

LF 1217.5 IS 1968

PAM



THE WORLD OF POLITICS

Inaugural Lecture
delivered at the College
on 5th March, 1968

by

W. H. GREENLEAF, B.SC. (ECON.), PH.D.
Professor of Political Theory and Government

UNIVERSITY COLLEGE OF SWANSEA



Classmark: LF1217.5 B5

1968

Accession no: 69/455.

Location: PAM

SWANSEA UNIVERSITY COLLEGE
LIBRARY

1002421843



UNIVERSITY COLLEGE OF SWANSEA

THE WORLD OF POLITICS

*Inaugural Lecture
delivered at the College
on 5th March, 1968*

by

W. H. GREENLEAF, B.SC. (ECON.), PH.D.

Professor of Political Theory and Government

THE study of politics in this University College was introduced relatively recently, as was the case in most universities in this country. But, of course, here as elsewhere aspects of the subject were taught from the very beginning as part of the instruction given in more orthodox fields of learning such as classics, history, philosophy, and literature. The first specific appointment of a lecturer in politics was not made until 1949, the chair of political theory and government being established four years later. And the 1950's were the period in which political studies very firmly came into their own in British universities. So, despite this late start as compared with more traditional subjects, when I arrived in Swansea I found an already large and very flourishing department. And my first, and most gratifying, task on this occasion is to express my esteem and my thanks to all those who created and tended this thriving development in the face of real, if sometimes transient, difficulties.

My subject tonight is the 'world of politics' and the broad theme of the remarks I shall make concerns the nature and differentia of politics as an object of academic study. And I must begin with an apology because, although this is a big field, it is also one in which an army of reapers has already been at work. Nevertheless, I think that the harvest is so abundant that even the rather negligent search of a straggling gleaner like myself may be rewarded. Yet, somewhat ungratefully perhaps at the prospect of so generous and easy a yield, I want to begin by, apparently, throwing a certain doubt on the status of the subject I profess. For political theory and government is not (in the strict sense) an academic discipline at all: it is a subject-matter or area of attention. There is no special technique or method by which political science can be distinguished, and in this the labours of its votaries are, of course, unlike the work of the natural scientist or the historian, the philosopher or literary critic. In fact, the suggestion that the student of politics is an eclectic is

very well observed, for he draws on so many ways of analysis as seem to suit his purpose. And if the current fashion is to try to emulate the methods and employ the categories of the natural sciences (as is, indeed, the case in the field of social studies generally) it is not to be supposed that this is a unique, or necessarily a desirable, trend or one beyond the possibility of reversal. I shall make some comments later on about this political scientism. But this will be in the context of the general issue I wish to put forward for your consideration, which is: if political theory and government is not itself a traditional academic discipline, then how should its area of interest be described, and how may it be explored and made intelligible? These are simple questions but not necessarily easy to answer. As the immortal Pickwick observed to Count Smorltork, 'The word politics, sir, comprises, in itself, a difficult study of no inconsiderable magnitude.'

I

First of all, then, how can we seize on politics as a specific form of activity in some way distinct from the other areas of connected action we talk about? In everyday life and language we commonly refer (for example) to the world of sport, to the financial or business world, to the world of education, of the theatre and so on. And in each of these cases there seems to be implied a set of institutions, activities and persons linked in a particular and recognizable way. What do we mean when we talk about the world of politics as one such aspect of our affairs?

I imagine the common-sense view would be that there is no real problem here at all because everyone knows what politics is. The matter is wholly familiar and is grasped at once. It is true, perhaps, that its nature may not be sharply established because (as Hume says somewhere) we do not annex distinct and complete ideas to every term we make use of; and when we talk about (say) government

or law we may not spread out in our minds all the simple notions of which these complex ones are composed. But, nevertheless, we know whether or not we are talking within the proper frame of reference. We recognize politics as we recognize a familiar handwriting or voice: the act of apprehension is undoubted even though the particular signs are unspecified.

I suppose that this is so. But 'all true knowledge contradicts common-sense', and it will hardly do to rest content with this implicit point of view, with what Hegel calls 'uncomprehended immediacy'. For one thing, it may be based on a limited or esoteric experience. More importantly, what is apparently apprehended tacitly in this way is never in fact simply given. It hides quite complicated processes of perception and (in Collingwood's phrase) bristles with conceptual inferences. It invariably masks, too, a considerable diversity (or even inconsistency) of ideas. Politics is observed at work in so many ways. If we should try to articulate the position and list a series of ostensive descriptions (as they might be called) we would point out that politics has to do with running the community's affairs, with protecting persons and property, with authority, leadership, influence, pressure groups, government, law, parties, monarchs, presidents, cabinets, armies, assemblies (popularly elected and otherwise), police, civil servants and so on. Clearly, it embraces a very wide range of reference to persons or offices or activities of many sorts any of which might be quite reasonably invoked as the heart of the matter, as the central feature which gives a degree of conceptual consistency to the world of politics.

At this point, then, we may be driven to a further effort of conscious reflection and to ask how such elementary determinations, all of them, in effect, different aspects of the world of politics, can be held together in some synthesis of the whole. And, at this level of inquiry, what is demanded is some focal direction of attention which accords recognition to all of these partial rep-

resentations of the political scene. The search is for a general statement which tries to describe what is universal in politics and to bring speculative unity to this very varied range of phenomena, thereby distinguishing the world of politics from related areas. It is this kind of intellectualist enterprise that has often been attempted by academic students of politics. Building on the sphere of popular opinion and common-sense, yet trying to systematize and transcend it, they weave an understanding of politics around crucial concepts or principles which are formulated as precisely as possible. In this way, there have been extensive discussions of: power; legitimacy and coercion; the state and sovereignty; the authoritative allocation of values; the making and obeying of law; attending to the inherited arrangements of a set of public institutions; maintaining equilibrium by the conciliation and adjustment of interests; and such like.

There are many instances of this kind of thing at varying levels of sophistication. And always there are difficulties, ambiguities and omissions that limit the value of these lapidary generalizations. There is always someone who will point out that really there are one hundred and fifty or more different definitions of the term 'state' (that is, as many as there are independent countries); or that whatever organizing concept is favoured fails to take account of what was once true of politics in the past, or of the manifestly political arrangements of some obscure exotic tribe or region today. Or that it covers too much that is really not political at all. Even that the whole definitional exercise is tautological, no more than a roundabout way of saying that politics is politics.

But the central fact is that this whole reductionist procedure rests on a mistake. And it is simply misleading to assert that, sooner or later, some attempt has to be made to define politics. The error is to suppose that when, as with politics, we are faced with a wide variety of institutions, events and activities, we must look for the identical and recurring feature which is common to them

all, that we must analyse these more or less familiar situations to discern their unifying attribute and express this in a universal form. It is clear that the identity achieved in this way depends on dissection and separation, on the winnowing out of one (or a few) major aspects of the thing examined, and is thus partial and superficial; it is necessarily indifferent to other features of the situations in view. It may be even that the likeness pursued amid these contexts is, in some instances, less important than their differences. In either case, concentration on common qualities is at the expense of a full knowledge of each individual situation and by itself yields no insight into the diversity displayed by each instance and by the range of instances. General statements of this kind are, in a word, merely abstract. And the more general they are, the more empty they become, the less in touch with the real, and less instructive. It follows, therefore, that it would be to compound this kind of error to try to establish a super-definition which encapsulates all the features elicited and stressed by a partial analysis. So it is a great mistake to suggest as, for example, Duverger does, that in discussing the concepts of the social sciences, it is necessary, in the face of a variety of definitions, concepts, classifications and methods that prevail, 'to look for features common to them all'.¹

The fact is, we should not look for a designation of this kind at all: it is a waste of time and a diversion of effort. In political situations, the number of recurring characteristics is so great, so diverse, and connected in such a complex and interlocking way that it is not feasible to reduce them to a single formula. And students of politics who are bewildered at their inability to define their subject in this way concern themselves unnecessarily.

It is true that rational reflection requires the achievement of some form of universality. But what is needed is not reduction based on the abstraction of residual

(1) M. Duverger *Introduction to the Social Sciences* (tr. Anderson, London, 1964) p. 11.

likenesses only but rather a conception formed by concretion of both similarities and differences.

If, therefore, it is not appropriate to delimit the area of political studies in terms of a designation, in what other way can this task be attempted? In what manner should we approach the job of grouping political data?

An interesting suggestion is to be found (in one of its most recent expressions) in the late Professor Wittgenstein's discussion of 'family resemblance'. He was concerned with the analysis of language, and denied that all its forms have any one quality in common, suggesting instead that linguistic phenomena should be seen as related to one another in many different ways. And he illustrated his point of view further by reference to 'the proceedings that we call "games"'. There are so many different kinds of game (board games, card games, ball games, parlour games, olympic games, and so on) that it is difficult to see that they all share a common attribute. Rather if they are looked at carefully, what will be remarked (he says) is 'a complicated network of similarities, overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail'. And Professor Wittgenstein added that he could think of 'no better expression to characterize these similarities than "family resemblances"'; for the various resemblances between members of a family: build, features, colour of eyes, gait, temperament, etc., etc. overlap and criss-cross in the same way.¹ Some members of the family have the same way of holding their head when they talk, others have the same nose or the same build, and so on. And, of course, it is not necessary for any one feature to be common to them all so long as this range of characteristics is widely distributed. It is in this sense, then, that 'games' or 'forms of language'—or 'politics'—constitute a family group.

(1) *Philosophical Investigations*, I. 65-7; *Blue and Brown Books*, pp. 17-20, 117.

Now this is certainly a most interesting idea and it points us in the right direction even if it does not itself go far enough for our purposes. Granted that the inter-relationship is complex and the whole likely to be blurred at the edges, and that it is not appropriate to search for unity in terms of a common and unvarying attribute, it nevertheless seems reasonable to ask what degree and type of grouping is implied by the concept of 'family resemblance'.

And one obvious point is that the identity concerned embraces both similarities and differences. Members of a family are like and unlike one another in various ways and both the similarities and the contrasts are necessary, in the sense of being given, aspects of the whole. Further, as the family identity is not segregated from differences but contains and dominates them, alteration is not excluded either. While recognizably the same (in some sense), the group can (within limits) accommodate changes whether of size, components or features. It alters over time. So in this respect it is rather like one of its own members who, while changing his form or activity in many ways, is nevertheless the same person.

And this directs our attention to the nub of the matter. In what sense is an individual, or group, or activity or institution, the same thing even through its variations and even though it alters? What sort of identity is it of which the differences are part? The philosophical idealists used to call this a 'concrete universal'; but without raising the controversies surrounding this expression, I think the answer may be found in the alternative concept of 'character'.

Now, when we talk of character in this way we are not, of course, referring to anything wholly exact. But (as with definition in its literal sense) we do have in mind, I think, the idea of limits, even though these may be rather hazily formulated. When we discuss the character of a given concrete individual (whether the individual is a person, institution or activity) we mean, not that its

personality can be precisely designated in terms of a recurrent attribute, but that it has a certain range, falls within given bounds which are opposites but which the character nevertheless embraces. For instance, when we say that a person does something 'out of character' we imply that he has gone beyond the pales within which his behaviour is normally restricted.¹ I should like to illustrate this notion by a passage I happened to read recently and which occurs in a letter Macaulay wrote in 1828, in which he is describing Lord Jeffrey, the famous Scottish lawyer and critic, and which indicates the kind of consideration I have in mind. When, Macaulay writes, Jeffrey is

absolutely quiescent, reading a paper, or hearing a conversation in which he takes no interest, his countenance shows no indication whatever of intellectual superiority of any kind. But as soon as he is interested, and opens his eyes upon you, the change is like magic. There is a flash in his glance, a violent contortion in his frown, an exquisite humour in his sneer, and a sweetness and brilliancy in his smile, beyond anything I ever witnessed. A person who had seen him in only one state would not know him if he saw him in another.

And Macaulay goes on to say how this assemblage of dissimilar qualities was united in other ways, and concludes: 'I can easily conceive that two people who had seen him on different days might dispute about him as travellers in the fable disputed about the chameleon.'² This is an extreme case perhaps. But it does indicate the ambivalence (or even many-sidedness) to which I refer.

What I am suggesting, therefore, is that if the nature of the world of politics is to be adequately determined then it is not enough to designate this world in terms of one

(1) Cf. M. Oakeshott 'The Idea of "Character" in the Interpretation of Modern Politics' (an unpublished paper presented to a meeting of the Political Studies Association, 1954).

(2) Sir G. O. Trevelyan *The Life and Letters of Lord Macaulay* (London, 1889), pp. 106-7.

or a few recurring attributes which are seen as common to all the contexts observed. This is a defective procedure so far as it involves abstraction from a total situation which it is desired to understand as a whole. Nor is it sufficient simply to note the complex set of interrelationships that links these varied instances. This is simply to raise the problem of the nature of the aggregate concerned. Rather what is required is a concrete identity that encompasses without elimination both the manifold differences and the similarities and which in addition is not indifferent to the process of change involved in this variety of connexions. And this unity in diversity may be achieved by establishing the limits which indicate the range of character revealed by the world of politics.

II

The question that now arises, then, is how best to explore this character and to make it intelligible.

In everyday life, as we know, it is already sufficiently understood for the practical purposes involved. But a more precise representation is required in the context of systematic reflection on its nature and differentia. We want to know in terms of what categories and pre-suppositions, and by what method of inquiry, the character of the political world may be most specifically and adequately determined. And there appear to be two possible approaches that are relevant to the study of politics. We have, in fact, to nourish ourselves like Tennyson's

youth sublime,
With the fairy tales of science, and the long result of Time.

In other words, with the naturalistic and the historical modes of understanding. I should like to say something about both of these ways of seeing the world of politics.

Each one is rather like a pair of spectacles the lenses of which only permit certain ideas and types of evidence to get through to the vision of their wearer. But this simile implies, of course, that there is a further issue before us, Which of these two media gives the clearer view of the world of politics?

First of all, then, what does a naturalistic understanding of political life involve?

Moulded as it has been by the influence of religious feeling and thought, both classical and Christian, the system of scientific beliefs has itself been represented by two different yet not unrelated notions: on the one hand, the idea of transcendence, of a self-contained and permanent order rising above the unstable plurality of the merely sensuous; on the other hand, the concept of the physical and temporal incarnation of the godhead. These categorizations have emerged in styles of naturalistic thinking which together mark the limiting moments of the scientific character. First, science as deductive thought, as a stable world of ideas whose generalizations consist of an analysis of these structural concepts and of the relations between them. Secondly, science as a body of knowledge which rests on hypothesis, observation and experiment, on the empirical study of fact with a view to establishing, for example, regular causal patterns, classificatory systems or functional relationships. And it is clear that a science of politics, genuinely conceived, must assume a form compatible with this configuration of scientific beliefs.

Political knowledge as a deductive system of scientific ideas is a notion that can be traced back at least to the beginning of the modern world. Whatever may have been his real intention, Thomas Hobbes certainly—or usually—seems to be arguing that the only sound basis of political understanding is to establish an unassailable axiom about the propensities of human nature and then to elaborate deductively, and in the geometrical mode—the most exact form of reasoning that he knew—what followed,

from this premiss, about political society. Somewhat later, both Jeremy Bentham, a typical Enlightenment rationalist whose ambition it was to be the Newton of the moral sciences, and his disciple James Mill adopted a similar form of logical demonstration from admitted principles, claiming to reduce the study of government to such a formal system of argument, and political and legal decision-making to matters of calculation. And, just as theoretical economists of a certain kind long proceeded in this fashion, beginning with a model of the rational, utilitarian individual and deducing therefrom theories about the behaviour of the market, so latterly, similar attempts have been made to establish pictures of political (rather than economic) man governed by a like spirit, as in the so-called 'theory of economic democracy' of Anthony Downs who posits a basic rule about the rational pursuit of power within the framework of a democratic polity and from this draws a series of deductive conclusions. In a similar way, William H. Riker has used axioms about rationality and assumptions drawn from games theory as the basis of logical inferences about the behaviour of parties and other human groups.

But I suppose that one of the most typical and elaborate present-day equivalents to this type of general theory in the field of politics is the systems analysis of writers such as David Easton. This kind of exercise is confessedly imitative of the natural sciences: Easton uses as the motto for his book on *The Political System* a citation from Charles A. Beard praising the great intellectual enterprise of subduing the phenomena of politics in the naturalistic fashion. And within the general framework of this approach, a similar intent is also indicated, for example, by the use of diagrammatic formulation, the building of theoretical models, the stress on the potential value for quantitative expression of the variables concerned, and by the vocabulary employed: equilibrium, steady state, inputs and outputs, feedback loops, and so on. And I regard this mode of analysis as, in the broad sense,

deductive because (as it seems to me) the whole project is really an examination of what is involved in the axiomatic concept of a system, that is to say, the idea that societies of all kinds have a built-in tendency to equilibrium. Definitionally implicit in this notion are the other key ideas of structure, mechanism, process, function, role, self-regulation, developmental accommodation, and so on. It is necessarily in such terms, too, that the world of politics is seen: that is, as a complex system of inter-relationships maintained in a steady state by certain structures and functions. And the whole constitutes a stable (if sometimes amorphous) order of ideas transcending the actual welter and contingency of political life and change as ordinarily experienced.

Knowledge derived from empirical inquiry into actual political behaviour is also a flourishing enterprise and has been from the time of Machiavelli, Bacon and all their followers from the seventeenth century on—the 'indolent inductives' as they have been so aptly called. And there is no doubt that, in this fashion, a vast amount of data has been acquired about the world of politics. Nowadays (as Professor W. J. M. Mackenzie has recently reminded us) a great deal of this sort of work is carried out in connexion, for instance, with community power studies, the analysis of administration and organization of various kinds, the psychology of small groups (raising matters such as leadership, participation, communication and so on), and also with the great number of societies that have political arrangements of a kind rather different from those with which we are familiar in the western or developed world. Moreover, the ease of handling effectively large quantities of material has been immeasurably increased by the advent of the 'big machines', computers, and by data banks and such like. Of course, all this is not merely, or necessarily, an exercise in 'hyperfactualism', that is to say, collecting facts for their own sake and in the hope that, later on, some ideas will emerge to explain them or give them meaning.

Much of this type of work has been carried out under the inspiration and guidance of causal hypotheses of one sort or another, much as Marx, for example, tried to describe the basic factors at work in the development of human society and the necessary laws governing this process of change. On the other hand, most of the generalizations have, of course, been properly more modest than this, middle- or low-grade propositions of one sort or another. Often, it must be confessed, these are of a trivial or rather obvious order, such as Gosnell's famous generalization that non-partisan stimulation of voting will (in certain conditions) increase the number of people who vote. Alternatively the object has been to propound a typology of a whole range of political systems or of some aspect of them, it may be of a certain kind of institution, such as local government or parties, or of a process such as legislating or decision-making.

Because, then, of the most impressive and profound achievements of modern science, both intellectual and practical, it has often been assumed that the world of man and society would be most suitably examined and made intelligible (and thereby perhaps most effectively controlled) by the use of naturalistic categories and methods. This attitude is, indeed, part of the cultural bias of our time, a symptom of the age. So, quite often, one reads without any surprise that a genuine knowledge of society comes into being only 'with the extension of the scientific method . . . to the social world of man himself'.¹ And many sociologists, in particular, claim that their subject is no more than 'the application of the scientific perspective to the study of society'.² And as we are all often urged to be sociologists now, a good many students of politics have (as I have indicated) not been slow to follow suit in this respect.³

(1) D. Martindale *The Nature and Types of Sociological Theory* (London, 1961), p. 27.

(2) S. Cotgrove *The Science of Society* (London, 1967), pp. 24, 25, 37.

(3) W. J. M. Mackenzie *Politics and Social Science* (Harmondsworth, 1967), passim.

Now, it would, of course, be ridiculous to suggest that this naturalistic approach to political studies is in any respect improper or wholly without value. There can be no question of putting up a notice outside the political estate saying 'Scientists keep out!' Further, it would be absolutely absurd to urge a point of view that might seem to cast some sort of aspersion on scientific method as such. Certainly, I do not want to do this. But what I do wish to stress is that this scientific perspective is not the only one available and may be misleading, may not be the most fruitful, at least so far as the study of the political world is concerned.

My reasons for suggesting this do not rest at all on the incidental practical difficulties which arise in the application of these methods to a political or social subject-matter: for example, that it is difficult to conduct experiments in sufficiently stringent conditions, that the observer's values are likely to intrude easily, that the existence of free-will is an awkward obstacle in the way of generalization, that there are such problems as those of the self-denying and self-fulfilling prophecies, and so on. These are real difficulties but they are by no means insuperable; nor are they special to the social sciences. No, the real perplexity rests on different and (as I see them) more fundamental grounds; and it centres on various forms of what might be called abstraction, a feature of scientific beliefs that makes them, in fact, akin to the process of reductionist designation I criticized earlier in this lecture.

The first form of abstraction is involved in the attempt of general theories to transcend or encompass the variable and complex features of practical life and to arrive at a stable view of this experience which, unlike the original, is completely uniform and ordered, and free of all contingency. Consider, for example, the functional type of axiomatic theory to which I referred a little while ago. This has many virtues: it can be rigorous and stimulating in analysis; prolific of new terminology and questions;

and it is capable of fascinating internal adaptation and development. Yet there is an air of unreality about it all, even of superficiality. It is almost as though the sophisticated management and elaboration of the theory becomes an end in itself and proceeds on its abstract, or tautological, way having little regard for or relevance to an understanding of particular political realities. It becomes detached from the specific and concrete events, processes and decisions it is supposed to explain, and it is sometimes difficult to see how its notions can be cashed. This

is an abstraction
Remaining a perpetual possibility
Only in a world of speculation.

And this is altogether apart from other, internal, difficulties that this type of theory involves, such as the question whether too little stress is placed on change and on the role of dysfunctional factors; or, more importantly, whether a pattern of behaviour can be said to be explained (in any real sense) by showing its bearing on the whole structure of society.

The second type of abstraction involves the selection and hiving off of certain aspects of the given experience for special emphasis and consideration. And, since the beginning of modern physical science, something of this sort has always been acknowledged as a crucial aspect of scientific analysis. This recognition was reflected, for instance, in the old distinction made between the primary and secondary qualities inhering in an object or process, the former being those which could be grasped in scientific terms (such as mass or velocity, in fact anything quantifiable) while the latter were attributes which could not be so conceived and which were, therefore, scientifically irrelevant or merely subjective. It was this same contrast which underlay the so-called 'dissociation of sensibility', the great abyss which appeared to have opened up between the scientific understanding of an objective

mechanical world on the one hand, and the world of moral, aesthetic and religious values on the other. The root of the matter was really the process of analysis which seemed to be involved in scientific investigation. An object, for instance, was regarded as a collection of various attributes or qualities which could be notionally distinguished. These particulars could then be classified and compared and become the basis of an elaborate taxonomy; or certain of them could be set apart, associated with others of a like kind, and these relationships be regarded as instances of a general law. The important thing is the process of dissection involved, and the destruction thereby of the concrete individual object originally in view in favour of a concentration of attention on certain of its aspects. In this fashion, the scientific understanding can be seen as stepping aside from experience as a whole into a stable shadow-land of its own making. Not illegitimate of course; and this is an immensely powerful mode of inquiry. But it is necessary to recognize what is assumed and what may follow if we view all objects unremittingly in this way in a sort of dead and spiritless disconnexion. Something is lost. However, exponents of a science of society often recognize quite frankly that abstraction of this sort is a crucial aspect of the kind of analysis they enjoin and seem to suggest even that in this lies the strength of their position.¹ Yet this must mean that the procedure they favour does, whatever its power, impose definite limitations on, and involve a sort of one-sidedness in, the view of politics achieved.

For example, there is the matter of the relevance of some of the naturalistic techniques of inquiry. Thus, quantitative methods may be very useful and open up an inviting range of possibilities of obtaining more information about, say, voting behaviour and movements of opinion. But there is also much about which they may be

(1) e.g. Cotgrove *op. cit.*, pp. 14, 31; Duverger *op. cit.*, p. 12; S. F. Nadel *The Theory of Social Structure* (London, 1957), pp. 153-4.

able directly to tell us very little, for instance, how and why a decision on a particular issue was taken by government. And these areas that the methods cannot illuminate are often the more important ones politically. So to overstress the undoubtedly interesting results of quantitative inquiry in limited matters is rather like the behaviour of the drunken man who has lost a coin in a dark street and who keeps looking for it under a lamp-post because that is the only place that is well lit!

What is involved here is particularly well illustrated by the comparative method. This method is of considerable significance in the social sciences generally where it is often a substitute for the direct experimentation which is not possible. As variables cannot be controlled in a laboratory, a great number of different yet supposedly similar sets of conditions are looked at at the same time. What is done is, in effect, to isolate (that is to say, abstract) certain significant features or functions which seem to resemble one another and to use these as a basis of classification and comparison often on an international basis. So, it is suggested that 'the French National Assembly, the British House of Commons, the German Bundestag and the Italian Chamber of Deputies can be compared. These institutions have identical general characteristics'. In the same way it is thought possible to compare the office of Prime Minister in all the great countries of the contemporary world; or believed that the general structures of, say, the decision-making process are analogous wherever this process occurs.¹ Well, of course, these things *can* be compared; and such an exercise is, I suspect, a usual part of university courses on political institutions. But I doubt very much whether it serves any useful purpose beyond giving its practitioners a feeling of cross-national omniscience. Certainly, the task is (so far as it appears valuable) corrupting and the conclusions are necessarily thin and superficial as well as misleading.

(1) Duverger, *op. cit.*, p. 262.

I say this because there are many problems some of which seem quite intractable. There is the difficulty of knowing that the elements compared are really alike. And if they occur within the same cultural context then their autonomy may be very hard to establish; while, if they are not so situated, then it is very likely that the differences will be more important than the similarities. Again, if generalizations (or 'syndromes' as I believe they are sometimes called) are to be based on genuine comparison then the evidence for each element concerned must vary neither in quality nor amount; and negative instances (to which all too often little attention is paid) assume a vital significance. Moreover, the whole process is based on abstraction of the kind I am here concerned with. What are compared are not two or more whole, organic entities but selected aspects of them only. Not the House of Commons and the U.S. House of Representatives but rather chosen features of the activities of these institutions which are removed from the total context of their operation, in which alone they have meaning, and held apart as specimens for investigation and, possibly, as instances of a general classification or principle. And there is the further problem that even such abstracted elements as these may nevertheless be of very complex make-up.

Some odd things are done in the name of this comparative exercise. To take an extreme case, the American ethnologist Murdoch compared the two party system in Great Britain and the U.S.A. with the dualist lineage organization of some Indian villages in the American south-east. I must confess I doubt very much indeed whether such a comparison can contribute much to an understanding of the world of politics. In a different context, and to give another example, some very dubious generalizations about the nature of militarism have been put forward by Alfred Vagts and others on the basis of a comparative study of military castes, observations which rest on data of very variable sorts and quality, and which

can be quite misleading; as they are, for instance, about the British military tradition and the political and social role of senior officers within that tradition. The error is to suppose that there is some sort of common denominator in all the forms of military organization. And, in fact, what is said to be comparative in this sort of project is often merely illustrative; that is, instances are chosen (usually on a limited and rather unsystematic basis) to exemplify a theme independently arrived at. The conclusions based on these so-called congruities are often oversimplified and may, to use Professor Evans-Pritchard's phrase, be little more than 'crude qualitative approximations'.

And this view is confirmed when one considers the other major form of abstraction involved in the scientific view of politics and which may be called the distortion of externality. That is to say, political phenomena tend to be seen only as events to be observed, measured, classified, compared, regarded as instances of general laws, and so forth, much as A. F. Bentley wanted in some such fashion to examine group activity from the outside, or as a functionalist is concerned not so much with the actual motives or ideas of actors in a socio-political situation, but rather with the objective role of their activity as it serves to maintain societal equilibrium (as it must in accordance with the demands of his general theory). Events alone are analysed; and ideas may be ignored.

Yet this surely omits a crucial dimension of understanding? For human behaviour is only fully comprehensible when seen, not as a series of events, but as activity, that is, in terms of the conscious ends that guide the people concerned, in terms of the thought implicit in what they do. This is particularly true of such a world as politics which is so infused with ideological and moral considerations. In this sense, a naturalistic view of politics is empty and defective so far as this element is put to one side. And what is necessary, on the contrary, is

to eliminate the contrast between external events and internal ideas that seems implicit in the naturalistic approach, and to deal instead with the concrete activity as a whole, the thought expressing itself in action. Consider, for instance, a political institution of any kind. This is not a thing or object which can satisfactorily be observed and analysed as if it were a specimen or an experiment in a laboratory. It is a group of people behaving in a certain way and in accordance with given rules; it is an activity, part of a form of life. And as such it can only fully be comprehended in terms of the ideas and purposes immanent in it which give it meaning and make the rules acceptable.

It follows that we need a less abstracting, less mutilating process of understanding than that provided by naturalism. And this is where recourse may usefully be had to history.

Now, the nature of historical inquiry is, in its turn, variously conceived. And one of the limiting moments of its character is indeed determined by naturalism itself. For there is a great and continuing tendency to see history as a part of science or as ancillary to it. Yet if history is thus regarded, historical fact necessarily assumes one of the forms of scientific abstraction I have described. For example, it may help to sustain a set of assumptions, say about human nature, which form the basis for a system of deductive inference; or which by providing material about, perhaps, the process of economic or cultural development, helps to demonstrate a general principle of change. Or, again, as a sort of ancillary reservoir of data, history can supplement researches into the facts of the contemporary world and, in this way, contribute to a cumulative body of knowledge useful in solving the problems of human relations. But, in any of these roles, a fact is something separated from the full flow of historical experience and subordinated to organizing generalities derived from outside history itself. It is true that this is one way to make history seem more than the doubtful story of successive events: but it is the naturalistic way.

And, of course, this history which masquerades as science can offer no more than the appearance of escape from the toils of abstraction whilst binding its shackles still tighter. It is merely naïve to suppose that science and history must deal with 'individual cases' in the same way; and that it is unnecessary to make any further distinction.

The turn must be, instead, to the contrasting aspect of the historical character which is concerned not with the establishment of generality but with the fullest possible study of the origin and development of the historical 'individual'. What is studied is not examined as an instance of a law or theory or principle but for its own sake as a unique entity. Of course, I use the term 'individual' in a special sense here. I do not simply mean a human person alone, but any person or group of persons, institution, activity, idea, process, or whatever seems to the historian to constitute a unity. This individual may be, therefore, of varying scope. It might be a specific politician like Lord Attlee, or a group of politicians such as a party or faction, it might be a given office such as that of Prime Minister, an idea like the Divine Right of Kings, or an event such as the passing of the great Reform Bill, and so on. Whatever is thus chosen by the historian, and whatever its scope, is then recounted as a complete story in all necessary detail and in the most coherent manner possible. And the identity sought is one in which all the differences and tensions are present and comprehensively encompassed in the overall meaningful picture. So, it is clear that the historical approach, understood in this way, may be aligned with the appropriate manner of determining the character of the world of politics which was discussed earlier.

Certainly it is to be contrasted with the abstracting forms of naturalism. Such a study of the historical individual can never be unrealistic in the way that general theory can be, for it never departs from concrete reality and is always concerned with this in all its detail. Similarly,

and for the same reason, it does not break down the objects of its attention into sets of separated particulars. And, in a very important respect, it can never be accused of ignoring the realm of ideas. For there is a sense in which this realm is its real home (notwithstanding the fact that some recent and influential schools of history have tended to ignore this dimension). In the introduction to his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, Hegel is reported as having said that everything that has ever happened is the struggle of mind to know itself.¹ So, whereas naturalism sees things (as I have called it) externally, history, in its independent guise, is concerned with the 'inside' in a very special way. This is what (following Hegel) Croce and Collingwood meant when they said that all history is the history of thought. So the world of fact studied in history is really the knowing mind as such. And, if this is so, it follows that human activity (including politics) is only meaningful, not as seen externally, but as the story of the thought implicit in that activity. It is essential, therefore, to lose the distinction between purposes and events, thought and reality, ideas and institutions, and to deal with the concrete activity as a whole: the thought or indwelling life expressing itself in action. And politics, like any other endeavour, is thus seen as an aspect of the attempt, by the human spirit, to build itself a world which is compatible with how it wishes to live. And it is, of course, in this sense, that the study of politics is especially concerned with the examination of political thought—in its relation to the context from which it emerges, to the activities and institutions in which it finds expression, to its various levels of articulation and coherence.

III

When we come to consider how these two systems of belief—naturalism and history—stand in relation to one another, it is obvious that a number of situations is possible.

(1) (tr. Haldane and Simpson, London, 1892), i. 23.

They might be seen as separate but equally legitimate views of experience as a whole. Or as pertaining to two quite contrasting regions of thought and activity. Again, it is possible to view them as distinct moments in a scale of forms of knowledge. Then, perhaps, as involving two different but nevertheless complementary methods. At least this range of options is open to us; and the names of exponents of each possibility come readily to mind. Of course, these prospects all seem to imply an antithesis between the two ways of thinking involved. Scientific understanding is concerned with what is universal and proceeds by way of abstraction and generalization. While, in contrast, the concrete reason of history deals with the individual in its own right and not as an instance of a general law or classification; and it shows, too, how it is possible to have knowledge of things that are constantly altering without invoking either an unchanging realm or substrate or law to provide stability.

Yet these two styles of thought need not go entirely unreconciled. And I do not mean simply that the processes of scientific thinking must rest on historical experience or that they seem in some respects to reflect historical notions of change. I do not refer to connexions of this kind. I mean rather that it is possible to see them both as necessary, to see that, different as they are, they are nevertheless aspects of a single identity which is composed indeed of this very contradiction. And such a unity may be found in a philosophical point of view.

Consider the way in which we have been examining the world of politics. This inquiry has not itself been a naturalistic or historical one. Rather it has been a discussion, at another level or in a different perspective, of how naturalism or history view that world. And from these second-order speculations comes the conclusion that the character of the political world is itself indicated or determined by these two modes of understanding. These systems of belief open up a range of possibilities about the nature of that world and what we should think about it.

They are (so to say) the moments of its configuration. And in this manner *both* of them are involved in a comprehension of its nature and differentia, of the limits within which the character of this world emerges.

The character of the world of politics may, then, be grasped in this way, and it may be called a philosophical way. True, the philosophical style employed in the analysis is, I admit quite unashamedly, unmodish and indeed downright old-fashioned. But it is, in my view, useful for all that. If nothing else, it has given some indication of what should be avoided and what, perhaps, can be achieved in the study of politics; also, it has implications about how this study should be organized.

For instance, it is appropriate always to recall the limitations inherent in naturalism. At the same time, it is manifestly necessary that something should be learned about this important approach to political studies; though those universities or students of politics who stress only this way of inquiry and who think that political studies is a profession which seeks to explain in terms not historical, are adopting a point of view that, whatever its strengths and virtues, is one-sided and inherently defective in important respects. Rather, we must (like the hero of Homer) gaze on all the pleasures of naturalistic fascination and yet not be seduced by them; and remember that the charms of history are, indeed, more enticing still.

Again, it is clearly implied that the study of institutions and ideas, into which the teaching of politics is traditionally divided, must not be completely separated, as is so often the case in practice. For they constitute an historical whole and should not be sundered. As I have said, a political institution is a form of activity which can only properly be comprehended if the ideas and purposes implicit in it and which give it meaning are also grasped. The aim in this respect should be not a formal or even a sociological study of institutions merely—let alone an indulgence in the superficialities of comparison—but rather an examination in depth of a political tradition as a

whole, in all its aspects, to establish its full range of character. And to do this properly means dealing in a much wider compass of material than is usually invoked in courses on political institutions.

Implications of this sort are many and they have practical pedagogic consequences which it is fascinating to contemplate. Among them there is just one more that I must mention specifically, and this concerns the study of political thought. One of the notions I mentioned a little while ago was that all history is the history of thought and that politics was (in this sense) to be seen as a world of ideas which, of course, has a history of its own. Now, political thought is of two, or perhaps three, kinds. First of all, there is political theory. And this is either political doctrine, that is, persuasion or recommendation of some kind cast in ideological form; or it is the analysis of the concepts and arguments used in political discussion. Obviously both these exercises (which may sometimes get mixed up) will be conducted in the style regarded at the time as being most convincing or rational. And then there is the history of political thinking, the history of both political doctrine and analysis at all levels of articulation and complexity. Within the framework of such a history, political theory of either kind is simply the latest entry in the account and is itself to be considered and explained in the context of this history as a whole. And I would like to draw one specific conclusion from all this: that if the fullest (though not the only possible) account of the world of politics is provided by an historical inquiry into the detail of given political traditions; and if this involves the study of institutions and behaviour in terms of the ideas that give them meaning; if, further, all history is in this sense, basically the history of thought; then it follows that the palm must be awarded to that aspect of political study which is called the history of political thinking. But I hasten at once to confess two things. One is that I am *parti pris* in this matter having, both by interest and accident, come to specialize in this particular aspect of

political studies. The other is that I would not at all wish to espouse the cause of what is often taught under the title, the history of political ideas. A mere catalogue or chronology of political opinions and doctrines, without any attempt to achieve proper contextual reference and thematic coherence, is a travesty of what the study of this history ought to be. Again, the detailed analysis of the concepts and arguments of a few, rather arbitrarily selected, 'great books', is not such a history at all but merely what I have called political theory in another guise; and the rationale of this pseudo-philosophical manner of inquiry itself is (as I have said) a matter for historical explanation. So when proponents of this analytical theory and the historian go out together for a ride then, as Collingwood says, the historian comes back with the philosopher inside.

But these are, I suppose, controversial matters; and I must now conclude. Or rather, I have to come to an end. For there is not really any conclusion in this kind of discussion. Only, at best, a widening understanding of the possibilities that lie ahead. We began with some problems about the world of politics as a whole; and now face some difficulties about the character of the university study of that world. One question succeeds another; and the new is in some respects the old in a fresh form. But the intervening exercise is not necessarily valueless if it has provided some alternative, and perhaps more suitable or convincing, perspectives to those with which we first started. So (if I may once again cite Mr. Eliot in his Bradleyan mood),

the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

Filmset 'Monophoto'
and Printed by
Allens Printers (Wales) Limited

LIBRARY



UNIVERSITY OF WALES
SWANSEA

