BOOK REVIEWS

A Masterpiece of Political Thought

Mark G. Malvasi

Mark G. Malvasi teaches history at Randolph-Macon College in Ashland, Virginia. His essay entitled "Quem Patrem? M. E. Bradford's Southern Patrimony" marked his first appearance in *Modern Age* (Winter 1996). In the following discussion of James Bryce's *The American Commonwealth* (1888) Malvasi indicates the reasons why this masterpiece remains a discerning critique of American political life and thought in the nineteenth century. Though disclosing optimism about the future of the United States, Bryce also identified problems that, if not solved, would have serious consequences. This new edition of *The American Commonwealth*, Malvasi states, comes at a critical hour since "it inspires the imaginative reconstruction of the past and the sober assessment of the future that we today so desperately require."

THE BEST THAT E. L. GODKIN, the editor of the liberal journal *The Nation*, could say about United States congressmen in 1874 was that "we underrate their honesty, but we overrate their intelligence." Henry Adams, another patrician critic of late nineteenth-century American politics, remarked that to disprove Darwin's theory of evolution one need only study the history of the presidency from George Washington to Ulysses S. Grant.

American politics during the last three decades of the nineteenth century invited such rebukes. In *The American Commonwealth*, the most encyclopedic and discerning critique of American political life in this tumultuous era, James Bryce unquestionably concurred with the judgments of Godkin, Adams, and others. Bryce, however, was no congenital pessimist, nor was he like the host of nineteenth-century English visitors to the United States who found little to admire about American customs, institutions, or citizens. On the contrary, Bryce remained optimistic about the future of the United States and identified numerous aspects of American government and society worthy of attention and respect. His encouraging assessment notwithstanding, Bryce also addressed fundamental problems that, if unsolved, would temper his hopeful predictions.

In Bryce's view, American politics at the end of the nineteenth century was dominated not by virtuous statesmen but by venal politicians who conspired to feast at the great barbecue of government subsidies. Republicans and Democrats alike regularly bought votes and saw to it that their partisans cast more than one ballot in critical municipal, state, and national elections. In the absence of a professional civil service required to administer federal programs, public policy became synonymous with

the pursuit of private gain. Access to the spoils of victory quickly replaced any lingering intention to govern while in office. Electoral triumph apparently provided its own rewards.

The period that Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner labeled the "Gilded Age" signaled for Bryce an epoch in American history when the old was dying and the new was struggling to be born. In the past lay an isolated republic of farms and villages, with a traditional emphasis on hard work, self-sacrifice, the patriarchal family, and strict Protestant morality. The population was predominantly English, Scotch-Irish, and northern European in origin. In the future was an imperial nation of cities and factories, with a cosmopolitan population drawn from every corner of the earth.

The vast social, political, economic, and cultural changes that the United States experienced during the Gilded Age strained traditional social arrangements as well as established political institutions. Bryce understood that economic growth and social innovation brought both progress and disorder. In their quest for stability and security, Americans increasingly turned to government. Government on every level, however, was ill-equipped to deal with the new challenges that confronted the nation. Consequently, party politicians, according to Bryce, responded with passivity or confusion.

In his estimation, most political leaders were mediocrities. The issues that preoccupied the major parties were either tangential or irrelevant to the problems at hand. Both Democrats and Republicans avoided taking positions on the great questions of the day: the rise of corporate monopolies, the conflicts between capital and labor, the decline of the agricultural economy, and the defects of a financial system that produced a major economic crisis approximately every twenty years. "Neither party," Bryce insisted, "has anything definite to say on these issues":

> ...neither party has any clean-cut principles, any distinctive tenets. Both have traditions. Both claim to have tendencies. Both have certainly war cries, organizations, interests enlisted in their support. But those interests are in the main the interests of getting or keeping the patronage of government. Distinctive tenets and policies, points of political doctrine and points of political practice, have all but vanished.... All has been lost, except office or the hope of it.

Instead of assuming an active role in the dramatic transformation that the nation was undergoing, American political leaders and American political parties remained locked in a rigid stalemate, watching the remarkable changes that were taking place in their midst but doing little to affect, shape, direct, or control them.

To Bryce, American politicians were more concerned with winning elections, retaining office, and distributing patronage than with clarifying issues, defending principles, or solving problems. Bryce was only partially correct in this assessment, for the lethargy of the party system was more the symptom than the cause of the political impasse of the late nineteenth century. Rather than a wholesale decline in public morality after the Civil War, the spectacular increase in the demands placed on government engendered the vast free-for-all at the public trough. The real crisis of late nineteenth-century American political life arose because public policy could not keep pace with rapidly changing economic conditions and social realities. The result was a political system in which grievances festered and grew without relief.

Throughout more than 1,500 pages of observation and analysis, Bryce offered few specifically political remedies to

counter these unfortunate developments. So many politicians, businessmen, and interest groups benefitted from corruption that Bryce foresaw little possibility of reforming the American political system from within. *The American Commonwealth* is, as a result, a superbly anti-political book. American politics could be rescued, Bryce asserted, only by "a succession of men like the prophets of Israel to rouse the people out of their self-complacency, to refresh their moral ideals, to remind them that the life is more than meat, and the body more than raiment, and that to whom much is given of them shall much also be required."

Bryce was quick to point out that the United States had no prophets of this sort. Yet the nation had been blessed with "two classes of men who maintain a wholesome irritation such as that which Socrates thought it his function to apply to the Athenian people": informed critics to identify public ills and philanthropic reformers eager to develop and administer the antidote. In these thoughtful and determined experts Bryce placed a singular confidence.

There was thus much in Bryce's mature political thought that reflected the emerging Progressive movement. Like Bryce, progressive reformers did not seek political solutions to the problems of the urban-industrial world. If Progressivism was anything, it was a revolt against politics. Instead, progressives wanted to turn the management of government and society over to scientifically trained experts isolated from partisan conflicts, who could engineer a more efficient, more productive, more disciplined, and more stable order. Bryce applauded their efforts.

Sooner or later, however, the progressives required the involvement of government to attain their objectives. Only government, most reformers agreed, could effectively curb the powerful private interests that threatened the welfare of the nation. The progressives also concluded that American government at the turn of the century was miserably unprepared to execute such an ambitious program. At every level, political institutions were outmoded, inefficient, corrupt. Before they could reform society, the progressives discovered that they would have to reform government itself. Initially, they directed their attention against the political parties, which they considered undemocratic and reactionary.

Like the progressive reformers whom he esteemed, Bryce contended that the major political parties undermined the constitutional foundation of the United States government. He welcomed any measure designed to weaken the influence of parties on American politics. Bryce, for example, extolled the adoption of the secret ballot that made it virtually impossible for party managers to dictate the voting behavior of their constituents. He also praised such innovations as the direct primary, the initiative, the referendum, and the recall, each of which was likely to limit the power of political parties and to improve the quality of candidates for office.

Making government more democratic and more responsive to the will of the people, Bryce concluded, was but one way in which party rule could be broken. Equally important was placing power in the hands of nonelected, nonpartisan officials insulated from political agitation and trained to negotiate the growing complexities of modern life. Bryce lauded the campaign against partisan politics in municipal government, especially the operations of the urban political machines. The exposure of "machine government" and "boss rule" in cities as diverse as St. Louis, Minneapolis, Chicago, Cleveland, Cincinnati, Philadelphia, and New York helped to remove

city government from the domination of the political parties and to stimulate a general demand for political reform. Bryce found these advancements both salutary and reassuring.

He had reason to be optimistic. When Bryce published the first edition of *The American Commonwealth* in 1888, America stood near the zenith of its preëminence, wealth, and power. In America during this period cultivated tastes and civilized values prevailed. More than political, social, and economic theories and institutions, Bryce recognized that it was the interior richness of American life that would determine the future of the nation.

The historian John Lukacs has characterized the years between 1895 and 1955 as "the bourgeois interlude" in American history. By the middle of the nineteenth century a distinct bourgeois culture was already taking shape, at least in the northern states. As astute an observer of American affairs as Alexis de Tocqueville argued that the ascendancy of bourgeois standards, values, and institutions was the most important and dynamic aspect of antebellum society.

The nineteenth-century definition of "bourgeois" was more moral than economic. The term referred to the culture of an aggregate of individuals who, though ambitious and acquisitive, had learned to restrain their ardor for economic gain and material comfort. The marriage of moralism and materialism was the distinguishing characteristic of the American bourgeoisie. An ethic of moderation, discipline, and virtue was essential to the bourgeois social and political vision. Nowhere was this aspect of civilization in the United States more evident to Bryce than in the attitudes, manners, aspirations, and lives of American women.

Like Tocqueville, Bryce admired the spirit, rectitude, and civility of American women. He regarded the women even more than men of the bourgeoisie as the agents of culture and the pillars of civilization. Husbands made money; wives determined how to spend it, patronizing the arts, the theater, the symphony orchestra, the opera, the ballet, and a multitude of other cultural activities in addition to promoting and supporting a legion of benevolent reform movements. The feminization of culture during the late nineteenth century may have made the United States something of a matriarchal society. Bryce, nevertheless, reasoned that

> The respect for women which every American man either feels or is obliged by public sentiment to profess has a wholesome effect on his conduct and character, and serves to check the cynicism which some other peculiarities of the country foster.... No country seems to owe more to its women than America does, nor to owe them so much of what is best in social institutions and in the beliefs that govern conduct.

Bryce looked forward to the future of the United States "with a hope that [was] stronger than anxiety," for America marked "the highest level, not only of material well-being, but of intelligence and happiness, which the race has yet attained." Could Bryce have guessed that little more than a century after he wrote *The American Commonwealth*, many thoughtful Americans would look back on this bygone era with a mixture of longing, admiration, nostalgia, and regret? Despite the unsettling social changes and rampant political corruption, countless Americans now regard the last decades of the nineteenth century as the "Age of Innocence." Americans living in the late twentieth century have witnessed, and contributed to, a growing disrespect for law, property, women, family, learning, religion, and, indeed, civilization itself. They have at the same time paradoxically embraced a past that represents all that was du-

rable, familiar, and wholesome about American life.

Ironically, it is the worship of boundless progress and the belief in unconditional freedom that have relaxed manners and morals, loosened the bonds of family, and generally dimmed the prospects for the future. Bryce no doubt would have objected to this judgment. He admired above all the confidence and vigor of Americans, who felt "in their veins the pulse of youthful strength" and who had "already achieved many things which the Old World has longed for in vain." The Americans, Bryce contended, had kept alive the faith in progress and the hope for a better world.

Yet Bryce could not have endorsed, or even imagined, ambition without limits or freedom without responsibility. George Santayana, a younger contemporary of Bryce, once declared that "absolute liberty and English liberty are incompatible and mankind must make a painful and brave choice between them." That many, perhaps most, Americans no longer recognize the necessity of such a distinction is astonishing, perplexing, and disheartening. The new edition of *The American Commonwealth* has thus appeared at a critical hour,[1] for Bryce's masterpiece inspires the imaginative reconstruction of the past and the sober assessment of the future that we today so desperately require.

1. *The American Commonwealth*, 2 vols., by James Bryce (Indianapolis, 1995) *Vol. I: 720 pp. Vol. II: 992 pp.*

The Truth of Whittaker Chambers

Milton Hindus

Milton Hindus, a member of the founding faculty of Brandeis University, taught there for thirty-three years, retiring as the Edytha Macy Gross Professor of Humanities. His first publication in *Modern Age* (Spring 1960) was his portmanteau review of Boris Pasternak's *I Remember: Sketch for an Autobiography* and N. Narokov's *The Chains of Fear*. In appraising Sam Tanenhaus's exemplary biography of Whittaker Chambers, Hindus judiciously probes those qualities of character that Chambers's liberal enemies have long sought to reject. In a drama of treason, betrayal, and expiation, the picture of Chambers that finally emerges is one of a sympathetic, intelligent, and sensitive man long misrepresented and misunderstood. Both biographer and reviewer show here that if Alger Hiss was among "liars in high places," Whittaker Chambers was his own man—a man of truth.

IN THE WAKE OF THE DEATH of Alger Hiss, more than thirty years after the death of the man principally responsible for the exposure of his double life which he stubbornly denied under mounting evidence that he was lying, a long, detailed, and