and conditions we already enjoy, but as new directions we might take. They turn into social justice, liberation, and real or strong democracy, and guide our strivings. One type of politics is, then, navigation by ideals. The problem is, of course, that you can only steer by one star, not by several scattered over the heavens. That means that those who promote the claims of one star rather than another must show that it is the one star which will lead to the satisfaction of *all* our strivings. But since many of our strivings are mutually contradictory, we must give up either some of our strivings or some of these destinations. And that is why the direction of politics must always be an outcome

of changing judgements about conflicting desirabilities. Ideals are important in politics, but in the end realities must determine where we go, and how fast we travel.