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THE CLAIMS OF POLITICS

IN the present social atmosphere the invitation to express political conviction and engage in political action grows more and more insistent. To have given much of one's time to 'culture'—in the sense of literature, the arts, and in general the finer developments of human possibility—is not readily accepted as a reason for political non-commitment; often, in fact, it is taken to carry with it special political obligations. Whether these special obligations exist, and if so what they consist in, are the chief questions dealt with in the following symposium.

The editors were anxious to assemble as representative a set of opinions as possible, but had some disappointments, especially in regard to a promised Marxist contribution.

RICHARD CHURCH

THE INDIVIDUAL AND POLITICS.

Only the criminal, or the person with a sick mind, will deny that every man and woman is under an obligation to serve the community in some way or other. That sounds an obvious statement. But the implications are not so obvious. For one thing, everybody at some time is in a pathological condition, during which he rebels against his duty, and doses himself with cynicism in order to relieve the pain in his social conscience.

It might be useful to say something about this condition, for I believe it is a fairly common symptom amongst the middle-aged, the generation to which I belong. It is an interesting generation because it caught the brunt of the activities, or at least the immediate activities, during the last war. The seeds of social malaise were laid then. They are sprouting now.

If a man has had a wound, he evolves a semi-conscious technique of gestures to protect the tender spot from all contacts. He does the same thing if his mind has been wounded. The callous flesh causes a paradoxical reaction of hyper-sensitiveness. The tendency is to avoid touching things. Society, and all the obligations it entails, is a very hard and knobby thing. Men and women

between the ages of forty and fifty shrink from that contact. They have a sort of fixation arising from the painful memories of what was demanded from them in 1914-1918.

In addition, people reaching this time of life have a more natural tendency towards inaction and withdrawal. The fires of youth are waning, its ideals and enthusiasms burned out. Once that happens, it is impossible for an honest person to go on believing in generalizations and all those crude categories on which young people built their political faiths. It is then that he begins to waver. He is not shown much mercy by the generation treading on his heels. 'Just for a handful of silver he left us,' said Browning of Wordsworth. But it is not so simple as that. The trouble is that nothing is simple, as the maturing mind begins to discover. The issues between political parties are discovered to be unreal issues, the aims of political parties to be unreal aims.

It is noticed by the temporarily cynical adult that social crusades are often led by scoundrels, and reactionary movements by men of charm and integrity. He observes too that some of the most socialistic legislation is put through by Conservative Governments (look for instance at the work being done by Sir Samuel Hoare to-day in the Department of the Home Office). As against this, I recollect that during my quarter of a century in the Civil Service, most of it spent in the Ministry of Labour, I saw two Labour Governments in office. During those periods all progress was arrested in the Department. It was a very disillusioning experience. But for that matter, to serve in a Government department is always a disillusioning experience. One sees the politicians behind the scenes. One has to wash their dirty linen in private. It is rather a disgusting occupation.

I do not exaggerate when I say that I believe demagogues to belong to the criminal class. They are parasites who make nothing and produce nothing, except trouble and despair. And what is so depressing is that Trades Unions seem to be a breeding ground for this particular type of politician. That is why the Labour Party is such a sorry spectacle to-day. That is why, too, the enraged person who wants to get on with the job of social building is almost inclined to turn to syndical-anarchism, as a system which openly proposes to do away with the professional politician and all his *words*. Guild socialism is now a museum

ization has somehow taken a wrong turning and as it progresses down the wrong road, puts an increasing strain on the ropes—this is going to be a mixed metaphor—has somehow overgrown itself in the wrong ways and shapes and is putting an increasing strain on its roots.

Since this is so, to remain aloof is to encourage the worse tendencies. It is only postponing the date of reckoning and increasing the chances of defeat.

If these premises are correct, it is the duty of every citizen who, by nature or education, is mentally or spiritually above his neighbours, to continue his own personal development but at the same time to watch every political development around him with the closest attention ; to regard himself as a member of a new Holy Office charged with the combating of the appalling and rampant heresies all around him ; to employ his interest and authority diurnally to the re-tracing of the road and the recognition of reality. This is the duty of them all—a vital duty and, incidentally, one of the reasons why I have written this article.

CHRISTOPHER DAWSON

The expansion of Politics from the narrow limits of utilitarian Liberalism to the all-embracing claims of the totalitarian community-state has already had a revolutionary effect on Western civilization and may produce still greater changes in the future. It threatens to confound and destroy the traditional forms and standards of culture and to reduce it to the crude undifferentiated unity of a mass civilization. The man of letters no less than the philosopher and the religious teacher has lost his former spiritual freedom and is in danger of becoming the conscious or unconscious servant of the ruling powers, whether those powers are the anonymous servants of material interests or the acknowledged leaders of a totalitarian party State.

In these circumstances our primary duty is to keep our heads clear and not allow ourselves to be confused by the over-simplification of the issues which has always been the besetting sin of the political partisan. For though the problems that confront us are new, they are not without analogies in the past. It is not the first time that there has been a conflict between the claims of

politics and the claims of culture. In the first place it is important to realize the essential disparity of political phenomena. There are at least two distinct types of political interest which can be sharply differentiated. There are professional politics—the business of government ; and there are ideological or spiritual politics—the spirit of loyalty to communal ideals. From one point of view politics are a profession and the politician is a specialist, like an engineer or a financier, whose function it is to transact public business in an efficient and economical manner. But from the other point of view, politics is a mystical vocation, and the politician is the man who is conscious of a mission to save his people or who has the power to inspire men with an enthusiasm for a common ideal.

It is obvious that these two forms of political action have very little in common. A man may be an admirable chairman of committees and yet be quite incapable of making men willing to die for the policy that he favours, while the man who is able to fill his followers with an invincible faith in their common cause, may be entirely incompetent when it comes to practical politics.

It seems to me that a great part of our difficulties is due to the confusion and contamination of these two types of political psychology and political action. For though it is easy to distinguish them in theory, they inevitably tend to overlap in practice. The great statesmen and political leaders—Cromwell, Abraham Lincoln and the rest—have always been the men who were able to combine both functions, to be at once the personal embodiment of communal ideals and the practical organizers of public affairs ; in much the same way as the great Churchmen have been those who managed to unite the essentially dissimilar functions of the ecclesiastical administrator and the religious teacher.

Moreover this duality of political life is not confined to the professional politician ; it is no less apparent in the life of the ordinary man. The latter has to fulfil the practical duties of citizenship. He has to take his part in the business of local government, to vote in elections, to sit on councils and committees and to undertake his share of public burdens. But he also has duties towards the community of a wider and more spiritual kind. These are the virtues of patriotism and devotion to the common good which need not express themselves through any of the recognized

channels of administrative activity but which are nevertheless the very essence of citizenship. But though these are political virtues, they also transcend politics, since they are directed towards a community which is wider and deeper than the State. Our conception of that community depends on our ideology. If we are Liberals it is Humanity, if we are Conservatives it is the Nation, if we are Communists it is the World Proletariat, if we are Fascists it is the Race. But so far as I know, there is no creed or ideology which makes *the State* the final social end and excludes the concept of a wider community to which our deepest loyalty is due.

It is in this sphere that the main responsibilities of the thinker and the man of letters are to be found. Practical politics are the concern of the practical man, and the business man may be better equipped than the philosopher and the poet to take part in the transaction of public business. But when it comes to the consideration of the final ends of political action, to the criticism of the ideologies on which that action is based and to the creation of a social consciousness and sense of responsibility which transcend the limits of the political community, it is clear that the thinker and the writer have a more important contribution to make than the man of action or the political orator; and it is their primary function to serve society with intellectual integrity in this sphere rather than to take an active part in party politics or in the actual work of government.

This principle is far from being generally admitted at the present day. The individualism of nineteenth century culture had already effaced the old frontiers between the spiritual and temporal powers and weakened the traditional hierarchy of social and spiritual values, and now the coming of the totalitarian state marks the emergence of a new type of politics which recognizes no limits and seeks to subordinate every social and intellectual activity to its own ends. Thus the new politics are in a sense more idealistic than the old; they are political religions based on a Messianic hope of social salvation. But at the same time they are more realist since they actually involve a brutal struggle for life between rival powers which are prepared to use every kind of treachery and violence to gain their ends.

It is easy to condemn the dictators and the politicians for thus opening the gates to the flood of evil and violence which

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threatens to overwhelm our civilization. But the primary responsibility does not rest with them: it rests on the intellectuals who prepared the way for them by their theoretic justification of violence and terrorism. It was the Communists who first popularized the new political theory and technique, and the Communists in Russia were *par excellence* the party of the intelligentsia. And on the other side, it was men of letters like Nietzsche and Sorel, Marinetti and D'Annunzio who were the spiritual fathers of Fascism and whose influence transformed a national movement against defeatism and social disorder into a totalitarian cult of the will to power.

If the intellectuals abandon the interests of culture and cease to recognize the primacy of spiritual values, we can hardly expect the politician to do otherwise. Setting aside political Messianism and the exaggerations of totalitarian ideologies, the task of the modern statesman is quite important enough to occupy his whole attention. He is responsible for the safety of the State—*salus reipublicæ*—and we cannot blame him for subordinating everything else to that vital task, any more than we can blame a ship's captain for putting the safety of his vessel before the interests of his passengers. But the State, like the ship, is a means and not an end and though the public interests with which the statesman is charged are vital to the existence of the community, they are not its only interests or even its highest interests. The intellectual, on the other hand, is the servant of those wider interests which transcend the sphere of politics. He works not merely for the State but for the community of thought which extends far beyond the limits of any single political society.

The trouble is that this conception of a community of thought has never received adequate treatment from modern social theorists. Either it has been rationalized by the philosophers into a universal ideal which has no sociological content, or it has been regarded as the ideological aspect of the political and economic society which is the ultimate reality. But any serious historian, and most of all the historian of literature, must realize that there is a community of thought, which, no less than the political society, is the result of historical development, but which has its own laws of growth that are not limited by political or even racial frontiers. For example, mediæval Christendom and mediæval China formed two distinct and independent communities of thought, and the fact that

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the Mongol Empire united Russia and China in one political system did little or nothing to bind these two spiritual worlds together. On the other hand modern Europe and modern America do not form two separate communities of thought in spite of their differences of culture and their political independence. English and American literature are mutually dependent, and religious and intellectual movements which have their origin on one side of the Atlantic may have as much influence on the other side of the ocean as in the land of their origin.

If this is so, it is clear that the social responsibilities of the man of letters cannot be identified with his duty as a citizen or subordinated to the interests of the State of which he is a member. He is bound to think of the interests of culture as a whole and to direct his activities in whatever direction he can serve them best. This does not mean that literature must be denationalized or cosmopolitan; for the nationalism of a literature is a different thing from political nationalism. Indeed the periods when a literature gives fullest expression to the national spirit and tradition are those in which its international influence is greatest.

At the present time it seems to me of the first importance that literature should recognize that it has national and international responsibilities quite distinct from those of politics. There is an obvious political conflict between the Western powers and the states of the Axis, but there is no such conflict between their literatures. French and Italian literature are not Democratic and Fascist literature, they are just French and Italian literature, and though the political conflict will normally find some literary expression it will not involve any fundamental opposition between the two. In fact while the political systems are mutually exclusive, the literatures both belong to a common tradition of culture which transcends politics and, to some extent, even nationality.

But this ancient European tradition is threatened to-day by a new barbarism more formidable than anything in the past, since it possesses an infinitely stronger technical and scientific equipment. I am not referring to any particular political state or régime, but to the general tendency to social mechanization which treats science, literature and culture as nothing more than instruments in the struggle for power. The claim of politics to organize the State as a mass community is fatal to the old ideals of culture. If it

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could be completely realized, it would mean the end of thought and the end of history. Human society might thus attain a higher degree of unity than it has ever possessed in the past, but it would be a soulless unity, like that of the societies of the insect world. In such a society there would be no room for criticism or personality or any free spiritual activity and without these things it is difficult to see how literature could continue to exist.

Mars
etc.

GEORGE EVERY, S.S.M.

CRITICAL JUDGMENT IN POLITICS.

The majority of our people still engage in political decision only at a general or at a municipal election. They are then required to decide which of two or more individuals is the most fit and proper person to sit in Parliament or upon the town council, to deliberate and to give a vote upon national or local affairs. But the historical circumstances of the last fifty or a hundred years, the decline of local life in parish, ward and borough, and the growth of what we are accustomed to call mass-civilization, have in practice changed the decision from a decision between individuals to a decision between parties, and made the House of Commons more and more a piece of political machinery to register decisions which are in fact made outside its walls. The chief decisions may indeed be made by members of Parliament, but as Conservative or Labour leaders.

At the same time there has been an increasing tendency to talk as if legislation was made not by Parliament but by the people. The fact that the House of Commons registers the comparative strength of two organizations which are spread all over the country reinforces this impression. The less the individual member is able to take up a political attitude himself, the more the individual citizen believes that he has at least as complete a political attitude as that of his M.P. The only political attitude is one of assent to a party programme. Even those who dissent from both parties often express their dissent by assent to a programme formulated by some private and confidential conference. And yet both the National Government and the Labour Party inspire widespread distrust. Neither possess the confidence which our system of general elections is supposed to secure to a Government.