

The Claims of Politics

Christopher Dawson (1939)

with notes by Joseph T. Stuart¹

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 to 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 are 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 fulfill 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 the 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 the 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 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,² Marinetti³ and D'Annunzio⁴ 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 reipublicae*—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, mediaeval Christendom and mediaeval China formed two distinct and independent communities of thought and the fact that 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 today 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 mechanism 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 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.

Endnotes

1. Christopher Dawson, "The Claims of Politics," *Scrutiny* VIII, no. 2 (1939). Reprinted with the permission of Julian Scott. *Scrutiny* was a British journal of literary criticism edited by F. R. Leavis that lasted from 1932 to 1953. See also an earlier volume of this journal for a previously unpublished lecture by Dawson called "Conservatism," *The Political Science Reviewer* XXXIX (2010): 232–262.
2. Georges Eugène Sorel (1847–1922) was a French philosopher and theorist of revolutionary syndicalism. His notion of the power of myth in people's lives inspired Marxists and fascists. Born in Cherbourg, France, Sorel worked as an engineer for years before completely devoting himself to study and writing. His 1908 book *Réflexions sur la violence* argued that the success of the proletariat class depended on violent revolution. Sorel was influenced by Alexis de Tocqueville, Proudhon, Nietzsche, Marx, and others.
3. Filippo Tommaso Emilio Marinetti (1876–1944) was an Italian poet and editor, the founder of the Futurist movement, and a fascist ideologue. He lived and studied in Egypt and France, was trained as a lawyer, and decided to devote his life to literary pursuits. His *Futurist Manifesto* (1909) initiated an artistic philosophy, Futurism, which was a rejection of the past and a celebration of speed, machinery, violence, youth, and industry. Marinetti became an active supporter of Benito Mussolini.
4. Gabriele D'Annunzio (1863–1938) was an Italian poet, journalist, novelist, and dramatist who influenced the Italian fascist movement. Born to the wealthy mayor of Abruzzo, D'Annunzio studied at University of Rome La Sapienza. He invented much of the ritual (balcony speeches, the Roman salute, the use of religious symbols in a secular setting) later used by his rival Mussolini during his (D'Annunzio's) occupation of Fiume and his leadership of the Italian Regency of Carnaro from 1919 to 1920. Despite their great differences, both he and Mussolini "attempted to transform their countrymen into more heroic types, rejecting the Italian tradition of civility in favor of an ethic of violence and imperialism." See Michael A. Ledeen, *The First Duce: D'Annunzio at Fiume* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), viii.