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# POLITICS AND CIVILIZATION*

D. W. GOTSHALK

IN THIS paper, while I shall say something about politics and civilization, I shall be concerned most of all with international politics and twentieth-century civilization. Even this is a very large subject, and my remarks actually will be limited to certain philosophically important aspects of it. Also, my chief aim will be merely to indicate a problem that these aspects of politics and civilization seem to raise and, beyond that, to suggest incidentally, not a solution, but some reasons for the problem's existence.

## I

I shall begin by stating certain general assumptions I shall make about politics and civilization and by giving a brief general analysis of the relation of politics and civilization, as I understand them.

First, as regards civilization, our primary concern will be with civilization as activity or as a system of human activities, not with civilization as a state of being or static condition, which is a momentary, arrested cross-section of civilization in the active sense. Furthermore, I shall assume that civilization as activity includes conscious activities, as well as an array of institutions, customs, "unconscious" habits, and other resources and substrata of action.

Now, any activity, certainly any human activity of the type just described as constituting civilization, can, I believe, be analyzed into two components. These might be called the process component and the guidance or control component. Consider, for example, the activity of fine art. The creation of a work of art involves numerous physical, physiological, and psychological processes that have been trained for performance. These processes constitute a kind of technology that disposes effective causal energies in a highly selective manner. But in some sense also the creation of a work of art involves a sense of direction, an aim, a goal-in-view, or an aspiration of personality, which in a modest and sometimes very discerning way serves as a governor of the technical processes and keeps them groping or winging toward a compelling objective. Creation of art, except in the most rare and unlikely cases, is not an automatic and purely mechanical activity, and even where it seems to be, some imbedded directive, lodged in the subsoil of the artist's mind, can usually be found that clarifies the contour and significance of his work.

The basic principles of this analysis of

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fine art as activity, I believe, apply quite generally, and specifically to a civilization as activity, e.g., the American, Western, or world civilization of our time. Each of these has the two components. Each exhibits a vast array of processes that are generally characterizable in various ways, work and play, production and consumption, doing and undergoing, and the like. These processes *in toto* consist of the expenditure of vast resources of causal energy with a technical proficiency of highly variable caliber. But there is also the guidance or control component. The energies are discharged in certain directions. There are specific designs to be found in the work and play, the production and consumption, the doing and undergoing, and the like, indicating that in these processes something selective is wanted, that aims are being entertained and operating in the action, that goals are being pursued, explicitly or covertly, and guiding or controlling the processes.

As to politics, I shall understand it also as an activity, an activity within the larger complex of activities called civilization. But politics as activity is a term of many meanings. As popularly understood, it often means any trickery in public life used to increase, or to try to increase, a person's or a party's advantage over another. Also, to quote Santayana, it sometimes means "a scramble for office among sophistical rhetoricians."[1] In this discussion, I shall use the term "politics" in a less cynical sense, namely, as the art of government. Now, as an art, politics has a technical side. It involves energies and skill, and in some cases a knowledge of institutional mechanics that is often highly special and difficult. But for us it is the goal-side of politics that is of greatest relevance. This goal-side is peculiar, first of all, because politics not only has, like other activities, its own goals and guidance, it also is itself a process of producing goals or principles of guidance for the civilization in which it operates. The policies and laws that a government creates set up requirements of social behavior. They are guides for group life. They constitute norms that are intended to be observed by its officers and by the citizenry, indeed by all who are within the area of its sovereignty. Furthermore, these norms are not just requirements intended to move us by their inward rightness or goodness, although they might. They are in the main supported by an extrinsic force that makes them peculiarly compulsive. Thus, when the voice of conscience is stilled, when the tugs of tradition and custom have subsided, when the vision of art and literature, philosophy and religion makes little appeal, the imperatives of the state may still gain assent and action and strike terror and fright in the disobedient. In this sense, politics is not merely one more activity or even one more norm-producing activity within civilization. It is that activity capable of supplying the most generally compulsive and decisive guidance principles of civilized life.

## II

When we move from a general definition of "politics" and "civilization" and from a general analysis of the relation between them into the context of recent times, certain characteristics must be added at once to the above description of the two activities to bring the description into fuller conformity with the facts of the times.

The first is the enormous range of politics in our civilization. Politics is obtrusively everywhere. Even in the democracies, where once the tumult of govern-

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ment could be considered by the great majority as so much synthetic background noise, the effects of national and international policies today more and more visibly disturb everywhere the main tenor of daily life. In the multitude of totalitarian nations, the vast and visible range of government is in certain respects even more effectively and unpleasantly evident.

Closely connected with the largeness of its range is the great increase in the power of government. Not only does government tend to obtrude or intrude everywhere, but it has far more power at its command. I mean by this not only an increase of government power over certain phases of civilian life, over industry, agriculture, finance, education, and the like. I mean not only that the governments of almost all nations today are devoting vast resources of our civilization to military or semi-military purposes, and that many of these governments have at their disposal weapons capable of mammoth destruction. Also included is the fact that the governments of our time have behind their vast and increasing striking power, production, distribution, and communication systems of unparalleled causal potential. These systems may be used for many ends, but in time of need they can be quickly redirected to the ends desired by governments. Not extensive government but extensive government with this colossal power potential brings us nearer to a description of the position of politics in the context of our civilization.

But at least one more characteristic must be added to this description. This concerns the ends pursued by governments. In our century, while government has changed remarkably in its causal potency, the aims sponsored by government have not changed in any adequately parallel manner. These aims are complex, but, even in most recent times, one age-old aim has still claimed overwhelming attention. This is the pursuit of power. This aim has remained a fixed star, not only for the generality of our artisans of government, the politicians, in seeking their own ends, but also as the central aim of governments themselves in shaping policy toward each other. Every major move they make is calculated on a large international chessboard in its exact bearing both on the power position they occupy and on the position of the "friendly" and "unfriendly" governments that are their eager power rivals.

In other times, certainly in prescientific days, the aggressive pursuit of highly partisan ends in the public domain had various results, some good, many very bad. But in our times, the margin of safety for this aim has narrowed immensely. In our times, the mechanisms for controlling physical and human nature have been developed in an extraordinarily high degree. Our industrial might, the instruments for mass communication and manipulation now in our possession, exceeds the wildest fancies of a century ago. To put this enormous causal potential at the disposition of agencies dedicated to gaining power supremacy is like moving dynamite near an open flame. Even with our power potential largely in leash, as in the last decade, the result has been to increase enormously the vicious quality of our public life and to create unparalleled fear in peoples all over the earth. People are scared. Before the era of thermonuclear weapons, de Jouvenal wrote: "The essential psychological characteristic of our age is the predominance of fear over self-confidence."[2] This condition of social distress and unhealth has in certain respects been increased even more markedly in

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the last decade, and certainly a leading source of it has been the role of politics in our civilization.

## III

It is incidental to my chief purpose to attempt to explain why politics has played this role in our civilization. But let me say a few words here on this topic before proceeding. Many explanations describe the situation as a result of outworn goals being retained, even enlarged, in new and very changed circumstances. This disparity between our technological means and our political ends, one shiny and new, the other rusty and old, has already been suggested. It is certainly in some sense one important factor in any full explanation of the situation, and I shall return to it later in a different connection.

I believe, however, that at least one other factor must be included in any minimum explanation. This is the singular inappropriateness at any time of the elevation of power to a dominant public end of civilized living. The situation in recent times merely illustrates in very concrete terms the *reductio ad absurdum* of this conception of a public end.

I know there are some, indeed many, who hold that politics is merely a contest for power, and that the theory or science of politics is simply a description of the mechanics of this contest. "The general field of the science of politics is the struggle for social power among organized groups of men."[3] This view is sometimes accompanied by a cynical conception of moral and social norms as the after-product of a rising new order of successful power managers. "A rising social class and a new order of society have got to break through the old moral codes just as they must break through the old economic and political institutions. Naturally, from the point of view of the old, they are monsters. If they win, they take care in due time of manners and morals."[4]

Still, however strong the pursuit of power is in practice, however widely this pursuit is recognized as a creator of manners and morals and as worthy of scientific description, the elevation of power to a dominating end, and certainly to the dominant end of civilized living, is fundamentally a paradox. For power is causal efficiency. Power is a command of physical instruments and human beings to effect ends. Power is a means, a resource for doing things. To elevate power to the dominant end, even to a dominating end of civilized living, is, in old-fashioned language, to subvert the order of nature. The potential means to a terminal good becomes disconnected from this type of good. The inevitable result is a second-rate substitute for the good, and a striving that has no terminus and that must grow to greater intensity and fury as the range and potency of the means involved increase.

But whatever the full explanation of the condition we find ourselves in, it is the problem posed by this condition that is my central concern. This problem might have arisen among us even if state power were not a public end at all, if, for example, the glory of Jehovah or something else were the central animus of politics. The problem in its philosophical aspect concerns a kind of fundamental contradiction in basic principles. The great role of politics as the art of government in a civilization, we have said, is to create policies and laws to serve as norms for social behavior. Moreover, politics and government of all human agencies, generally speaking, furnish the most imperative and decisive directions for a civilization. Yet the prevailing role of politics and government in recent times

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has been to unhinge the processes of civilization in an increasing degree. Indeed, with each advance of our technological civilization, under politics and government as now conducted, we seem to be getting ever closer to the possibility of total barbarism.[5] This contradictory situation is perhaps the central problem of politics and civilization at present.

## IV

In this paper, my chief aim, as I have said, is simply to present this problem in some of its significant philosophical aspects. Let me repeat my chief point, which concerns a conflict of principles. The role of politics in the process of civilization is to be a norm-producing agency, to discover and enact certain public standards or patterns of good to direct and guide social existence. Only to the extent that politics or government effectively plays this role does it seem to have any valid excuse for being. Yet the prevailing effect of politics and government in recent times has been to lead us into an increasingly disturbed social life and toward an ever more imminent total destruction of social existence. Let me at this point guard against several possible misunderstandings.

First, our criticisms are not against politics and government as such. The thought is not that the less government the better and, ideally, government should wither away. On the contrary, I suspect that in the years ahead, indeed even now, more government than we have is needed, not less. Certainly, if our technological civilization continues along what seems to have been its basic trend up to the present, developing increasingly the crowdedness and interconnectedness of our world, I suspect that to do its job properly government rightly will have to grow larger in the future, not smaller.

Second, our criticisms also are not intended to be directed against politicians. From at least the time of Socrates, of course, politicians and philosophers have been critical of each other. But in view of what was just said it would appear that artisans of government are necessary, and even more than ever necessary now, in the structure of civilization. A philosopher might say that if our politicians had been more enlightened, the disorders of our civilization probably would have been less severe. But it might also be said that a great deal of what is good in our civilization, and this is certainly considerable, is owing to enlightened political action. On the whole, I believe, the chief fault does not reside in our politicians as such. Rather they have been the victims of a system of training long intrenched and difficult to oppose, and probably it will be only by changing this whole system radically and fundamentally that we may expect a thoroughly improved situation in politics or among politicians.

Let me say a few words on this point, at least in so far as a discussion of it seems to shed some light on the relation of politics and civilization today, and so help to clarify further the problem I am trying to present.

## V

Plato proposed that philosophers be rulers and rulers philosophers; but, flattery aside, and I mean flattery to the rulers, of course, this does not seem to be a very practical proposal. Following the principle of division of labor, admired by Socrates, it would seem wiser for philosophers to devote their major energies to philosophy and only minor efforts at most to public housekeeping. Philosophy itself, at least today, would seem to be a large enough undertaking.

There is, however, a kindred concep-

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tion of rulers, even advocated by violent critics of Plato,[6] that does seem to some purpose. This is the conception of the ruler as a social engineer and of government as social engineering. In some respects this analogy is repellent, for social engineering seems to mean the skilful manipulation of peoples as if they were passive things, as electrical or mechanical engineering means skilful manipulation of physical entities. This element of the analogy is herewith completely rejected. But one might conceive a good engineer as a creator of useful structures for channelling physical processes and a good ruler as a creator of useful patterns for the channelling of social actions. One is the skilful creator of physical forms, the other of social norms. In this respect, at least, the analogy of engineer and ruler seems acceptable and sound, and government seems to be properly describable as a kind of social engineering.

*If* this is the case, I beg of you to note the consequences for the problem we are discussing. Our great feats in engineering, mechanical, electrical, chemical, and so on, are largely the work of the late nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. Besides the technological skills necessary to produce them, these achievements have behind them hundreds of years of increasingly precise and systematic theory, constantly under review to retain within it only generally valid principles. Moreover, in our day even the most incompetent and fifth-rate engineer, to qualify for professional activity, must have some grounding in mathematical and physical science and must master in some fashion a rather large body of universally accepted theoretical principles.

Compare this with the situation in politics. First, there is here no hundreds of years of background in precise and systematic normative theory, under constant review to retain within it only generally valid principles. Indeed, there is no such background at all. Literature, the arts, philosophy, religion, and the humanities generally contain a large number of unco-ordinated normative suggestions for theoretical consideration. But we have not developed from these as yet any body of principles for the fruitful union of peoples comparable in universal validity and general acceptability to the principles developed by physics regarding the actual union of things. Furthermore, we have not yet discovered a method by which such a universal theoretical science might be developed. There have been innumerable discussions of this. There have been starts—many false starts—to get going on it. But, so far, judging by clear consequences, nothing definite and substantial appears to have emerged, although, of course, it may be emerging.

With this absence of theoretical and methodological foundations it seems Pickwickean to describe politics as it is now as engineering at all. There is no secure grounding in universal theory with which even the poorest in government must have some familiarity and on which the best can develop creatively and imaginatively in their specific projects. There is no axiomatic discipline, attitude, outlook, *esprit*, to go with the theoretical grounding and establish a minimum code of professional integrity. A few ideas of the good drawn from literature, philosophy, religion, custom, or common belief; some technological skill, such as training in law: this is about the maximum equipment for the art of government that even the best now possess.

Thus, it is small wonder that those who do conceive politics as social en-

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gineering, such as Popper, often insist that the tasks of government now should always be very specific and primarily negative—to relieve suffering, not to promote positive happiness.[7] Viewing things from a methodological and theoretical standpoint, one would hardly wish to trust government as it now is further than this. Moreover, if politics is engineering, and I believe in the sense we have already accepted politics is, it is also small wonder that politics is failing by such a wide margin to do the job it should be doing in our civilization. Indeed, the wonder is that it has done as well as it has, that it has frequently produced enlightened leadership in various areas and innumerable works of obvious and widespread benefit.

In any case, the disparity between our politics and our physical technology, between the most imperative principles of social guidance and the most potent causal resources in our civilization, becomes immediately intelligible. It is not merely a disparity between old and new, i.e., that we pursue outworn archaic goals with shiny new instruments, although this is the case, as I have already said. More profoundly, it is a disparity in understanding and method, in system of training, in quality and character of theoretical and practical foundations, on which these two all-dominant factors of our civilization are based. There is simply no comparison on these points. Politics is not in the running. The result is that the kind of engineering politics now attempts to do is inevitably very inferior when it is set alongside of the kind of engineering that our physical technology does do. There is no comparable set of marvels being produced because there is no comparable set of solid foundations from which such marvels might spring.

## VI

In concluding this description of the posture of politics in civilization, and specifically in our civilization, I would like to add three remarks to what has been said about the problem raised.

First, the problem posed by politics in our times is, I believe, one that everyone must face in some fashion. There is no escape. A return to religion, the intense pursuit of pleasure, the persecution of others, immersion in an all-consuming routine or specialist task: these are a few of the many ways that people today try to run for cover. But I believe they are of no avail. What we are involved in at this time is a large-scale or almost universal problem of public order or disorder. And each human being as an inhabitant of society is, so to speak, in the public domain and necessarily implicated in any large-scale or well-nigh universal problem of public order or disorder.

Second, this problem in certain respects at least offers an extraordinary opportunity for the philosopher. As we have seen, the problem revolves around the extreme disparity between the role politics has in a civilization and the role it is playing now in our civilization. Also, the role politics has in a civilization, the role of norm construction, if it is to be properly grounded, seems to call for a theoretical foundation which politics has lacked and lacks at this time. What it calls for is a science of public order of universal scope, which by virtue of being under constant review to eliminate error is capable of being generally accepted as a reliable basis for procedure. A theoretical science delineating universal principles of the actual physical order underlies our technology. A parallel science delineating the elementary requirements for a fruitful social order seems needed

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for our politics. And just as the philosophers of the seventeenth century combined with mathematicians and physicists to lay the foundations of modern theoretical physics, so, it seems to me, it is the opportunity of the philosophers of the twentieth century to combine with psychologists and social thinkers to lay the foundations of a modern theoretical humanistics. The detailed psychological and social knowledge is beginning to accumulate. More is wanted and more is coming. But what seems most wanted are conceptions of social order capable of general application, capable of indefinite refinement by new knowledge and experience, and capable by this method of winning their way in the forum of knowledge and, like the natural sciences in engineering, becoming generally accepted elements of social education. To try to contribute concepts of this type seems an appropriate undertaking for philosophers.

Finally, while time for such a long-range project may be short, it may be longer than we think. The peoples of the world, especially the technologically gifted peoples, are aware of the danger at hand and as yet seem in no mood to commit race suicide, despite the vigorous gestures that still are being made in that direction. Even with sufficient time, it is true, the basic problem of getting our public ends securely readjusted is formidable. It is not merely the theoretical difficulty of forging new concepts to be developed by a new attitude and method. It involves the practical problem of wearing away centuries of inertia and drift in the management of human affairs. The difficulties here may be too great. There may be no way to make sufficiently effective progress against them. Still, the stakes are high enough, I think, to make the undertaking worth considering. It may be that the twentieth century will see our technological civilization end by its own devices in a mighty shambles. It may not, however. This civilization may limp along from crisis to crisis until we become inured to public dissonance. Or, it may right itself by a miracle. But what would be gratifying, I think, and worth the expenditure of all reasonable effort is if the tumult of our times were the birth-pangs of a new venture and, in the perspective of later days, the second part of the twentieth century marked the distant decisive turning point in man's long uphill struggle toward putting reason and decency securely into the foundations of organized social existence.

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## NOTES

1. G. Santayana, *Dominations and Powers* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951), p. 309.
2. Bertrand de Jouvenal, *On Power*, trans. J. F. Huntington (New York: Viking Press, 1949), p. 349.
3. James Burnham, *The Managerial Revolution* (New York: John Day Co., 1941), p. 58.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 229.
5. Cf. F. J. P. Veale, *Advance to Barbarism* (Appleton, Wis.: C. C. Nelson Publishing Co., 1953).
6. Cf. Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950), chap. ix.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 155.

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