The Concept of the Political on the World Stage*

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Let me begin with the word we most often invoke to describe the kind of politics that we as citizens wish to practice, or we as political scientists wish to study others practicing — democracy. Democracy is both a sacred and a promiscuous word. We all love her but she is hard to pin down. Everyone claims her but no one actually possesses her fully. One moment we think we have her, but the next moment she has, like a female Proteus, slipped away and is causing conceptual trouble elsewhere. A moment's thought may remind us why this is so.

Historically there have been four broad usages of democracy. The first is found in the Greeks, in Plato's attack on it and in Aristotle's highly qualified defence: the word democracy simply comes from the Greek, *demos* (the mob, the many) and *kratos*, meaning rule. Plato attacked this form of rule as being that of the poor and the ignorant over the educated and the knowledgeable — ideally, of course philosophers (today American social scientists). Plato's fundamental distinction was between knowledge and opinion: democracy is rule, or rather the anarchy, of mere opinion. Aristotle modified this view rather than rejecting it utterly: good government was a mixture of elements, the few ruling with the consent of the many. The few should have *"aristoi"* or the principle of excellence from which the idealised concept aristocracy derives. But many more can qualify for citizenship by virtue of some education and some property (both of which he thought necessary conditions for citizenship), and so much be consulted and can, indeed, even occasionally be promoted to office. He did not call his "best possible" state democracy at all, rather *politeia* or polity, a political community of citizens deciding on common action by public debate. But democracy could be the next best thing in practice if it observed "ruling and being ruled in turn". As a principle unchecked by aristocratic experience and knowledge it remained, however, democracy was a fallacy: "that because men are equal in some things, they are equal in all".

The second usage is found in the Romans, in Machiavelli's great *Discourses*, in the seventeenth century English and Dutch republicans, and in the early American republic: that good government is mixed government, just as in Aristotle's theory, but that the democratic or popular element could actually give greater power to a state. Good laws to protect all are not good enough unless subjects became active citizens making their own laws collectively. The argument was both moral and military. The moral argument was the more famous: both Roman paganism and later Protestantism had in common a view of man as an active individual, a maker and shaper

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of things, not just a law-abiding well-behaved acceptor or subject of a traditional order. But there was also a military argument. Machiavelli read the history of the Roman republic as showing that a state that can trust its own people with arms is stronger than one that has to limit the holding of arms to a small elite or else to hire foreign mercenaries.

The third usage is found in the rhetoric and events of the French Revolution and in the writings of Jean Jacques Rousseau — that everyone, regardless of eduction or property, has a right to make his or her will felt in matters of state; and indeed the general will or common good is better understood by any well-meaning, simple, unselfish and natural ordinary person from their own experience and conscience than by the over-educated living amid the artificiality of high society or the universities. Now this view can have a lot to do with the liberation of a class or a nation, whether from oppression or ignorance and superstition, but it is not necessarily connected with individual liberty. (In the European eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, remember, most people who cared for liberty did not call themselves democrats at all — constitutionalists or civic republicans, or, in the Anglo-American discourse, "Whigs"). The general will could have more to do with popularity than with representative institutions. Napoleon was a genuine heir of the French Revolution when he said that "the politics of the future will be the art of stirring the masses". His popularity was such, playing on both revolutionary and nationalist rhetoric, that he was able for the very first time to introduce mass conscription — that is to trust the common people with arms. The autocratic Hapsburgs and Romanovs had to be most careful to whom and where they applied selective conscription.

The fourth usage of democracy is found in the American constitution and in many of the new constitutions in Europe in the nineteenth century and in the new West German and Japanese constitutions following the Second World War, also in the writings of John Stuart Mill and Alexis de Tocqueville: that all can participate if they care, but must mutually respect the equal rights of fellow citizens within a regulatory legal order that both defines, protects and limits those individual rights and protects self-regulating voluntary bodies — civil society.

What is most ordinarily meant today by "democracy" in the United States, Europe and Japan is, ideally, a fusion (but quite often a confusion) of the idea of power of the people and the idea of legally guaranteed individual rights. The two should, indeed, be combined, but they are distinct ideas, and can prove so in practice. There can be, and have been, intolerant democracies and reasonably tolerant autocracies.

Personally, I do not find it helpful to call the system of government under which I live "democratic". To do so begs the question. It can close the door on discussion of how the actual system could be made more democratic, just as others once feared — and some still do so — that the democratic element becomes too powerful. Sociologically and socially England is still in many ways a profoundly undemocratic society (Scotland and Wales somewhat more democratic), certainly when compared to the United States. But even in the United States there is overall now little citizenship or positive participation in politics in the republican style of the early American Republic. There are some interesting but very localised experiments in direct democracy, local referenda and "citizenshipship panels" etcetera, and of course people vote (albeit in perpetually disappointing numbers) in formal elections, but between elections talk of and active participation in politics rates far, far lower as the most favoured national activity, apart from work, than shopping.[1]

When considering the present nature and problems of democracy, I want to suggest that what we often mean to talk about is something even prior to either ideal or empirically observed definitions of democracy — politics itself. Here we all must have something to say. Politics is too important to be left to politi-

[1] Seymour Martin Lipset does not put it quite so bluntly in his recent magisterial survey, *American Exceptionalism: a Double-Edged Sword* (W.W. Norton, New York & London: 1996), but the figures and attitude surveys he reports lead to this conclusion.

cians. Politicians are too busy and preoccupied with — in the broad perspective of human history — short-term advantages and actions, with winning the next election, so others must speculate and try to do their long-term thinking about civilised humanity for them. Thought and action must go together, not merely if the political tradition is to be preserved but also, since the need is pressing, if it is to be extended. *By the political tradition I mean simply the activity of resolving disputes and determining policy politically, that is by public debate among free citizens.* Although this activity is one of the most important and celebrated inventions of human civilisation, it is now so much taken for granted or even regarded — because of the actions of particular democratic politicians — as a debased activity; and party leaders in autocracies or in one-part states see, when present among their followers, as a dangerous activity. In so many countries any opposition to the policies or leaders gets represented as opposition to the state itself. The beneficial application of politics is neither universal nor universally understood; or even if understood, it is not always desired or tolerated.

The political tradition may be the world's best hope, perhaps last hope as we see long-term problems begin to accumulate that could destroy (the phrase does have real meaning) civilisation as we know it. If political solutions, or rather — as is ever the case political compromises — are not found, power blocs will struggle harder and harder, more and more ruthlessly and competitively, in a world of increasing demands and of diminishing resources, to maintain the standard of living of at least a voting majority of their own loyal inhabitants. And it is almost fatuous to remind that the misapplication of scientific and industrial technology does now give us these unique and handy opportunities for mutual destruction (quite apart from the slow but sure despoilation of the resources and natural environment that sustain us). The two World Wars of the twentieth century should have been a perfectly adequate demonstration of this, but could yet prove an inadequate premonition of the shape of things to come. During the Cold War, the fear of global destruction by atomic bombardment perhaps took the minds of most political leaders and thinkers off other slower global threats. And politically the post-war era has seen some good reasons for political optimism about the internal affairs of states. The collapse of Soviet power through sheer inefficiency, the somewhat similar decline, at least, of military regimes in Southern Europe and South America at least; and some relaxation of despotism in the largest country in the world, China, and some signs of civic stirrings even in the bloody anarchy of sub-equatorial Africa, are some such indicators. The new South African constitution is a great example of how political compromise is possible in a hopeless seeming situation of continued oppression or destructive revolution. And generally the myth of the superior efficiency and the invincibility of power of totalitarian and autocratic states has been exploded.

However, the collective inability of democratic states to act together by political agreement to deal with real and vital common problems has been amply demonstrated also. Consider the inadequate response to the bloody shambles of the break-up of the Yugoslavian Federation, the lack of enforcement of United Nations' resolutions on Israel, let alone failure so far to achieve effective international cooperation to prevent the degradation of the environment of the whole planet. Take also the case of nuclear weapons: if the threat of deliberate two-bloc world war now seems happily (if somewhat fortuitously) gone, yet the ability of the so-called great powers to prevent the spread of nuclear bombs to less stable regimes is now diminished almost to the point of impotence. Some of this impotence arises, of course from the inability or unwillingness of political leaders in democracies (one in particular) to educate and change public opinion (precisely what Aristotle feared in "democracy").

The invention and then the tradition of governing by means of political debate among citizens has its roots in the practices and thought of the Greek *polis* and the ancient Roman republic. So political rule could be said to be as "Western" or "European" in its origins, and yet as universal in its application, as natural science. But the origins of even such power-

ful and influential traditions of activity endow the descendants of its progenitors with no special wisdom, indeed sometimes it gives us a false sense of superiority and dangerous overconfidence. The general ideas of both political rule and of the natural sciences and attendant technologies are not bound to any one culture, have spread universally both as power-driven exports and as eagerly sought-after modernising imports. The results, of course, vary greatly in different cultural settings and by the accidents of contingent events; but there is more in common now between such societies because of such a process than in the pre-political, pre-scientific and industrial world.

The Eastern World may produce, and it almost certainly will, variants of the "democratic", or as I prefer to say "political" tradition, from which the West may learn — this has already happened in technology. But, it is fair to say, the West does not stand still entirely. That the concept of "citizen" has been only fairly recently extended to women is no small matter — full civic equality is still far ahead, and the consequences of this are as likely to be as great in the future as they are still unclear in the present. Now this elevated view of politics may surprise our fellow citizens who form their idea of "the political" from what they read in their national newspapers about the behaviour, in all respects, of actual politicians. Indeed one must ask, are such politicians the friends or the foes of good government? Certainly they are (to use a favourite word of Hannah Arendt's) "thoughtless" about the consequences in terms of public example of how they practice politics and behave themselves, which is part of politics.

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More than thirty years ago I wrote a book called *In Defence of Politics* which has remained in print ever since, and has been translated into many languages. But it received very few reviews by my then academic colleagues. But that did not dismay me for I had aimed the book at the intelligent general reader, and it has been called, if only by the publishers (but respectable and sensible people), "a modern classic".[2] But what does dismay me is that during the last thirty years there has been a continuing decline in book publishing of serious political thinking aimed at and read by the public, despite all the troubles and unexpected opportunities of our times.[3] Coherent political thinking can be all but abandoned by party leaders, certainly debased and too often reduced to sound-bites uttered with a coached sincerity, but with no well-grounded justifications advanced for the fragments of general principles somewhat (or almost wholly) opportunistically advanced. Sincerity stands in for reasoning and when politics is discussed, even by intelligent ordinary people, it is more discussed often in terms of personalities than of principles and of appeals to immediate self-interest rather than to long- term mutual or public benefits. Only a few columnists and editorial writers in newspapers of some quality keep up the once-prevalent tradition of intelligent and reasonably open-minded public debate and speculation.

During that same time the academic discipline of political thought, however, has thrived as never before, both as the history and contextualisation of ideas and as the analysis of meaning and implications of concepts in current use — say "freedom" , "equality", "justice", "sovereignty", "nation", "individualism", "community" and so on. But this advance has been almost wholly internalised. Most academic writing on politics and the problems of democracy can be seen, sometimes rather generously, as contributions to the advancement of knowledge, as well as to the individual's reputation and promotion pros-

[2] *In Defence of Politics*, 4th. edition, Penguin 1992, first published by Weidenfeld & Nicolson 1962, and in the USA by the University of Chicago Press .

[3] In fairness I think this is less marked in the United States than in Britain, Germany and France. The larger American market, of course, makes this possible; but also in the United States there are more serious journalists with resources for "research", or rather graduate assistants to gut the best and most relevant of the large but almost wholly internalised academic literature.

pects; but few seem interested in diffusing this knowlege to the public (or, if so, are able to do so). Faults on both sides can be found: it is all too easy to make a career by writing about politics ("researching" is now the term more used) and yet for the product to remain wholly within the ivory tower, unknown either to the press or to the reading public. The irony of doing this for the study of politics escapes most of the denizens of the castle. We are often rather like those student leaders of the 1960s who proclaimed their solidarity with the working class and "the people" in a Marxist terminology understandable only to those among "the people" who had a degree in social science at a new university. But, on the other hand, the Media take very few steps to discover and use the academic product. In Britain only the talents of experts on electoral statistics are regularly courted. The idea is strange to leader writers that there is a tradition of political thinking and knowledge as relevant to the problems of the modern world as economic theory, and one historically more important. Political considerations are far more often held to interfere with economic reasoning than the contrary.

The thesis of my *In Defence of Politics* was all too easy even if challengingly simple. It spoke of making some "platitudes" pregnant: that politics is the conciliation of naturally different interests, whether these interests are seen as material or moral, usually both. I wrote in the Aristotelean tradition. There is a passage in Aristotle's *Politics* where he says that the great mistake of his master Plato was in writing about ideal states as if to find a single unifying principle of righteousness. Rather,

> ....there is a point at which a polis, by advancing in unity, will cease to be a *polis*; but will none the less come near to losing its essence, and will thus be a worse *polis*. It is as if you were turn harmony into mere unison, or to reduce a theme to a single beat. The truth is that the *polis* is an aggregate of many members.

Not all societies are organised and governed according to political principles. Most governments in history suppress public debate about policy, far preferring to encourage "good subjects" rather than good or active citizens. But this has become more and more difficult in the modern world. Yet it is not just so-called political ideologies that threaten free politics, nationalism and religion can do so also. There is nationalism and nationalism, religion and religion; sometimes reasonably tolerant, at other times intensely intolerant. Although politics is not necessarily threatened by strong religious belief, sometimes not even when there is a dominant religion, yet some beliefs and practices stifle or threaten free politics and the open expression of contrary views. But some secularists can also see politics as inherently disruptive of social order. "The country could be run better without all this politics". And many must sympathise with Dr Joseph Goebbels' axiom: "Politicians perpetuate problems, we seek to solve them".

So political rule, I argued, existed before democratic government and is, in a very real sense, logically prior to "democracy", unless by that term we mean, rather fatuously "everything we would like" rather than a component of good government, a concept of majority opinion and power that is not always compatible with liberty and individual rights. Some dictatorships, for instance, have been and still can be genuinely popular, resting on majority support and the stronger for it. Both historically and logically, politics is prior to democracy. We may want to fill the cart full of good things that everyone wants and feels they need, but the horse must go out in front. Without order there can be no democracy, and without politics even democracy is unlikely to be just. Political rule is the most generally justifiable type of order.

Therefore, still leaning on old Aristotle against the over-sophistication of modern social science (whether in the Marxist or the modern American mode), I would argue that politics rests on two preconditions , a sociological and a moral. The sociological is that civilised societies are all complex and inherently pluralistic, even if and when (hopefully) the injustices of class, ethnic and gender discriminations will vanish or diminish. The moral aspect was that it is normally better to conciliate differing interests than to coerce and oppress them perpetually, or seek to remove them without consent

or negotiated compensation. While much political behaviour is prudential, there is always some moral context: some compromises we think it wrong to make, and some possible ways of coercion or even of defence which we think are too cruel, disproportionate or simply too uncertain. A nuclear first strike, for example, even against a non-nuclear power, could not reasonably be called political behaviour — even against Bagdad. Hannah Arendt was wiser than Clausewitz and Dr Kissinger when she said that violence is the break-down of politics, not (in his famous aphorism) its "continuance by other means".

So it was too easy for me to argue that it is always better to be governed politically, if there is any choice in the matter. The thesis did not seem so banal or simple-minded at the time because there was sustained contrast, in some passages explicit but implicit all through, between political rule and totalitarian rule. The simple could then appear both profound and important. But with the break-down of Soviet power and the old pull towards a binary system, the whole world has become more complicated and previously existing contradictions in the so-called "free world" have both come to the surface and grown more acute. (I am not too happy with "free world", by the way, for that concept — like "our democratic way" — begs far too many questions, makes too many assumptions, is a highly complex concept whose components need unpacking and testing carefully for quality, and is too often self-righteous and propagandistic in use ; so to say rather those parts of the world that are ruled politically. But the concept of politics certainly implies freedom and its widespread practice depends upon it).

Just as totalitarian rule and ideology could break down internally, so can political rule; and political prudence can prove inadequate. I gave such situations little serious attention in the *In Defence*. Since then I have studied both in books, documents and newspapers and by talking to people on the ground, the conflicts in Northern Ireland, South Africa and Israel/Palestine, turning what were originally accidental encounters into deliberate commitments. Each are so different in detail but they share a problem in common. So I will use them symbolically as *examples* of the general problem of the adequacy of "mere politics" when people who enjoy at least some kind of a political tradition, yet refuse any talk of compromise, because they feel that their very identity is at stake if they give any ground. They can have a conviction that they are on the very edge of "a step too far" if their leaders even talk to their enemies and that could then "fall from a great height". The examples are somewhat fortuitous. Say that I am now too old or idle to learn Serbo-Croat, Cypriot-Greek and Turkish, the several main languages of Kashmir or the many involved in the break-up of the Soviet Union.

Also I did not consider the apparent inadequacy of the political method and of diplomatic negotiation to resolve international problems that genuinely threaten tragedy or disaster on a global scale. Was it, indeed, the fear of nuclear war between the USA and the USSR that diverted realists — both among statesmen and the whole "realist" school of the study of international relations — from facing up to such problems, finding it all too easy back then to brand such questions of the global environment and the self-indulgent obsessions of a few scientists and, paradoxically, of bands of anti-scientific Greens, speculative ecologists and New Age alternative-lifers in sandals?

The justification of politics in terms of the negation of totalitarianism was all too easy. The mundane could be made melodramatic in terms of contrast. The "defeat" of the USSR and the "victory" of the West also appeared to imply the rejection and then the demise of ideology. I took ideology to be not any set of specific ideas about particular things (say beliefs and doctrines) but secular claims to comprehensive explanation and policy. Old autocracies, however ever bigoted, bloody and cruel had limited aspirations — usually just for the ruling class to stay in power and so would let sleeping dogs lie if they paid their taxes and doffed their hats. But some modern autocracies earned the new name because they saw the need to mobilise the masses, to make sleeping dogs bark and even sing in unison, to attempt to achieve the revolutionary objectives of an ideology. But ideology did *not* vanish

with the demise of Communist power and its universalistic pretensions. Political prudence and pragmatism did not take over. Rather there emerged the rapid, almost wildfire spread of the belief that more-or-less unrestrained market forces will resolve all major problems on a global scale; or at any rate that they cannot be resisted. If Adam Smith was read, it was without his moral philosophy that was the explicit context for the beneficent working of markets.

Hannah Arendt in her great book *The Human Condition* remarked that there have only ever been two kinds of comprehensive ideologies claiming to hold the key to history: the belief that all is determined by *race* and the belief that all is determined by *economics*. Both, racism and economicism are, we should remember, distinctively modern beliefs: before the late eighteenth century the world could get by without such enormous secular claims, and not even religions claimed to *explain* everything. Arendt pointed out that economic ideology took two rival forms, and yet their belief that there must be a *general system* had a common origin and linked them more than their disciples believe: *Marxism* (all is class ownership) and *laisser faire* (all is market forces). The missionaries and advocates of market ideology in the former Soviet bloc now denounce political interventions in the economy almost as fiercely as did the old totalitarians, although fortunately they are still subject to some political restraints and a few residual cultural inhibitions. In the party politics of the moment in my own country my friends rightly rail against excesses of privatisation, the diminishment of public welfare from the state and the attacks of a former British Government on the very concept of a *res publica* or a public interest (when Margaret Thatcher famously said, "There is no such thing as society"). Governments can seek to distance themselves from any responsibility for guiding Adam Smith's hidden hand by which the free market becomes the public interest (give or take some emollient oils of private charity and rituals of religious benevolence — thinking of the real Adam Smith). But in a broader perspective, the degree of political restraint upon the children of Hayek — the Reagans and the Thatchers — is also remarkable. They have done to us, for good or ill, much less than they know they ought to have done; and that is because of "irrational political factors", thank God!

Prices cannot be sensibly determined except by market mechanisms; the final breakdown of Soviet planning proved that —however well it may have served for a time of emergency. And capitalism is an international system whose imperatives can be ignored only at a fearful price — say North Korea and Cuba, or by the luck, while it lasts, of oil in the sand. But it does not then follow that price must then determine every human relationship, least of all the civic. The effects of the market can be either limited or mitigated by civic action, some should be. *Man is citizen as well as consumer.* There is taxation, for instance; there is or was public and family morality, strong cultural restraints on the exercise of both economic and political power. New lines of demarcation and mutual influence between the polity and the economy need examining closely and coolly. If people see themselves purely as consumers they will loose all real control of government. Governments will then rule by bread and circuses, even if not by force; and torrents of trivial alternatives will make arbitrary and often meaningless choice pass for effective freedom. For all the absolutist rhetoric, in reality at least a degree of welcome confusion reigns. Only the two extreme positions of All-State or All-Market are untenable; there is a lot of space between. Political and economic factors and principles interact with each, limit each other; but neither can live for long without the other.

Of course it was always foolish in the light of history to think that the end of the Cold War (a quite sudden event that neither prophets nor social scientists expected — a salutary warning to all prophets disguised as social scientists) would by itself lead to peace, prosperity, freedom. And what new democracy has emerged looks much more like Schumpeter's view of democracy as a competitive electoral struggle between party elites (in his *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* of 1942) than the old republican ideal that inhabitants and subjects should all become active, participa-

tive and critical citizens.

Consider, by way of contrast to even the best democratic practices of today, a passage that used to be worrying knowledge to autocrats and elites in Europe, and a source of inspiration to their opponents, especially the American Republic founding fathers. Once-upon-a-time the Periclean oration of the 5th century BC in Athens would have been read by almost everyone who read books at all:

> Our constitution is called a democracy because power is in the hands not of a minority but of the whole people. When it is a question of settling private disputes, every one is equal before the law; when it is a question of putting one person before another in positions of public responsibility, what counts is not membership of a particular class, but the actual ability which the man possesses. No one, so long as he has it in him to be of service to the state, is kept in political obscurity because of poverty. And, just as our political life is free and open, so is our day-to-day life in our relations with each other. We do not get into a state with our next-door-neighbour if he enjoys himself in his own way, nor do we give him the kind of black looks which, though they do no real harm, still do hurt people's feelings. We are free and tolerant in our private lives; but in public affairs we keep to the law. This is because it commands our deep respect....
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> Here each individual is interested not only in his own affairs but in the affairs of the state as well: even those who are mostly occupied with their own business are extremely well-informed on general politics - this is a peculiarity of ours: we do not say that a man who takes no interest in politics is a man who minds his own business; we say that he has no business here at all. We Athenians, in our own persons, take our decisions on policy or submit them to proper discussions: for we do not think that there is an incompatibility between words and deeds; the worst thing is to rush into action before the consequences have been properly debated ....[4]

Classical historians now tell us, of course, that Pericles must be understood as a demagogue, a kind of democratic dictator. But the point for us now is less what the demagogue did but what he thought it popular to say, the lasting ideal he invoked.

[4] From Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War* (Penguin, London 1954), pp. *117-18.*