THE STUDY OF POLITICS

THERE is something incongruous, possibly impertinent, in offering to give an inaugural lecture more than six years after this university had done me the signal honour of electing me to succeed so great a scholar as Sir Ernest Barker in the chair of Political Science. My main, my only effectual excuse, must be the stress and strain of war, the claims of other authorities than the university on what services I could perform. The alternative was not the giving of an inaugural lecture earlier but the not giving of it at all.

Yet that alternative, which has its attractions for human idleness and timidity, was rejected by me and, I think, rightly rejected. For there is a special duty incumbent on a professor in a field like mine to declare the faith, or the doubt, that is in him. He is not professing an exact science in which his opinions, prejudices, views of his field of study matter little. There may, indeed, be no such fields of study, but if there are, the academic study of politics is most certainly not one of them. To claim for it the austerity and exactness, the freedom from the passions of the hour that is the peculiar glory of those studies of which this university is the most famous academic home, would be absurd.

This seems to me to be a truth self-evident, but in academic fashion, I fall back on the greatest name in the long list of those who have written on politics in the

English tongue. It is true political science, true realism to assert with Burke that 'no reasonable man ever did govern himself by abstracts and universals'. Neither does nor did any society and the study of a field of human action in which passion and faith must play a great part must call, at any rate, surely may call for a modicum of passion and faith in the student?

If this be admitted, it is right that I should declare that I do not come to the study or teaching of politics a complete neutral, ready to believe that nothing has yet been decided or that all is eternally in question. I do not, so far, see my duties as those of a political seismologist content to note an earthquake here and a mere tremor there. Like Sir Ernest Barker, I think that the theme of politics is closely connected with ethics and especially 'with liberty as a part or element of the social aspect of goodness'. Such a confession will seem naive to many, but to those who hold beliefs like mine it is some consolation to notice how hard it is for the adherents of more realist creeds, tied by first principles to more material concepts, to purge their vocabularies of the seductive words. And if those words are only used to seduce because of the resonance imparted to them by so many centuries of history, the mere habit of using them may not be without unforeseen results. For as Elie Halévy used to say, from the point of view of the statesman, of the public moralist, the homage of hypocrisy, paid by vice to virtue, is a real homage and may end in the conquest of the hypocrite by the virtues he has practised so long. To talk continually of liberty is dangerous, for the

word may ask to be examined, and if examined may be found to have its old appeal. Be that as it may, the study of politics, as seen by me, is first of all and, perhaps, last of all, the study of the means whereby liberty and authority may be best combined, whereby the dignity of the free man is made compatible with the highest and richest forms of co-operation. For the art or science of politics, if it be more than a device for the acquisition of coercive power, must I think terminate in the creation or augmentation of men, not of things.

Had this chair been founded a century ago, the old Cambridge of mathematics tempered by classics might have been scandalized by the intrusion, but there would have been less scepticism as to the existence of a field of study called political science, although there might have been strong feeling that the proper place for such study was London or even Oxford. It may be surmised that there would have been fairly general agreement with the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge which began a lengthy work on *Political Philosophy* with a chapter entitled 'Advantages of Political Science'. True, in that chapter was admitted, handsomely, the superior precision of other disciplines.

'Mathematicians who run hardly any risk of error—naturalists who run but little more—have never been so bigoted and so uncharitable as those whose speculations are fated to be always involved more or less in doubt.' Having, from time to time, listened to the professional conversation of practitioners of these disciplines, I am a

little inclined to see in this handsome testimonial an illustration of the well-known contrast between the reverence of the laity and the ironical levity of the priesthood. But the contrast with 'political reasoners' in whom 'we find beside the intolerance of metaphysicians, a new source of error and of fault in the excitement which the interests of men, real or supposed, lend to their passions', has still its old force. Indeed, it has more than its old force, for we may doubt to-day whether any such academic discipline as political science exists, a doubt practically unknown to earlier ages.

There is, it must be admitted, in the title of this chair, an ambiguity or a pretension that many find repellent. The direct connection of science with politics is infrequent, and that politics can be, in any but the most special sense, a science, may well be doubted. We can, of course, regard the whole of human experience as an unplanned biological experiment, providing data which, in their different ways, the historian, the economist, the sociologist, the political scientist studies and systematizes. And many, many books have been written on some such assumption. With few exceptions, however, the world has willingly let them die, and the rulers of the world have not been willing to go to school to such masters. So it was when Lemuel Gulliver happened to mention to the King of Brobdingnag that 'there were several thousand books among us written upon the *Art of Government*; it gave him (directly contrary to my intention) a very mean opinion of our Understandings'.

The King's opinion is widely shared and until a Darwin or Mendel comes among us to give a few general laws of political behaviour true of all species of political societies and of men in all their political relations, there is not much hope of changing this judgment of the world. In this sense 'political science' *is* a pretentious term, since its students and teachers do not acquire any such mastery of the political world as do physical scientists of the material world. Politics may have all the potentialities of the atomic bomb, but those potentialities are not the result of the activities of political scientists, as Plutonium or Neptunium are of the activities of the physicists.

When the whole problem of politics was the combination of liberty and effective authority and while there was still apparent agreement on the meaning, both of liberty and of effective and legitimate authority, the mechanisms of politics could be studied with the same optimistic attention as the mechanics which were transforming the industry and commerce of nations. Representative government was as happy and imitable an invention as the steam engine. Henry Hallam would have agreed with James Madison in admiration for the discovery of 'this great mechanical power in government, by the simple agency of which the will of the largest political body may be concentrated, and its force directed to any object which the public good requires'. This discovery relieved the optimistic political thinkers of the early nineteenth century from the fears of the incompatibility of power and freedom which had haunted Montesquieu and Rousseau. The

fall of the Roman Empire was as much due to the failure of the Roman Republic to find this solution of its imperial problem, as to the incursion of the Barbarians, the influence of Christianity, or any accidents of history of the type of the length of Cleopatra's nose. The desperate remedy of Caesarism was made necessary by the failure to find the mild remedy of a representative Senate.

Dwelling in this climate of opinion, it was easy to delimit the field of political science, to put excessive faith (as even John Stuart Mill did) in mechanical devices like proportional representation, and see in the formal spread of representative government a ground for rejoicing and an invitation to study the ways in which the new Prussian or Japanese parliamentarism was imperfect though hopeful, the ways in which the congressional government of the United States diverged from a norm of which the House of Commons, or the total English system as described by Bagehot, was the exemplification.

The study of politics became, especially in the United States, a study of the mechanics of a society whose general character was taken for granted. Political mechanisms and ideas were added to a social structure; either they were forcibly imported and imposed as by the British in India, or were adopted by an awakening state as in Japan. If the adoption of western political principles and practices did not seem to give uniformly good results, or indeed uniform results of any kind, there were apparently adequate explanations to hand: race conflicts, illiteracy, backward religious beliefs and practices, debilitating climates, mere

intellectual failure to grasp the rules of the game. So could the state of Mexico, of Italy, of Spain be accounted for. This type of explanation survived down into very recent times. It would be easy, but unkind, to exemplify it, to refer to a modern map illustrating the close correlation between illiteracy and dictatorial government, or to arguments assuming that once the Prussian military and civil bureaucracy was put under parliamentary control, the mere virtues of the parliamentary democratic system would work wonders, above all the wonder of replacing an old and deep-rooted German tradition with a new and foreign tradition. But to put it that way is to be unjust to the optimists who hardly considered the question of tradition at all, but saw the problem simply as the replacement of one mechanically conceived system of political organization by another.

We are, for the most part, cured of that illusion to-day. We have seen that universal literacy was no proof against the imposition of tyranny and that the most ingenious imitations of our political methods often, very often, failed to work. It has been seen that the question was not one of making minor modifications like the adjustment of a ship's piano to sail through the tropics, but of pondering the question, in no very optimistic frame of mind, 'Can any political mechanisms be usefully exported at all?' It was a useful reaction but it was too complete a reaction.

For the failures and the disillusionments of the old methods of comparative politics came from their too limited definition of the content of 'politics' and their

failure to notice the relevance of other fields of comparative study. We have come to see the profound relevance of economic problems. We can see, for example, that the main Irish problem of the nineteenth century was the economic problem of the land system. We can see that the mere verbal imitation of the constitution of the United States of America by the United States of Mexico was bound to be a parody as long as the Mexican social structure was so different from the American, as long as there was no equivalent of the 'We the People of the United States', the concept and the political reality on which the constitution of the United States rested and rests.

It was and it is an easy reaction to dismiss the whole political apparatus as irrelevant and so its study as time-wasting pedantry. But such a view would be as far from realism as that of Broadbent in *John Bull's Other Island*. Broadbent, you will remember, could 'see no evils in the world—except, of course, natural evils—that cannot be remedied by freedom, self-government, and English institutions'. It was and is proper to laugh, but we can laugh too heartily and fail to notice that Broadbent was only exaggerating grossly, not talking mere nonsense. For freedom, self-government and English institutions have in practice cured or moderated very serious evils, from Suttee in India to child labour in England. The modern history of the Ireland in which Broadbent was pontificating would have been very different if there had not been English political institutions in England—and in Ireland. If

you doubt that look at the very different history of Poland under the rule either of Prussia or of Russia. Because in Ireland the rulers and ruled talked the same political language, which both assumed was universally valid, they had a common ground on which to fight and argue and, on the stronger side, an increasing moral but none the less real compulsion to diminish the strain caused by the conflict between words and practice. Because there was a common political language and, if you will, a common superstition that political language mattered, the mere preponderance of power on one side was not given full weight. If you think that the matter of the dispute between England and Ireland was, once the basic land question was settled, of no real moment anyway, it is surely a very academic doctrine indeed that, in the name of realism, ignores what passions really move men to action!

And if the 'People of the United States' has become more and more a reality behind the text of the American constitution, it is because the constitution has proved, in practice, to be an effective environment for the real body politic to grow in.

When we laugh at the superstitious reverence of past generations for 'freedom, self-government and English institutions', we are in our right when we are laughing at an absurd and dangerous complacency, but we are not so much in our right when we laugh at the idea that freedom and self-government are or have been either good or important, or when we ignore the fact that they have

been, in practice, associated with English institutions or colourable imitations of them. For the next stage is not to dismiss political institutions as unimportant, but to regard as virtues in other political institutions the mere absence of those qualities which Broadbent exalted with such complacency but not without good reason. Those qualities of a political system which Broadbent and an overwhelming majority of his countrymen prized for so long are, perhaps, not to be prized to-day. If this be so, I can only say with a Cambridge poet:

'Men are we and must grieve.'

I shall borrow, without permission but, I am certain, without objection from my predecessor, a justification of the university study of politics which Sir Ernest Barker applied to the general situation of democracy.

He listed among what he called the 'works of justification', the 'strengthening of the power of discussion—the broadening of civic intelligence and the extension of civic knowledge'. We must, in the university, do what is rightly declared to be the function and opportunity of the democratic state, 'enlist the effective thought of the whole community in the operation of discussion'.[1]

Here we are confronted with the difficulty that, whatever may be the case of the whole community of Britain, our university system, with its specialization and segregation, makes the 'enlistment of the whole community in the operation of discussion' difficult, perhaps impossible.

[1] Sir Ernest Barker, *Reflections on Government*, p. 414.