

# *The Commitments of Political Education*

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A FOURTEEN YEAR OLD aborigine Australian undergoes his tribe's initiation ceremonies. He passes through a number of symbolic acts signifying death and regeneration, the beginning of a new life, but they also include instruction. The boy learns the names of the gods, the stories of creation, the ceremonies proper to an ordered life. "From initiation one learns the true theophany, the myth of tribal genealogy, the corpus of laws, moral and social, in a word, man's place in the cosmos." (M. Eliade, *Patterns of Comparative Religion*, 1963, p. 56.) Here we have a prime example of political education, consisting in ritual and also the communication of "knowledge, the global understanding of the world, the interpretation of the unity of nature, the revelation of the final causes underlying existence," all this aimed not so much at "satisfying the neophyte's thirst for knowledge, but primarily at consolidating his existence as a whole, promoting continuity of life and prosperity and assuring a happier life after death."

Let us now imagine an Athenian youth in the late fifth century B.C. His father, being able to afford the not inconsiderable tuition, has sent him to school with the famous Sophist Hippias. The boy is being instructed in mathematics, astronomy, music, as well as in grammar, rhetoric, and dialectic. Hippias makes him memorize copious facts and subjects him to severe drill in useful skills. There is no question here of "consolidating the neophyte's existence as a whole," since such questions as the order of being and the moral quality of man's entire life are slighted. Hippias has undertaken to sharpen the young man's wit and tongue, to furnish him with intellectual tools that would enable him, step by step, to climb the ladder of prestige, public office, power, and wealth, all the while making shrewd use of Athens' political institutions.

One day, however, the youth encounters Socrates who has come to Hippias' house to involve the famous Sophist in profound argument. The depths which Socrates' dis-

course opens to the boy's trembling wonder induce him from that day to "turn around," away from his self-seeking passions, toward the quest for truth and the love of the good. Socrates brings the young man to rational examination of the movements that he can experience in the depth of his soul, and thereby to an awareness of a public order congruous with the order of being itself. Not only Hippias' shallow instructions but also the boy's traditional lessons in Homer drop away from him like last year's skin from a snake. Not only his own life but also Athens as a whole become to him a problem of a "serious play." The truth which the young man is learning to discern in the depth of his own soul thus also turns into an ever-present critique of society. But Socrates' civil loyalty in life and death remind him at all times that a critique of society rooting in love of the divine ground never amounts to sedition and rebellion.

Skipping many centuries, let us now look over the shoulder of a young Russian intellectual of about a hundred years ago. At the university and in the rooms of his companion students, his feverish brain gulps down large doses of Helvétius, Holbach, Fourier, Hegel, Feuerbach, and Comte. Through this reading, his mind acquires the habit of dismissing the realities of his historical situation: Russia, Christianity, Europe. He begins by rejecting the past, then condemns all of the present civilization, and spins out shiny models of other realities which he deems possible, which according to his reading might have been or, given the appropriate effort, could be made to supersede all that now exists. As for the realities around him, they seem to him to amount to no more than a series of obstacles that still frustrate—but not for long, now!—the Promethean desire to create a new, wholly different world, one so much better than the one which men have so far

inhabited, a world without evil, limitations or distortions. The key to that world is, of course, political revolution. One could say that this young man's education moulds in him a political will not for, but against society.

A hundred years later, this same man's great-grandson emerges from a Soviet institution of higher learning. His training has prepared him to assume a carefully defined role in the Soviet's planned economy. Both before and during his university years, he has gone through years of indoctrination in such subjects as the history of the working class and the Communist Party, the Communist ideology, or the requirements of the "phase of transition" from capitalism to communism. When still in grade school, his imagination was properly oriented by stories of Soviet heroes, men and women who, disregarding injuries, handicaps, and every pain, gave their all to Soviet production. These heroes were prefigurations of the coming "new Soviet man," a novel creature for whom there is no good except the Party and its interests, who has wholly subordinated his person and his own good to the utility of the totalitarian movement that manages the country.

THESE FIVE INSTANCES might be looked upon as universal types, even though we have found them in diverse historical situations. Accordingly, we could then classify educational patterns as either instruction in the order-sustaining myths, or training for the clever pursuit of private utility, or attunement to the experienceable truth of being, or social critique in the name of a utopian "possible reality," or conditioning for a ruling sect's public utility. Should we call all five examples of "political education?" Suppose we were to deny that attribute to some of these types and vindicate it to others, would it follow that we should prefer the latter over the former? We are

now talking about political education as our subject, and one could begin by defining political education as the moulding of man to the requirements of a particular society. Such a definition might tell us something about what we should seek were we committed to political education, but it cannot commit us to political education as such. After all, we are familiar with societies in which the best find politics beneath their dignity and unworthy of their attention, who would say with Goethe:

*Ein garstig Lied. Pfiui, ein politisch Lied, Ein leidig Lied . . .*

(A nasty song! Fie! a political song—a most offensive song! . . .)

On this view of human life, education should begin where politics leave off. It was this educational ideal that Wilhelm von Humboldt preached to nineteenth century Germany, replacing political education with *Bildung*, "the highest and proportional unfolding of an individual's personal energies to a whole" (cf. Eric Voegelin, "Universität und Öffentlichkeit," *Wort und Wahrheit*, Vol. XXI, pp. 497-518). Such education is emphatically uncommitted to the form of political existence and substitutes a commitment to the idea of "science" conceived as something "not yet wholly attained and never to be wholly attained," instruction in which "science" is to constitute "the moral culture of the nation." Humboldt's idea of education that is indifferent to society and instead geared to an asocial person and an unpolitical "science," is characteristic of much of modern Western civilization, resulting in widespread political apathy. If we call this pattern unpolitical, we should attribute the same predicate to education that produces an attitude of alienation from society, even though that same education may aim at some kind of political action. Revolutionary action means the dissolution or destruc-

tion of political form and is the opposite of commitment to the form of political existence. Hans Buchheim (*Totalitarian Rule, its Nature and Characteristics*, Wesleyan Univ. Press, 1968, p. 89 ff.) argues that even the public rule of a totalitarian-minded group is apolitical since it is subversive of social norms and of the state, and hostile to the society's traditions, and considers itself "the germ cell of a new element within the old whole that has already lost its historic right to exist." On this showing we would have to call unpolitical the education through which a totalitarian movement conditions people to support it rather than the form and norms of their society.—Among the universal types, then, we find two that are political (instruction in the myth, and attunement to the order of being) and three unpolitical (education for private utility, revolutionary education, and education for the utility of a totalitarian movement).

Such taxonomic distinctions as such say nothing about whether it is good to have political education. That question usually is answered in terms of man's need for society and authority. One wonders, though, whether such an answer fits the problem. Let us look at our own political education, to the extent to which we still have one. In essence it does not differ from that of the Australian aborigines. In both cases teachers, in the name of the whole society, pass on to youngsters the assumptions on which the going social concern is predicated. In Australia, this teaching comes in the form of stories about gods, creation, and ceremonies. Our teachers, too, communicate myths, albeit in different form, by conveying assumptions about man, nature, morals, this country, its past and heroes, and other civilizations. They inculcate attitudes not only by words and music but also by ceremonies: the invocation, the pledge of allegiance, the respect shown to the flag and the country's military uniforms, reverence

for the Constitution, the ritual forms of democracy (Robert's Rules), deference to instituted authority, obligation to the laws. This teaching, and the corresponding pressures from a person's peers, result in Americans who are so committed to their country and its ways that they cannot do without its external paraphernalia when living abroad, even in another highly civilized country like, let us say, Italy. Thus one cannot answer the question whether man should have political education by answering in terms of a general need of man for society. There are some, of course, who deny even this general proposition. But should we agree on the abstract statement as such, we still would not have answered our question. For that question, surely, must be whether man is to be educated to the form of a particular society, to that society's "character," as Aristotle used the term. For there is no society other than the particular ones. We cannot make our approval of political education hinge on an abstract image of social perfection that has no historical actuality. If there is to be political education, we must expect it to have a content shaped by the underlying myths of the given historical society in which we live, and to be committed to sustain its character, institutional system, and practical limitations.

A statesman might possibly leave it at this point. Political scientists, however, cannot stop here, for they are committed to the truth of human order. The quest for truth must take us beyond the given historical society, beyond its constitution, beyond even such concepts as democracy. Beyond all contingencies we "are forced" (the term Plato used in the allegory of the Cave) to ascend to the unconditioned, the timeless, to probe for the ground of being. Plato's quest fastened on "the good," Aristotle's on "the best," Augustine's on the creator and redeemer God and the "tranquillity of or-

der" of all created things. Political science emerged in history as a disciplined inquiry into the unconditioned truth beyond public order, and apart from such an inquiry there could be no political science. For a mere description of the various parts of an institutional pattern and their way of fitting together surely does not rank the name and dignity of a science. Political scientists, therefore, could not settle for a political education that treated the contingent as if it were all there is and thereby perverted a historical particularity into an absolute, clothing society with the illegitimate mantle of divinity.

At this point, then, we move beyond the kind of political education that limits itself to the myth sustaining a particular society. By insisting that political education must also commit itself to absolute truth beyond and above historical givenness, we furnish each citizen with a yardstick of the source of order, available to him as a man rather than a citizen, knowledge rather than myth, accessible to the autonomous mind that experiences directly the participation of man in the divine ground of reality. Aristotle has taught us that political science must be double-pronged, concerning itself "with 1) what is best in the abstract but also with 2) that which is best relatively to circumstances." In the same way political education, ever since Plato, must embrace both the contingent and the absolute. That means that it has two commitments: to the character and the sustenance of a particular historical society as well as to the critique of that society in the light of transcendent truth.

We seem to have arrived at the *prima facie* assumption underlying reflective contemporary political education which, more than anything else, is education for social criticism. What gives us pause at this point, however, is that the above mentioned three types of apolitical education all are rooted

exclusively in social criticism. We must infer, not necessarily that all social criticism is incompatible with political education, but at least that there seems to be a kind of criticism which results in the loss of political substance and political education. Thus the nature of criticism itself becomes a problem, and we need critical standards by which to examine and judge criticism itself. Modern social criticism can be traced to Hobbes (according to Marx, he was "the father of us all") who introduced into political thought his method of "analysis," i.e. the taking asunder of a body into its component particles. The atomic particles which Hobbes obtained when he thus dissected the body social appeared to him as self-centered, self-seeking, asocial and apolitical individuals. Referring to them as the yardstick for political criteria he based his social critique on the requirements of separate and insular human atoms rather than on the *zoon politikon*. Education embracing the apolitical basic assumptions of Hobbes, or the subsequent ones of Locke, Adam Smith, Wilhelm von Humboldt, or John Stuart Mill would tend to bring up men who consider themselves above all private men rather than citizens. Thus a critique derived from asocial assumption cannot be compatible with political education. A different but yet similar effect results when criticism of society stems from the image of an order that never was, either the *ordre naturel* of the eighteenth century, or the future millennium of contemporary ideologies. One should emphatically include in this latter category Hegel, whose yardstick of absolute rationality in history belongs to the utopian possible realities rather than to real historical possibilities. The influences of both Hobbes and Hegel on education lead to nonhistorical thinking, because they envisage behind historical societies a transcending reality which is both world-immanent, human, contingent, and

yet apolitical and trans-historical. Hegel's absolute rationality is revealed in its non-political character by Marx whose absolute yardstick is the stateless society of the future. An education that takes its clues from this type of social critique will tend to dwell on apparently practical goods which are yet conceived without regard to the possibilities and limitations of given historical realities. One might call this an emphasis on the moral practical good inordinately excluding attention to existence, the kind of emphasis that characterizes Kant's *Perpetual Peace*.

The good, or "the best," however is only one of two prongs, the other one being actual historical existence, human organization for action in a particular place, at a particular time, and in a particular historical setting. The human situation is in the midst of historical contingencies, facing limited practical possibilities, an open future without certainty of the outcome, in the framework of a given set of people and institutions. No education can be political unless it takes the historicity of human existence seriously. It fails to take it seriously whenever it pretends to a knowledge of history as a whole, as if there were available to men a point above history from which a human mind could survey past, present, and future. Even when it avoids the pitfalls of totalitarian ideologies, education embracing history as a whole implicitly claims some certainty above the future and will try to prepare men for this alleged outcome of things. That, however, amounts to ignoring the entire problem of human action in history. I incline to be suspicious of all textbooks that indulge in sweeping generalizations on history, either by arranging it in a series of ages (the age "of faith," "of reason," "of machines") or in terms of process (evolution, progress, dialectic), or by attributing value to time ("advanced" or "progressive" = good, "backward" or "re-

actionary" = bad) to all of which I would oppose Ranke's dictum that every moment in history is immediately toward eternity. What I understand Ranke to say is that man's dwelling place is neither the past nor the future but the historical present, which is a dwelling place because in it and through it man, having to take contingent action, makes his decisions facing eternity, in the perspective of death.

As we have seen, the contingent and historical can never be the last word, in a situation in which philosophy has come to shape our consciousness and the Prophets of Israel our conscience. Historical decisions are taken not merely by the standards of traditions and existence, but also *sub specie aeternitatis*. The eagle eye that probes the depth of the soul or gauges the reach of divine purpose must always look beyond a historical position to the source of order in which any human actualization appears peace-meal. A critique of society in the light of transcendent truth is compatible with an education that takes seriously the human condition in the midst of historical contingencies. Nobody could be more realistic about historical givens than Augustine who also at all times was "making the movements of infinity." This phrase occurs in Kierkegaard's portrait of the "knight of faith" (*Fear and Trembling*) the man who lives in the here and now with unusual intensity because at every moment he also resigns from it all and turns to the Eternal. The concrete world of history and the transcendent absolute are fully compatible as long as man is aware of his standing "in between," the contingencies of change below and the eternal Absolute above. The only critique of society that will not destroy historicity is one that looks, from the point of given historical reality accepted as one's undeniable situation, to the timeless divine ground of being.

Most of today's political thought also measures society by transcendencies, but transcendencies explicitly conceived as denials of and substitutes for, the divine ground of being: Progress, History's Dialectic, the Class Struggle, the Economic Order, Race, Revolution, the Subconscious, the Autonomous Self. In one sense or another, such concepts seem to stand for something that transcends particular societies, and in this way they serve as absolutes to today's ideological thought. But as far as history is concerned, they are not above and beyond but within history, contingencies which some perverted thinker lifted from the stream of change and treated as if it were the source of order. We are told that the contingencies immediately surrounding us are to be judged and measured by contingencies somewhat more remote. Hence these are pseudo-transcendencies, falsely divinized moments of history or possibly even pseudo-history. History, however, cannot stand this divinization of any of its moments or aspects, and neither can nature. A social criticism based on pseudo-transcendencies results in the destruction of past and present, leaving only the dream of a future and the false cause of "liberation" by which the divinized contingency would be freed from all the other impediments of history. If we desire political education, we must realize that we can have it only as a combination of a commitment to the historically extant society combined with the openness to the transcendent absolute, and we must guard not only against the absolutization of the first commitment but also against the perversion of the second.

What about the tasks of the present moment? It is obvious that we are not called upon to face the problem of political education *ab ovo* but rather to look at our actual practices in this regard and decide

where to move from here. With much simplification, one may describe our situation in the following terms:

Much, indeed most of present-day political education still flows from our tradition and customs. It comes in the form of an unreflective patriotism and common sense value judgments of people whose world is still intact, whose sense of priorities remains untroubled, whose loyalties are unquestioning. Most of this type of education occurs in public schools where we can witness again and again the spectacle of sons and daughters of immigrants being turned into Americans in less than one generation. Some political education of this type is performed by the media, some by public leaders. The entire process is nothing but America handing down its sustaining myths to the young.

Over against this, we have a type of education governed by articulate premises and principles representing the critical mind, mostly nurtured on modern political ideologies. One may distinguish three varieties: 1. *Atomistic liberalism*, focusing on individualistic self-sufficiency and serving chiefly an apolitical notion of human life. As far as formal instruction is concerned, positivism is the chosen vehicle of this education. As positivism presents an "objective" realm of value-free facts, it hands to its devotees a reality that leaves the individual person and his important decisions all to himself, undisturbed by the outside world, and the world a mere set of obstacles to be circumnavigated. Positivism empties the political and legal sciences of their ontic and normative substance, reducing instruction to the discussion of natural causation. It also tends to do away with the concept of the state for which it substitutes process concepts centering on groups or elites.

2. *Moral progressivism*, focusing on the moral improvement of "mankind" conceived as a purely human achievement

which is also construed as the substance of history. It differs from traditional teachings about goodness in that it locates the problem of good and evil not in the human heart but in the arrangement of social institutions and thus teaches no doctrine of virtues but rather one of public reforms. In the light of this premise, all change is hailed as a movement toward the good. Formally speaking, moral progressivism claims no specific discipline as its own but manifests itself in the teaching of social ideals or, as we have come to call them recently, "dreams," the blueprints for social engineering. A typical example of such teaching is the film "Camelot" the plot of which turns on a political ideal that breaks down because it failed to reckon with human sinfulness, but the conclusion of which celebrates the impractical ideal for its own sake.

3. *Revolutionary nihilism*, indulging in sweeping and global judgments totally condemning the present society on the assumption that such total critique will eventually produce a new and better creation. In formal education, this tendency has manifested itself in a systematic policy of college educators critically to destroy all values with which students arrive, without replacing them by any new order. Another characteristic of this education is to translate every concrete complaint into a statement about a "wrong" or "sick" society. Before such radical negation, moral distinctions vanish: all laws appear unjust, all consciousness false, all relations corrupt, all institutions oppressive, and cynical alienation alone remains as a claimant to realism. So far, revolutionary nihilism has not spawned a type of formal instruction but now threatens to do so, if the Caucus for a New Political Science succeeds in introducing college courses serving chiefly to reinforce alienation and to develop the will to revolutionary destruction.

WHAT CAN WE DO, we who wish to dedicate ourselves to political education rather than the negation of society? Obviously, if we practice what we preach we would not resort to recipes of perfection but concentrate on certain steps that can be taken in the present situation. Without claiming any exclusive merit for them, I submit a few suggestions as a contribution to a debate:

Political education means among other things, education to the form of public order in which our historical existence is cast. The form of our civilization is certainly not identical with the state, as Frankfort's studies of Egyptian and Mesopotamian society have shown. All the same, *faute de mieux* political scientists might begin by restoring the concept of the state as a move toward a form concept, preferring the state concept to concepts of sociological process which now dominate many courses, both college and high school.

Another step would aim at rescuing the discussion of laws from either logical formalism or sociological naturalism. The consideration of laws should move in two di-

rections: consideration of the community of values that has historically grown in the form of American tradition, and consideration of the nature of things and of the good in the abstract, including emphatically the consideration of moral responsibility as a constituent of personal human freedom.

A third move might seek to avoid and eliminate sweeping judgments about society, as well as delusions about our power to "create a society." Society is not an object but a resultant of the lives of many free agents, and the claim that it is subject to total redesigning can result only in hideous totalitarianism.

Finally, we could promote the citizen's awareness that society is organization for action in history, which means that our public representatives must always choose between courses beset by many limitations and evils, courses none of which can be called wholly good and none wholly evil. All the same, as we are joined in a society, we jointly bear the responsibility for the results of our action, so that we should look upon our society as a charge rather than a utility.