

An Unpragmatic Theorist

Political Theory and Practice, by

Bernard Crick, *New York: Basic Books,*

Inc., 1973. xii + 224 pp. \$10.00.

THE WORK OF Bernard Crick is well known to American political theorists, chiefly as the result of two earlier books, *The American Science of Politics* (1959) and *In Defense of Politics* (1962). In the former he demonstrated the uniquely American characteristics of American political science; in the latter he analyzes a type of political régime, culturally

peculiar to the West, designed to serve as mediary or broker between conflicting social interests where the absence of such a system might result in some authoritarian or totalitarian alternative. He continues to develop these two basic themes in the present work, which is a collection of essays published between 1963 and 1971. Only one of the essays, however, deals in a systematic way with the two subjects mentioned in the title of the book, or with the general problem of theory and action. Yet there is abundant evidence in the book that the problem is still very much on Crick's mind.

In the essay called "A Failure of Liberal Perception" (1964) he notes that in the period from 1929-33 British intellectuals were unable to recognize the nature of Nazism as a totalitarian ideology, and traces this failure "ultimately to a weakness in English political education and speculation." The concepts and theoretical indices for an analysis of German National Socialism were simply not present in the British intellectual culture of the time.

In "The Elementary Types of Government" (1968) Crick tells us there are basically only three governmental forms, *viz.*, autocratic, republican (or political), and totalitarian. The simplicity of his argument is both startling and informative. Can it be that only three basic types of régimes can be differentiated among all the diverse and disparate political phenomena evident in the long course of human history? Crick of course is following Machiavelli—the reader perhaps will recall his excellent introduction to *The Discourses*. Machiavelli indeed had reduced the possible types of government to two, principalities and republics, and in doing so had chosen the modern as opposed to the classical-Christian tradition.

Plato in the *Republic*, for example, had distinguished one régime from another by analysis of the forces dominant in the soul and argued there were as many types of régimes as there were identifiable types of soul; but more importantly Plato's

philosophic anthropology led the political theorist to distinguish between higher and lower, good and bad types of régimes by reference to the superior order of the soul of the just man. This provided political analysts with criteria that enabled them to differentiate among forms of government on rational and scientific grounds. Aristotle in the *Politics* (1286b8-24) answered the practical objections to Plato's analysis by viewing the types of régimes from the perspectives of a philosophy of history. Kingship, said Aristotle, had occurred in the distant past when men of outstanding virtue were few and the common sort were inclined to accept the rule of exemplary men. By Aristotle's time, however, only democracy was acceptable because the state had become larger under oligarchs and tyrants whose misuse of power created a multitude of disaffected citizens and these had managed to seize the power themselves. The democratic dispensation, however, was not necessarily the best of all possible régimes, but was merely the outcome of simultaneous social growth and decline.

For his part Bernard Crick champions the republican régime over all others, though not indeed from the perspective of philosophical anthropology or from a philosophy of history. One is impressed nevertheless by the intensity of his commitment to his choice. In a radio address delivered over the BBC in 1969 Crick declared himself in favor of tyrannicide. Tyranny, he asserted, should be closely defined and rulers whose behavior conforms to the definition should be killed. This dictum at the time of its formulation might have been perceived as merely a more or less legitimate effort by a professional academician to gain the attention of an increasingly rebellious and radical youth. Today, in the light of the tranquility or indifference that has settled over most college campuses, Crick's advocacy of political murder may strike us as having a sort of pornographic quality. Also we are better able now to perceive the danger of recommending violence to students as an

acceptable and even meritorious course of action. Indeed, a student obsessed, as many are, with the problem of getting higher grades for inferior work, might well decide that Professor Crick himself fits the closely defined status of "tyrant."

Thus the broadcasting and now the republication of his approval of political murder seems clearly irresponsible. What is even worse in an academician, Crick is inconsistent. If only three types of political régimes are possible, (autocratic, republican, totalitarian), what then is tyranny? Crick's doctrine on tyrannicide is borrowed from St. Thomas Aquinas, who held that it is justified only where four preconditions obtain: *viz.*, (1) that the tyrant has gained power by violent usurpation; (2) that he has broken the law, both natural and divine; (3) that no other remedy for existing evils in the state is possible; (4) that his removal by death cannot but lead to a better condition of affairs. So far, so good; but Crick evidently wishes to extract from this teaching something more than the circumstances under which the killing of a tyrant might be justified for a Christian. He seems to read into it a commitment to a republican type of régime. One gains the impression that Professor Crick is prepared to "render unto Caesar" only where Caesar has been duly elected by a majority vote!

But whether fallacious or valid, all his dicta are worth the consideration of the intelligent reader. This is by no means a difficult book to study; among other virtues its author is a superb craftsman of English prose, perhaps the best *writer* on political theory now alive. He has an unerring eye for relevant characterization, such as the anarchism of Michael Oakeshott (a topic the editors of *National Review* might have done well to consider), the proper rôle of students in universities (he favors communication with students but not their participation in university government), and the lack of patriotism in Enoch Powell.

Reviewed by RICHARD J. BISHIRJIAN