

MODERN AGE

A QUARTERLY REVIEW



Political Idealism and Political Reality

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ONE OF THE PUZZLES of democratic political life arises from the fact that while morality and political idealism are essential elements in any democratic polity, the excesses of political idealism and absolutist morals make democratic politics first unworkable and then destroy it altogether. In democratic societies there is both a constant temptation and invitation to moral athleticism and a constant betrayal and corruption of the ideal. The political idealists and the moral athletes attempt to transform the democratic polity into a French revolutionary style "republic of virtue" and though America's real religion is a civic rather than a transcendent one, all public issues tend to assume the vesture of ideal absolutes and all debate of public issues is couched in terms of moral fervor. The campaign of Senator George McGovern is an excellent example of the way in which political issues in America are often translated into religious enthusiasms and clothed in the language of moral absolutism. In spite of the disastrous defeat suffered by McGovern at the polls it is nevertheless true that this tendency, inherent in democratic politics, has enormous popular appeal. For this reason among others the great sin in the politics of exalted expectations is the sin of hypocrisy which in America is not simply

the tribute which vice pays to virtue but a technically perfected and universally recognized political skill. This may, in fact, be one of the dominant aspects of all democratic mass political movements which have a revolutionary origin or, at least, a revolutionary bias. Michael Polanyi has remarked that National Socialism was not, as many men have believed, a political movement which was totally amoral in character. Indeed Polanyi somewhere remarks it was a political movement whose moral commitments were so great and so compelling that the Nazi movement brought the world to the brink of destruction in order to see its moral ideals realized.

From the tone of these remarks you may suppose that my politics are Machiavellian and totally cynical; that they are operational in the worst sense of the word and that I propose as a political ideal a system in which ideals are sacrificed and morals corrupted not out of necessity but as a matter of course. It is necessary, therefore, that I make emphatic my conviction that any and every politics is based upon a vision of the good and projects a political order that is both moral and idealistic. Wherever "the good" is defined narrowly in terms of impersonal and morally neutral forces such as "the market" or power political config-

urations the long-term political response of the people has been in the past and will be again one of revulsion and protest. The fact is that men are extraordinarily jealous of their humanity and when they see it threatened by impersonal and morally neutral forces they resort to protest and to revolution. Morality and political idealism, especially in the mass democracies, is an indispensable political force. Nothing attests to this fact more powerfully than the moralizing tone and the artifices of enthusiastic idealism which are so important a part of the propaganda effort of totalitarian states. In these propaganda efforts politics has been reduced exclusively to its ideal and moral dimensions and the fact that the idealism is frequently fraudulent and the morality perverse ought not to blind us to the important role it plays. All too often we fail to properly gauge the moral impact of totalitarian propaganda simply because we have decided, and rightly so, that the propaganda is fraudulent and issues from a morally suspect source.

The fact that the energies and dynamics of politics are frequently and persistently moral ought to caution the political practitioner and the student of politics to suspect those easy and seemingly uncomplicated technical solutions to difficult social problems. Zero population growth, abortion, complete first amendment protection for any and all kinds of publication and utterance, a national social policy based totally upon the self-interest and the self-sufficiency of the individual, a national economic policy which subordinates national defense and the public welfare to economic maximization are public policies which in the long run will prove morally repugnant to the majority of the American people and consequently they are always politically dangerous to the individuals and groups supporting these particular programs. Unless a program can be defended in moral

terms, in terms of justice and charity and the general welfare, to argue that it is socially or economically efficient is to expose the program to general public opprobrium. While it is essential in any social or political situation that we start with the specific task at hand rather than a vague general ideal it is no less imperative that we constantly check our solution against the moral imperatives. Even so, morality, popularly defined, will often be defective. Politics without prophecy is always in danger of mistaking the wishes of men for the promptings of conscience. The tyranny of the majority is no greater than when it demands conformity to a defective but popular moral sense. Tocqueville spoke eloquently on this subject and it is one of the persistent problems of democratic societies.

The problem then which morality and ideals in politics poses stems from the fact that the ethical and political ideals are often abstract, general and without reference to conditioning historical factors and experience rather than practical, specific and derived from a particular historical and social situation. Neither political rights or political obligation can be of a general and an abstract nature. You will recall Edmund Burke's powerful argument which he made in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. You will remember that Burke was attacking the French philosophers (who made the revolution) and their English sympathizers. When he came to justifications of the revolution based upon the morality of "natural rights" Burke wrote:

Government is not made in virtue of natural rights, which may and do exist in total independence of it—and exist in much greater clearness, and in a much greater degree of abstract perfection: but their abstract perfection is their practical defect. By having a right to everything they want everything. Government is a contrivance of human

wisdom to provide for human *wants* [emphasis in the original]. Men have a right that these wants should be provided for by this wisdom. Among these wants is to be reckoned the want, out of civil society, of a sufficient restraint upon their passions. Society requires not only that the passions of individuals should be subjected, but that even in the mass and body, as well as in the individuals, the inclinations of men should frequently be thwarted, their will controlled and their passions brought into subjection. This can only be done *by a power out of themselves*, and not, in the exercise of its function, subject to that will and to those passions which it is its office to bridle and subdue. In this sense the restraints on men, as well as their liberties, are to be reckoned among their rights. But as these liberties and restrictions vary with times and circumstances, and admit of infinite modifications, they cannot be settled upon any abstract rule; and nothing is so foolish as to discuss them upon that principle.

It is interesting to speculate on the reason and the rhetoric Burke would bring to bear on both the anarchist right and the old and the new left. Burke's great and chief criticism no doubt would be that in their pursuit of absolute rights and absolute ideals they cut the ground out from under the possibility of attaining any rights at all and of achieving political ideals commensurate with the limitation-filled character of human nature. Burke's continuing injunction to politicians is to be practical; to fit long term objectives and high ideals to the petty and not so petty needs of the moment; to wed the sublime to the immediate and the pragmatic. Here is Burke in his *Letter to the Sheriffs of Bristol* (1777):

Civil freedom, Gentlemen, is not as many have endeavored to persuade you, a thing that lies hid in the depth of abstruse science. It is a blessing and a benefit, not an abstract speculation; and

all the just reasoning that can be upon it is of so course a texture as perfectly to suit the ordinary capacities of those who are to enjoy, and of those who are to defend it. Far from any resemblance to those propositions in geometry and metaphysics which admit no medium, but must be true or false in all their latitude, social and civil freedom, like all other things in common life, are variously mixed and modified, enjoyed in very different degrees, and shaped into an infinite diversity of forms, according to the temper and circumstances of every community. The *extreme* of liberty (which is its abstract perfection, but its real fault) obtains nowhere, nor ought it to obtain anywhere; because extremes, as we all know, in every point which relates either to our duties or satisfactions in life, are destructive both to virtue and enjoyment. Liberty, too, must be limited in order to be possessed. . . .

These are cogent but unpopular words in an era of exaggeration when restraints of any kind are perceived as galling and unbearable. Beyond what Burke says concerning the nature of liberty lies the more important and general principle of the limited and contingent nature of all political ideals and moral enthusiasms. Burke does not argue that we ought to dispense with ideals and morals in politics. Far from that Burke believed that the feelings or as he preferred to call them "spontaneous natural affections" were the source of morals and the basis for social and political life. These "affections" Burke conceived to have been implanted in the human heart by God. But, more important still for our argument, civil society can never be the product of nature alone; is not the consequence of abstract reasoning or the result of some enthusiastic action of the human will. Civil society is the consequence of "art." Burke argued in the *Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs* (1791):

The state of civil society . . . is a state of nature; and much more truly so than a savage and incoherent mode of life. For man is by nature reasonable; and he is never perfectly in his natural state, but when he is placed where reason may be best cultivated, and most predominates. Art is man's nature. We are as much, at least, in a state of nature in formed manhood, as in immature and helpless infancy.

Art takes cognizance of the workings of the practical intellect and is contingent upon and shaped by historical process. Men do not and cannot form their minds or govern their societies on the basis of abstractions. Extremes of every kind are evidence finally not that motives are pure and minds are noble but of political immaturity and an imperfect historical consciousness. Seen in the total context of history, many events, events in which we have taken an active interest and perhaps participated will have a very different quality than the one which we ascribe to them today.

Take the currently much debated question of America's role in the world. As you know from the turn of the nineteenth into the twentieth century a sizeable portion of the intellectual and the leadership elite in the United States advocated a break with the traditional American policy of nonintervention in the affairs of other nations and nonparticipation in the alliance systems of the great powers. This policy of nonintervention came to be called, mistakenly, "isolationism." In fact it was something quite different from isolationism for it argued that America's revolutionary hope could be best taught by example rather than forceful intrusion. This traditional theory, however, came to be rejected by moral and political enthusiasts who argued that the world had to be made safe for democracy; that America had to impose its order and act as the world's policeman in the cha-

otic societies which lay beyond our shores. The "Fourteen Points," the "Four Freedoms" and "doctrines" by the dozens provided the slogans for this adventure into international morality and idealism. After long and continuous debate most of the American people came to approve a policy which seemed to many so little congruent with our traditional values. Those who persisted in rejecting these enthusiasms were denounced as narrow and provincial "isolationists" unfit to live in the sparkling new world which was about to come into existence. Now, at the end of three quarters of a century of exhausting warfare the American people have begun slowly and uncertainly to reexamine the old arguments and to ask whether, indeed, our enthusiasm for establishing the reign of international morality was not the pursuit of a destructive chimera.

The historical context of any action is important both before and after the fact. All political action is a species of "situational ethics," just as all human action is contingent in terms of rightness or wrongness upon circumstance. Which is not to say, once again, that moral absolutes do not exist but rather that they are poor guides to practical action. The revolutionary proclaims "Let justice be done though the heavens should fall." Cardinal Newman is reported to have said that it would be better for the whole world to perish than that a single venial sin should be committed. Fortunately, God who is the ultimate judge in such matters has a somewhat less exacting standard. These are the extremes of moral and ideal enthusiasm but there are many other examples of a less grave character. Looking back at the political causes of the past two decades, whether these were causes of the left or the right is discouraging because so little practical and pragmatic wisdom has gone into their formulation and execution. The great question in politics is

not "what is right?" or even "what is desirable?" but rather "what is possible?" Of course the "possible" changes from moment to moment and no political leadership can really be great unless it knows, quite exactly, what is possible. In his early years intuition and a profound political sense led Adolf Hitler to a very clear and accurate perception of what was possible in Germany's international relations. After 1938 this sense, corrupted by a long series of successes failed Hitler completely and a war which Hitler chose and enormously complicated by the invasion of the Soviet Union finally led to his undoing and defeat.

The determination of the possible is closely related to the greatest of the political virtues; the exercise of prudence. Prudential considerations in politics and in individual morality have to do exclusively with means; never with ends. It is for this reason that the ideal and the moral as absolutes may be preserved intact even though the prudential solution may fall short of achieving the abstract ideal, may indeed be nothing more than the choice of the lesser of two evils. A more fortunate social dilemma exists when the choice is between goods, but nevertheless it is a choice in which the pursuit of one good often excludes the attainment of another. Situations of this sort are the everyday experience of economists, for the science of economics is a science of less and more; of scarce resources and infinite wants. Men who think politically and who determine the shape of civil society frequently do not recognize the fact that some choices always exclude others. They reject the realities of the world of either-or and insist, in spite of all the evidence to the contrary that men can have both-and. The both guns and butter policy of the Johnson administration, a policy which prevented us from seeing that we had a major war on our hands and kept us from acting accordingly is an ex-

cellent example. Perhaps the most serious political delusion of our times is the belief on the part of a great many Americans that their government can do everything and simultaneously. A healthy respect for human and governmental limitations has been all but lost. In the guns and butter policy and the contradiction it contained we have a practical example, important but superficial of the conflict of goods which bedevils all politics. Much more important and much more central to our democratic society are the conflicts which exist between liberty and equality and freedom and order. Both terms of these antitheses are essential elements to our polity. The pursuit of the abstract and perfected form of one of the terms excludes its antithesis altogether. It is obvious that men desire to live in a society where both perfect freedom and perfect order coexist. It is equally obvious that such a society does not and cannot exist on earth. How much freedom or how much equality men enjoy at any juncture of the temporal process depends upon a host of factors including complicated individual and social choices. Political wisdom, manifesting itself in prudent action cuts the mind loose from absolutes and abstractions and settles for the best possible combination.

What I am saying is the oldest kind of political theory. The observations are indeed, so old and so ordinary that I am almost ashamed to make them. I may be excused, perhaps, when I point out that prudence, compromise, tolerance, and even "benign neglect" have recently been scorned by important groups in our society who see them as the corrupting appeasement of evil and imperfection. The Democratic Convention of 1968 and the Democratic campaign of 1972 are excellent examples of the triumph of intransigent ideological abstraction and the danger posed by such a triumph to the politics

of moderation and the human measure.

In a great book of an older generation, *An Essay on the Nature and Significance of Economic Science* (Macmillan, 1932), Lord Lionel Robbins observes:

. . . There are cases when it is *either* bread or a *lily*. Choice of one involves sacrifice of the other, and although we may be satisfied with our choice, we cannot delude ourselves that it was not really a choice at all, that more bread will follow. It is not true that all things work together for *material* good to them that love God. So far from postulating a harmony of ends in this sense, Economics brings into full view that conflict of choice which is one of the permanent characteristics of human existence. Your economist is a true tragedian.

Exactly the same words might well be written of the political scientist or if you prefer, the political theoretician. For this reason Burke observed in his *Speech at Bristol Previous to the Election* (1780), "The condition of our nature is such that we buy our blessings at a price."

Burke spoke with his accustomed eloquence and great good sense again and again on the subject of political prudence and perhaps prudence is the most distinctive Burkian and conservative virtue. In a letter to Mons. Dupont, October, 1789 he wrote:

Prudence (in all things a virtue, in politics the first of virtues), will lead us rather to acquiesce in some qualified plan that does not come up to the full perfection of the abstract idea, than to push for the more perfect, which cannot be attained without tearing to pieces the whole contexture of the commonwealth. . . . In all changes in the state, moderation is a virtue, not only amiable but powerful. It is a disposing, arranging, conciliating, cementing, vir-

tue. . . Moderation (which times and situations will clearly distinguish from the counterfeits of pusillanimity and indecision) is a virtue only of superior minds. It requires a deep courage, and full of reflection, to be temperate when the voices of multitudes (the specious mimic of fame and reputation) passes judgment against you. The impetuous desire of an unthinking public will endure no course, but what conducts to splendid and perilous extremes. Then to dare to be fearful, when all about you are full of presumption and confidence, and when those who are bold at the hazard of others would push your caution and disaffection, is to show a mind prepared for its trial; it discovers, in the midst of general levity, a self-possessing and collected character, which sooner or later, bids to attract everything to it, as to a center.

There have always been those in American politics who have urged caution, prudence and compromise; those who denounced the act of hubris, of political overreaching but they have been all too few in number and their appeal has never possessed that *éclat* and the grandeur of ideological denunciation and crusading fervor. Especially during these last few decades one wonders what the complexion of American politics might have been had there been only a handful more of men such as Robert Taft in the United States Senate to urge compromise, caution and distance from passion.

But, of course, crusades are such fun, never mind who must pay the price that virtuous sentiments acted upon to the exclusion of good sense exacts. And the conservative, behaving prudently, must be willing not only to see others pay the price in waiting, in justice undone and in rewards foregone. He must, above all be willing to pay the price himself.

Prudence is so important as a political

virtue because of the very nature of political reality. In a splendid essay by Hans Buchheim, *Totalitarian Rule, Its Nature and Characteristics* (Wesleyan University Press, 1968), we find the following passage:

. . . Action is rooted in reality; it must accept reality's diversity and cannot fall back on the gradations of its own commitment; it recognizes only the one alternative—that something is done or that it is not. Every practical decision must be taken in the light of the ambiguity of a situation, and it leads to consequences that in the last analysis are quite as ambiguous. Every theoretical statement, therefore, simplifies the infinite diversity of reality, while every practical decision destroys the spectrum of gradations of commitment over which theory ranges.

For this reason, though theory can serve as a guide to action, it can never be a blueprint for shaping political reality, and it certainly cannot become a guide for individual conduct. For if the simplified structures to which theory owes its clarity and comprehensiveness are applied immediately in practice they must deform the diversity of life and do violence to its historically conditioned individuality. It follows that politics will be the more artificial the more uncompromisingly it is subjugated to theory . . .

Prudence and compromise, have moreover, not been uniquely conservative responses to the complexity of political reality. Even those operating within the revolutionary tradition have studied the advantages of a politics of moderation. I am reminded of Alfred Nacquet, one of the outstanding leaders of the left in the early years of the Third Republic in France, though many others might be cited. Nacquet had begun his political life as a so-called "intransigent" a defender of the ab-

stract ideals of the French revolution, unwilling to bow to any of the political necessities and realities of his time. Nacquet came to realize, however, that politics could not be made on the basis of ideological abstractions. The whole latter part of his career was one in which he attempted to realize what was possible of his ideals always believing that half a loaf was better than none. His new position earned him and the group of politicians who surrounded him the derisive designation "Opportunists" and in August 1882 an "intransigent" journalist attacked and denounced him for his inconsistency and the betrayal of his former ideals. Nacquet replied by saying:

There are several manners of being consistent with oneself. One consists of affirming absolute metaphysical principles, divorced from facts, that one never abandons and from which one never departs no matter what happens; even if this affirmation leads to the death of the Republic.

The other manner of being consistent with oneself is to pursue an ideal which does not change, but to recognize the ground on which one walks, to maneuver around obstacles, to sometimes accept something bad for fear of something worse, to avoid disasters, and to arrive as Spuller said [a prominent gambettist] perhaps slowly but more surely at the desired goal than the seekers of the absolute.

Both the Right and the Left in American politics need to relearn the great political art of compromise and practice the great political virtue of prudence. For it is in the reconciliation of the ideal with the actual that we realize our full humanity and make possible a society in which both public and private morality have their origins in a common source and in which it is possible to be a good man even while obeying the laws of the state.