

# MODERN AGE

A QUARTERLY REVIEW



## *What is the Purpose of Politics?*

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I SUPPOSE that if one were to ask the question, "What is the purpose of politics?" of Mayor Richard Daly (in one of his candid and relaxed moments), he would say, "The purpose of politics is to get elected," and if one were to ask that same question of Mr. John Dean, lately of the White House Staff, he would reply, "The purpose of politics is to get appointed." Now, however crass these answers may seem, they are not bad answers, for getting elected and getting appointed are political actions of great importance. They are not, however, the end or purpose of politics even though they have come to seem the very essence of political life. Politics for the general public increasingly means "something," or better said, a set of activities engaged in by politicians to their own great advantage and to the general disadvantage of the public. Politics for many is no longer viewed as the source of community and order in society and has come to be regarded as the preserve of professionals who have learned to make the system function to their benefit.

The state of mind which is frequently described as "political alienation" or more succinctly as "dropping out" derives at least in part from the feeling that politics is for politicians and that ordinary men and

women can have little or no effect on their political destinies. It is better, so many believe, to take refuge in a thoroughgoing cynicism and withdrawal from public life than to court the disillusionment which follows on the discovery of the political ineffectuality of the individual.

The characteristic mark of the age in which we live is an overwhelming skepticism with respect to the organized and institutionalized structures of our common life. The retreat into the private sphere is a reflection of this general distrust of politics, for politics reach beyond the governmental into every community activity. Survey research and public opinion polls reveal the steep decline of public confidence with respect not only to government but religion, education, medicine, labor, science, business, the press and significantly, even the family. All of these institutions have well developed political structures, are in fact a part of politics and so what we see so evidently manifested is the decline of politics, the massive desertion of the political and communal for the private and individual.

This underestimation of the effectiveness of politics is the mirror image of the overestimation of the possibilities of political

action. In fact, the retreat to the private sphere has recently often been a consequence of the disappointed expectations men held with respect to their most honored and powerful institutions. As Henry Fairlee has pointed out in his book, *The Kennedy Years*, the current mood of depression and dismay in American society stems in part, at least, from the grandiose dreams engendered on the New Frontier and by the Great Society. In those years American political leaders held out hopes and aspirations to men which simply could not be fulfilled through political action. Something of the same mood dominated the Roman Catholic Church during the pontificate of Pope John and in the brief period following the first session of Vatican II. When the inflated rhetoric had exhausted itself, when the great gestures had been made, when the eulogies had been organized and the money spent, when the manifestos had been issued and the council documents promulgated, the millennium had, alas, still not been achieved and we discovered that we were still stuck with our recalcitrant and unregenerate human natures. It was a dismaying experience. We ought to have learned from it not that politics can do nothing but that it cannot do everything. Many, however, came to believe not that politics could not do everything but that the wrong sort of politics could not do everything. The belief is now widespread that if only John Kennedy had been more pure in his intentions, had not been at heart a cold warrior, had been more deeply convinced on the issue of civil rights, had been more revolutionary in domestic commitments then today we would indeed be living in a sort of Camelot.

Both these positions are the consequence of a defective knowledge of the nature of politics. Both those who cop out and refuse political action and those who hope for ful-

fillments which political action can never bring to pass, fail to understand the nature of politics. Let us ask again then, "What is the Purpose of Politics?"

Politics is the institutional organization of society whether the form is that of the family, the community, the factory, the voluntary association or even that of business. Of course, much of the politics of these groups is informal and only in the most highly developed communities does politics become organizational. Nonetheless, wherever the individual touches on or is connected with society political life and political activity result.

Being fully human involves acting politically and this is the root of Aristotle's famous dictum. Nor can we as individuals avoid social or political involvement. Even Robinson Crusoe discovered that although he was autonomous he was not self-sufficient. It is an interesting fact that the more highly intellectualized and spiritualized, the more elaborately cultural human societies become, the more political they are. Diversity and complexity, both of which make autonomy not only possible but meaningful, can exist and be optimized where society and politics are highly developed. It has often been remarked that Thoreau was able to conduct his experiment at Walden pond only because Cambridge lay nearby and his family and friends provided that infrastructure of community which permitted the full flowering of anarchistic individualism.

Much has been written during the past decade concerning "libertarianism" and "anarchism." Many poses have been struck. The roads and the parks, at least in theory, have been sold over and over again and the defense establishment has been let out to contract, theoretically, to a hippy commune in central Colorado who promise to bite to death the enemies of people of the United States. For the most part, libertarians and

anarchists have not dealt realistically with either the problem of community or the problem of politics. Their recently invented social and political systems resemble nothing so much as the fanciful perpetual motion machines of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Liberty is a reflection of social complexity and political sophistication. It does not result in anarchism. Rather, it always creates and it requires obligation. Consequently, the question is not whether or not one has the right to withdraw from society, to make the great refusal, to break the bonds which bind men together for purposes of mutual fulfillment; the question is not whether we shall be political or not, but rather, how we shall be political and what the ends of our politics shall be. To be fully human is to live politically. The condition of alienation is a reflection of the impossible dream of total self-sufficiency. The madman who invents and peoples a world in his imagination is the only unpolitical man.

Liberty and obligation are indissolubly linked. To be free to do anything means to be obligated to do something. We are free to choose; that is, we are autonomous but the very possibilities of choice open to us are the products of the social matrix in which we have our being and in which we find our fulfillment. All politics and all community have their roots in the inadequacy of the individual, acting alone, to achieve the objectives he finds desirable. These objectives go to the heart of human existence, for human survival depends on man's ability to organize societies to meet the challenge of the environment. Beyond survival all those things which make life worth living and which offer us a foretaste of eternity are communal in nature. In this respect the Christian conception of the Trinity has always seemed to me, purely from a symbolic standpoint, a much more satisfactory representation of the Godhead

than Aristotle's self-sufficient, self-contemplating unmoved mover. The image of the beautiful vision in the Christian tradition is the image of community, the "communion of saints." But aside from these startling and profound images it is apparent that we ought to view our individual insufficiency not as limitation and as frustration but as the key to fulfillment. As the French are reported to say, "*Vive la difference!*"

It follows from this that the bonds of obligation in society are not exclusively or even predominately contractual; that is, social structures and political forms are not simply arrangements in which the costs and benefits are calculated and nicely weighed and when cost exceeds benefit the contract is nullified. Attempt running a family on that basis some time, or better still rearing a family of teen-age children.

Having said this I must add that I reject the communitarian position which argues that unless there is a common religion, unless there are commonly shared political myths and unless there are pervasive and commonly accepted cultural values about which there is no debate there cannot be an orderly and coherent society. This is neither logically necessary nor is it the experience of mankind.

Common action follows on the acceptance of a common task, the confrontation with a common challenge. Politics does not begin with contract or consensus. The origins of society do not lie in so ethereal a thing as community or so rational and calculated a thing as contract. Life is not quite so simple a matter. As soon as individual men, no matter how diverse they are in origins, heterodox in religion, pluralistic in custom and different in culture, perceive a common need or confront a common challenge, politics is born. Community and contract are not antecedent to political action but derive from it.

Politics then takes its rise from individual insufficiency. Does it follow that men acting together can do all things? Does it follow that there are no limits to political action? We have been speaking, up to this point, of politics in very broad terms, the politics of the family, the politics of the office, the politics of the playing field. Let us now speak quite specifically of the politics associated with government. Whatever the objectives of political activity in the family, the church, the military, these politics are in a striking way different from the politics of government or what we most frequently call simply "politics." Are there any limitations to the actions of government? What is the purpose of the politics of the "state"?

To ask that question is to raise a series of issues of the utmost consequence for contemporary society. The historical record in the Western World for the past one thousand years reveals the steady growth and concentration of the powers of the state, an enormous increase in its activities and absorption into itself of all other political forms and structures.

The state has clothed itself with the mystique and the liturgical forms of religion; it has become the moral arbiter of society; it has steadily drawn all the activities of the culture-creating elites into its ambit; it has assumed the dominant position in education; it has usurped many of the functions and the roles of the family; it has continuously enlarged its activities in the economic sphere and threatens now to engulf all enterprise, production and distribution of goods and income; it licenses and restricts and eventually will destroy as Rousseau hoped and Tocqueville predicted all intermediary groups and voluntary associations. The growth of the powers of the state has been the single greatest fact in modern European history. The French and Russian revolutions and the development of nation-

alism are only incidents in the history of the evolution of statism.

This growth in the power and the authority of the state gives the politics of the state a wholly new meaning and imposes on it forms which in other eras would have been thought totally inappropriate. We have come to view these new political forms as authoritarian and totalitarian. They are political nonetheless though the form of political participation may be very different from the forms characteristic of other eras and other political structures. For example, totalitarian politics casts itself increasingly in the religious and liturgical mold. Participation in the community is sacramental rather than conventionally political. The rites of solidarity on May Day or the anniversary of the revolution are a much more important form of political participation than casting a ballot or seeking electoral office.

Are genuine politics possible under such conditions? Has the evolution of Western governments been such that these are, in fact, the only type of politics possible? Is there a limit to what the state can and ought to do imposed by the nature of man and society? Or is the purpose of politics the augmentation of the authority and the power of the state until it becomes the gigantic though rusty mechanism of which Ortega spoke so eloquently in *The Revolt of the Masses*?

I assert that the politics of the state has one purpose and one purpose only and that is to enable men to live together in civil society. The purpose of politics is not to make men good or holy though that may be an indirect benefit which results from a properly ordered state. Politicians are not and can never become philosopher kings. When politicians speak of philosophy their accents are not those of Plato and St. Thomas but Marx, Rosenberg, Sorel and Marcuse. And this is the case because the very act of

attempting to establish absolute rather than relative justice, the very act of making all men virtuous or all men holy, the very act of allocating goods on the basis of the concept of equality poses a range of problems which lie beyond the powers of governmental action.

While governments cannot make men good they can create the conditions of peace and security which will enable men, singly and in groups to seek the multiform goods which have always been characteristic of any sophisticated society. While governments cannot make men virtuous they can maintain those conditions which make the pursuit of virtue possible. Above all, government will refuse the temptation to commit evil in the name of some higher and remoter good. Evil will not appear as a historical necessity pressed on mankind by the cycle of constitutions, by the invisible hands, the cunning of reason or the next sequent step in the womb of time. "Historical necessity" is always another name for the abdication of moral responsibility. When politics attempts to achieve that which is beyond political action, it often resorts to evil, always believing it is temporary, always assuming that when the new dispensation has been ushered in, evil will have been forever banished.

The purpose of politics does not go beyond securing the conditions in which the creative potentialities of the individual and the groups and communities he and others create are liberated and facilitated. Note that such political action will always be concrete and related to the solution to specific and particular problems. It will not be general, vague, ideological, nor will it be premised on the belief that either man's nature or his environment can be perfected. The world is a marvelous and complicated place and our natures even more complex. To believe that absolute justice, innocence or the perfection of person, time or place

this side of the grave is possible, is to indulge one of those groundless hopes which only idiots and revolutionaries entertain. Such notions are commonplaces with the monsters and deformities who serve as heroes in the novels of Dostoevsky. They are inexcusable in a world where every man's work is colored by ambiguity and tried by fire.

The great politicians of any age are not the dreamers and the idealists. They are practical men who have a vision of what is both desirable and possible for their societies. They are not the inventors of slogans such as the "classless society" or the "new frontier" or the "great society." They speak in terms of specific and concrete goals and they have some estimate of what the costs, material and social, will be. They realize that in a world of scarcity and conflicting demands to do anything means not to do something else. They are aware, moreover, that those actions which benefit one member of a society may not, probably will not, benefit another. They believe, therefore, that only those actions which benefit the whole of society more than they benefit any particular individual or group in society ought to be undertaken by government.

Even so, it is extremely difficult to calculate benefits with any degree of accuracy. For example, does public education benefit the individual more than it does the society or is the opposite the case? Does public housing benefit the society more than it does the recipient of the housing or is the opposite the case? How exactly is one to calculate and weigh benefits? These are extremely difficult problems but we might begin by making it a rule that individual welfare ought never to be the object of political action, just as private actions ought never to be the object of scrutiny by the police power or the society as a whole. Individual welfare may be and ought to be the object of politics or institutions other than the

state. That, in fact, is the role of the family, the church, the voluntary association. That the happiness quotient in my family should remain high should not become the object of state action for the state. Aside from its ability to spend money (an action which in terms of happiness is very ambivalent) the state has little to offer which can increase our happiness. It can do a great deal, however, to make life for myself and my family a living hell. The language of political discussion ought to eschew discussions of private benefit.

One way in which the state can limit its actions to those which benefit the society as a whole is to refuse any actions which can be performed by other institutions or groups within the society. The state, following this rule, does not attempt to perform the functions of the family, does not attempt to provide education, does not organize charity, does not regulate the economy and forgoes intrusions into the processes of production and consumption.

We have seen that the whole tendency of state action in the past five hundred years has been just the opposite of this. The state has constantly enlarged the sphere of its activity and increased the degree of centralization within society. I am not arguing that we need fewer social services, that individual need, dependency, helplessness is today less than it was a century ago though that may very well be the case. I am arguing that direct state action in these areas is inappropriate. I am arguing that these are not areas suitable for governmental politics. I am saying that governmental action is less apt to maximize welfare and liberty than alternative social solutions. Only in those cases in which a desired social objective cannot be achieved except by the intervention of the state and in the absence of alternative social institutions and structures ought the state to undertake public action. The community has every possible interest

in the world in the collection and safe disposal of garbage. It does not follow from this that garbage ought to be collected by city employees who are paid out of tax money. The same argument can and ought more often to be made with respect to the postal service.

However, we would delude ourselves were we to assume that all those needs essential to the orderly and satisfactory functioning of society are now or have ever been all met by voluntary associations and corporations and institutions other than the state. Libertarians have reason but not history on their side when they argue for the "night-watchman" concept of the state. Most men, even contemporary liberals, wish that a state of such limited powers were capable of meeting the needs of our society. But even in America where the voluntary association has obtained a development unequaled anywhere else in the world men are forced, repeatedly, to turn to the state simply because private agencies and institutions are unavailable.

Moreover, we have seen in the past half century, and that at an increasing rate of acceleration, the decay and dispersal of communities. Rapid and unorganic suburban growth, the movement of large populations from the farm to the city, the industrialization and economic development of the southwest, northwest, west and south, rapid social mobility and the erosion of the mores and the institutions which supported them in an older America; all of these factors have created an anomic and dislocated society in which the organs of community seem no longer capable of affording individuals and groups the services and protections they find necessary for survival. In consequence, when problems arise they devolve almost immediately upon the state. It alone seems to possess the organizational capacities, the experience, the skills and the resources necessary to deal with the prob-

lem. Finally, it seeks to provide an ideology to replace the lost faiths and the shattered myths which had at one time provided support for community.

The solution to this problem lies with the individual. He must deliberately choose to devote his time and talent to the location of community and the solution of the problems which his society confronts through common action. The individual must become a participant in the common tasks of the community. He must, increasingly, devote himself to the common good and to activities which have as their objective the securing of the common welfare. Indeed, the individual will discover his humanity most completely in these activities in which he brings to bear on the problems of his culture and time his gifts and insights. The alternative to participation freely and enthusiastically given is participation through the coercion of the state, participation often in solutions to pressing social problems which fly in the face of the moral, economic, cultural and political views of the citizen. We do not have a choice as to whether we shall participate or not. In the early 1950's when Western Germany began the grim business of rearming, slogans suddenly appeared stenciled on the walls and pavements, *ohne mich*, "without me!" That, however, is in any society never really an option. We cannot choose whether or not we will participate; we can, if we are fortunate, choose the method of our participation.

Beyond the cooperative action of individuals in the creation of community the state has a powerful and important role. It is in the interest of the state to encourage and foster voluntary association and nongovernmental institutional forms. These powerful corporate groups and institutions serve in all good societies to stand between the great power of the state and the helplessness of the individual. They act to check the power

of single individuals and the power of other corporate groups in the society but above all they alone are capable of challenging state power and authority. The state will be able to fulfill its mission best when its tasks are clearly delineated and when the boundaries of its powers and activities are constantly patrolled by strong and capable competing communities.

For its own health, therefore, the state ought not to undertake activities which go beyond the preservation of the civic order unless it can anticipate a time in the fairly immediate future when its intervention will no longer be necessary. It ought always to be the object of politics to make men and their communities autonomous and independent rather than to coerce them into dependency and servitude. There will always be moments when the resources of individuals and communities are insufficient to meet the staggering problems of the community. The state must then exercise special care that temporary assistance does not become permanent servitude.

Authority and its reflection in the exercise of power is ultimately based upon the moral dispositions of its citizens and upon consent freely given. The moral character of the state, as Harold Laski pointed out long ago (1925) in his book *A Grammar of Politics*, is no different from that of any other association.

It exacts loyalty upon the same grim condition that a man exacts loyalty from his friends. It is judged by what it offers to its members in terms of the things they deem to be good. Its roots are laid in their minds and hearts. In the long run, it will win support, not by the theoretic program it announces, but by the perception of ordinary citizens that allegiance to its will is a necessary condition of their well-being.

There have surely been few better definitions of the state or the purpose of politics.