

**POLITICS A LECTURE DELIVERED
AT COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY IN
THE SERIES ON SCIENCE,
PHILOSOPHY AND ART.
FEBRUARY 12, 1908**

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POLITICS

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POLITICS

EVERY science begins by laying hold of some definite and tangible facts, and advances by tracing their myriad relations until they are lost in the great complex of things. So politics starts with the government which, in final analysis, is a determinate number of persons in a political community charged with certain public duties, and it advances to a consideration of the phenomena which condition the organization and operations of the government.

It is evident at a casual glance that official performances are not really separable from other actions of the governmental agents themselves or from many of the actions of citizens at large. For instance, the declaration of war against Spain was a political act, but clearly it was only an incident in the sum total of events which led up to the armed conflict. For months before the official proceeding, social forces had been gathering strength, and impinging on the minds of persons charged with transmuting the feeling and will of the nation into the legal state of war. It was by a mere formal process that social realities passed over into political facts. To cite another example, an alderman voting in a regularly constituted assembly in favor of purchasing a plot of land for a park performs a political act in the strict sense of the word; if he gives a friend a quiet suggestion to engage in real estate trans-

actions near the proposed park, his procedure is none the less political though it is not clothed with official sanction.

It is apparent that the jural test of what constitutes a political action draws a dividing line where none exists in fact, and consequently any study of government that neglects the disciplines of history, economics, and sociology will lack in reality what it gains in precision. Man as a political animal acting upon political, as distinguished from more vital and powerful motives, is the most unsubstantial of all abstractions. The recognition of this truth has induced students of politics to search in many fields for a surer foothold than law alone can afford. This inquiry has led in such varied directions as to cause a recent German writer on political science, Professor Jellinek, to declare that the fundamental problems of state are neglected in favor of social questions, while microscopic methods of research into minute matters have destroyed the earlier rock-founded dogmas and left nothing behind but disconcerting doubts.

It is, however, to my way of thinking a false notion that the ancient and honorable discipline of politics has been overthrown or absorbed by the dissolution of the subject into history, economics, and sociology. Rather does it seem that solid foundations are being laid in reality in place of in the shifting sands of speculation. We are coming to realize that a science dealing with man has no special field of data all to itself, but is rather merely a way of looking at the same thing—a view of a certain aspect of human action. The human being is not essentially different when he is depositing his ballot from what he is in the counting house or at the work bench. In place of a “natural” man, an “economic” man, a “religious” man, or a “political” man, we now observe the whole man participating in the work of government. Politics starts with the observation of such of his acts as may be juristically tested, passes to

the acts most nearly related, and then works out into the general field of human conduct. In describing the forms of government, in seeking the historical and social reasons why government in Germany differs from that in France; in explaining the elaborate details of administration; in endeavoring to penetrate the sources of party organization and operation; in comparing the political experiences of different nations, politics has a definite field of its own, even if it does not meet the approval of the high priests of the mathematical and the exact.

It may be conceded at the outset that politics does not possess a single piece of literature as substantial as a table of logarithms or an engineer's handbook, nor a body of doctrine to be applied with celerity as a form of first aid to the injured. And after all, the men of pure science must admit that politicians are scarcely more disputatious over the best form of a primary law than are consulting engineers over the problem of ventilating the subway. In fact all knowledge, when applied to specific problems, even in many branches of natural science, is often at best a dim light, and political knowledge suffers from this general limitation on the human intellect. In spite of the many troubles that beset him, however, the student of politics may rejoice in an ever growing body of sound material, historical on one side, descriptive and statistical on the other.

Archaeologists and anthropologists are disclosing to us primitive types of society which were as unknown to Aristotle, Hobbes, and Locke, as the flora of the tropics were to the mediaeval botanist. Vast collections of laws, documents, chronicles, and miscellaneous papers, revealing step by step the processes in the origin and development of the state, have been edited with scientific care by historical investigators. Great treatises like those of Stubbs, Maitland, Gierke, Brunner, Coulanges and Spencer have put

the student of politics further in advance of Montesquieu than he was ahead of Marsilius of Padua of the fourteenth century. Governments are now taking censuses on an ever larger scale and on more scientific principles; bureaus are obtaining and arranging data on political experiments of every sort, from the working of old age insurance in Germany to land taxation in New Zealand. Private persons, like Charles Booth in his survey of London, are laying bare realities once the subject of futile speculation and thus outside the range of effective political action. From this vast heterogeneous mass of materials are coming an ever sounder notion of the origin, functions, and tendencies of the state, a higher view of its possibilities as the experiments of each nation are placed at the disposal of all, and finally a more scientific theory of causation in politics.

One of the most salutary results of this vast accumulation of data on politics has been to discredit the older speculative theorists and the utopia makers. Even their very interests and presuppositions are being rudely brushed aside. For example, Locke devoted about one half of his famous "Treatises on Government" to showing (1) that Adam had not by natural right of fatherhood or by positive donation from God any such authority over his children or dominion over the world as Filmer had pretended; (2) that if he had, his heirs had no such right; (3) that if they had, there was no sure way through the law of nature or the positive law of God of knowing who was the right heir; (4) and even if this could be determined, the knowledge of which was the eldest line of Adam was so utterly lost that it was impossible to discover the eldest house. After having rejected the Adamite source of political authority, Locke proceeded to base his reasoning on an equally unhistorical proposition that "To understand political power aright and derive it from its original we must consider what estate all men are naturally in and that

is a state of perfect freedom to order their actions and dispose of their possessions and persons as they think fit within the bounds of the law of nature without asking leave or depending upon the will of any other man."

Quite different from this is the procedure of the student to-day. If he wants to discover how government originated, how its forms have changed, the tendencies of its evolution, and the forces modifying its structure and functions, he knows that there is no hope for real knowledge except in the painstaking examination of the materials that are left to us—records of past politics, statistical materials on races, groups and classes, and descriptions of the bewildering types of society gathered from the past and from the four corners of the earth.

The influence of the historical school on correct thinking in politics has been splendidly supplemented by that of the Darwinians. They have given us as the political unit not a typical man with typical faculties, but a man infinite in variety and capacity, ranging from the dog-faced cannibals of the Andaman islands to the highest type of modern citizen who surrenders the hope of private gain that he may serve the state. Our primeval citizen, as Mr. Edward Jenks points out, is not "the noble savage passing his days in a sort of perpetual picnic surrounded by his family who sported in flowery meads while he discoursed sweet music," but rather in general a miserable, underfed and undersized creature, naked and shivering, homeless, in constant terror of dangers seen and unseen, with no family ties as we understand them, with no certain food supply, and no settled abode. The eighteenth century philosophers were wrong. We have not been driven from a political paradise; we have not fallen from a high estate, nor is there any final mold into which society is to be cast. On the contrary, society has come from crude and formless associations beginning in a dim and dateless past and moves outward into an