

Problems of Politicization

The Politicization of Society, edited by Kenneth S. Templeton, Jr.; introduction by R. M. Hartwell, *Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1979. 541 pp. \$10.00.*

IF THERE HAS BEEN endless theoretical uncertainty about the nature and definition of politics, it is hardly surprising that in recent years a multitude of meanings has been attached to the cognate term, "politicization." Although the essays in this volume reflect serious scholarly endeavor, they do not attempt to explore the full range of meaning of this elusive concept, but rather present one aspect or dimension of politicization. The result is a work that stands somewhat uneasily on the borderland between polemic and political science. Nevertheless, the ideological position the book represents is an important one, and it provides a useful starting point for considering the general problem of politicization and its significance for contemporary American politics.

Politicization as it is described in this volume will be familiar to readers of *Modern Age*, for it refers to perhaps the principal *bête noire* of contemporary conservatives, the rise of the centralized bureaucratic state. In an introductory essay R. M. Hartwell describes the classical liberalism of the nineteenth century against which politicization, the chief fact of twentieth-century history, is to be understood. Liberalism in politics and society meant individual freedom and cooperation between voluntary groups and associations; in law, individual property rights and freedom of contract; in economics, free enterprise and the self-regulating market unrestrained by governmental intervention. Whether or to what extent these things actually existed is not Hartwell's concern: they constitute rather a theoretical model with which to evaluate political developments since World War I. These developments, Hartwell reminds us, have raised up a new model of aggrandizing, interventionist, usurping government as an object of devotion in modern man's ceaseless quest for social progress and salvation.

In order to explicate this concept of politicization, one group of essays analyzes the origins of the state, a second describes the manner in which politicization has occurred, while a third discusses its impact and consequences. Written between 1949 and 1977 by scholars of genuine distinction, including Felix Morley, Michael Oakshott, Giovanni Sartori, Robert Nisbet, Jacques Ellul, and F. A. Hayek, the essays are generally of high quality and, apart from their contribution to the study of politicization, serve as a useful introduction to modern conservative thought. Rather than try to review all fourteen essays, I shall comment on those that best represent the point of view shared by most of the authors.

Robert Nisbet's essay, "The New Despotism" (1975), serves this purpose well. Nisbet begins with his persuasive argument that the rise of sovereign, centralized bureaucracy since the Renaissance has proceeded at the expense of the in-

termediate institutions of family, church, neighborhood, guild, and voluntary association, and in symbiotic relationship with individualism and the values and institutions of mass democracy. Nisbet takes no thoughtlessly simple view of this process, but rather understands the positive appeal in specific historical circumstances of the demands for individual liberty and natural rights that have provided the ideological and the moral foundation for the expansion of the modern state. Ironic or not, however, modern government in Nisbet's view has become despotic. And most recently its despotic labors and ministrations have been directed at a new kind of equality—that of condition or result, rather than the traditional liberal equality of opportunity. In pursuing what seems to be an unattainable goal, with the help of what Nisbet calls the "clerisy of power," American government relentlessly expands its power and intrudes ever threateningly into private and previously non-politicized social spheres. It does so, moreover, in indirect and benign rather than openly coercive and brutal ways, through bureaucratic organization, technology, social services, and the like. Furthermore, as legally protected liberties expand in the sphere of culture and society, even to the point of licentiousness, the political liberty once sustained by local communities, voluntary associations, and other pluralist groups continues to erode.

An excerpt from Jacques Ellul's *The Political Illusion* (1967) underscores the extent to which democratic participation in modern public life encourages the expansion of government and thus in a sense lies at the heart of politicization. Ellul writes that "the greatness of the state, its power to organize, and man's participation in the collective *via political channels* are the ultimate value symbols and criteria of our time, substituted for the religious symbols and criteria of the past." A seemingly ineradicable demand for solutions and a corresponding impatience with accommodation and compromise, he adds, provide yet further reinforcement for the growth of the state. Deeply embedded in modern con-

sciousness and institutional patterns, the phenomena of politicization in Ellul's judgment are "irreversible."

If Ellul is right about the irreversibility of the process that he describes, the point would seem to be to adapt to it as an historically necessary and inevitable trend. This, however, neither the authors nor certainly the publisher—Liberty Press—seem inclined to do. Their apparent purpose in describing once again the great maw of modern government is to make people aware of the dangers it presents in order to stimulate a desire for change. It is appropriate, therefore, to consider what the volume has to say about the possibility of arresting or reversing the process of politicization.

If the essays display any discernible tendency on this question, it is to anticipate an eventual revulsion against the centralized bureaucratic state, borne of catastrophe and crisis. William Marina (1974) writes, for example, that the best hope for reversing the trend toward the hegemonic state lies in the economic crises that advanced industrial societies experience. The heavy weight of social subsidies, defense and welfare spending, and bureaucratic regulations, he predicts, will lead to a reconsideration of the role of government and a probable restoration of natural law and the free market.

If I may refer to a work in which he deals at some length with this issue, Nisbet (*Twilight of Authority*, 1975) similarly suggests that eventually the problems created by the centralized state will become so oppressive that people will turn toward a pluralist philosophy. Nisbet sees hopeful signs of reaction against centralized bureaucracy in renewed interest in localism, decentralization, communalism, ethnic nationalism, fundamentalist religion, and kinship and family. But he believes—and one supposes his conservative colleagues share the belief—that the chief task at present is to break down the controlling intellectual assumption that realism in political and social action requires the centralization of power and enlargement of the public sector as morally

superior to the private. Nisbet *et al.* seek to present pluralism, or in some instances neo-laissez faire, as legitimate and intelligible alternatives available for the time when the centralized bureaucratic state comes to ruin.

If conservatives place a kind of gloomy confidence in an imminent historical catastrophe that will bring down the governmental leviathan, other critics of American politics see a strikingly different situation. In their view the chief difficulty is not too much government power, but *too little*. For them, too, politicization is the fundamental problem, but in their conceptualization of the matter politicization is the conflict of social groups confronting each other in a quest for power, against a backdrop of weak, ineffectual, and ultimately illegitimate government.

The writings of Theodore J. Lowi from this point of view offer the most cogent alternative analysis to the conservative critique of the despotic state. Typically in the post-New Deal era, Lowi explains, the federal government lays claim to an entire field of social activity, such as communications, defense, commercial aviation, and so on. Acting through Congress, it creates a regulatory agency which by a process of political bargaining gives governmental power—the power of sovereignty—back to regulated industries and private interest groups in the form of special privileges. Here is another kind of politicization: concerted efforts by groups, associations, and single-interest lobbies aimed at gaining power or advantage, or, what may be the same thing, promoting particular reforms under the shibboleth of the "public interest."

Henry Fairlie, like Lowi a one-time liberal with a conservative's appreciation of the need for authority, similarly criticizes extremist, single-interest, minority groups on both left and right, rather than the monolithic abstraction of centralized bureaucracy, for the all-absorbing politicization that besets American society. According to Fairlie: "Many of the absurd claims to 'rights' which various groups are now making are nothing more than a

politicizing of large areas of private life that used to be held free from the intervention of politics." This kind of politicization has its origins in America's liberal political culture, and grows out of the tradition of natural rights individualism, which encourages the pursuit of particular interests in the name of freedom and equal rights. Single-interest politicizers demand acceptance of their goals with a vengeance that, as Samuel P. Huntington has argued, is fundamentally subversive of governmental authority.

It is the de-legitimization and the dissolution of public authority, caused by the aggrandizing politicization of minority interest-groups and associations, that is central to the malaise characterizing American politics today. (Only John Lukacs in *The Politicization of Society* observes this phenomenon, pointing out that while individuals feel powerless in relation to the state, government is increasingly powerless in the face of rebellious, demanding groups.) If this is indeed the dominant reality, what is needed is stronger government. But this stronger government, paradoxically, must also be more limited government, confining conflict and bargaining to the legislative chamber and insisting on equitable and objective rules for the regulation and the coordination that are necessary in modern society. The key to stronger government is a restoration of authority, and this can only come about—legitimately, that is—through the adoption of democratically determined rules of law and their administrative application to contemporary problems in ways that are impervious to the self-righteous, importunate politicizing of single-interest organizations.

To be sure, the criticism of regulatory agencies that has become so prominent in recent years expresses a degree of reaction against the centralized bureaucratic state. It may be doubted, however, that a return to laissez faire liberalism is either immediately or remotely imminent. A more

telling portent seems to lie in the federal government's decision to underwrite the Chrysler Corporation, and the City of New York, and the Lockheed Company, and so on. A continuing and far-reaching regulatory role for the national government seems certain. One hopes that it can be constitutionalized, that government can be at once stronger, more limited, and more responsible; that politicization in the sense of a high level of conflict and agitation by single-interest, minority groups will abate. Even if it does, government will still be extensive, and bureaucratization considerable.

With all due humility, I would say this is the principal tendency of modern history. And while conservatives may also discern this trend, they appear unwilling to accept the corresponding obligation that it imposes to acknowledge the end and irrecoverability of classical liberalism, and to accept—and seek to constitutionalize—the modern state. Much as I would like to conclude otherwise, I believe that America's self-governing republican political culture will increasingly be required to adopt methods of rationalization, coordination, and integration in order to provide its citizens with the benefits of civilization—from material goods to education to opportunity to hope for the future itself. However utopian-seeming, these are everywhere regarded as politically legitimate. Of necessity, therefore, our politics will demand a high level of state activity. But this does not necessarily mean ritualistic liberal centralization as we have known it since the New Deal. It can and ought to involve decentralized administration of uniform and objective national standards. And one hopes above all that it will not be burdened by the de-legitimizing, factious, self-interested politicization that so sorely afflicts public life in the United States today.

Reviewed by HERMAN BELZ