

Political Science and Rural Government. Political phenomena, which are the material of political thought, embrace all forms of human behavior with respect to that central and paramount organ of social control which is termed government. Governmental institutions arise when a given group of people habitually behave in a certain manner with reference to each of a number of problems connected with that organ of control. In the past, the students of politics have got little beyond the description of the formal or superficial aspects of political institutions and the *a priori* justification or condemnation of the principle of rulership. In recent years the feeling has spread that political science should be made a real science instead of a mere loosely-knit combination of civics, history and philosophy. Connected with this feeling is the more or less tacit assumption that, once the laws of political conduct are known, they can be applied to the working out of forms of government which will produce socially desirable results. But the wish is father to the thought; and the difficulties in the way have been greatly underestimated. There is altogether too optimistic a hope in some quarters that a science of politics can be evolved within a period of time that is short of geological. It is for the purpose of setting forth some of the handicaps, while at the same time suggesting lines of investigation that should be undertaken, that this paper has been written.

Bryce once declared that in so far as political science is a science, it is based upon psychology or the permanent elements in human nature. It is often said that psychology is the basic social science in the same way that chemistry and physics are the basic natural sciences. The several social sciences are applications to the various phases of human life of the fundamental principles of human conduct. As engineering mechanics is an application of physics, and plant physiology an application of chemistry, so the science of politics should be an application of psychology. Only psychology can explain the political motive, which is a complex of economic desires, personal ambitions, lust for power, impulses to public service, and other incentives, mixed in different proportions in different individuals. But as yet pure psychology, while it has made rapid strides in late years, is only in its infancy, while political psychology has barely had a beginning. Furthermore, human nature is so variable a factor that no law of political psychology would enable us to predict except with reference to large numbers of persons acting over long periods of time.

Now the economic motive, which is closely related to but not iden-

tical with the political motive, is coming to be recognized as a complex also; but the economists have been able to work out a tentative body of principles without the exhaustive analysis of this economic motive. This is because they have a quantitative standard of measurement in the money value which people place upon goods and services. Unless some such unit is found by students of government, the current attempt to collect political statistics will bear little fruit. Statistics on non-voting and the like which have no common denominator are as meaningless as the already available "facts" that lie in unrelated isolation on the dusty pages of the statute books and other public documents. All such information has value for an art but not for a science of politics. In politics there is no unit of value.

Another primary difficulty is that the political scientist cannot verify his deductions by the use of the controlled experiment. The natural scientist can by this method isolate the factors with which he desires to deal. *Ceteris paribus* is always his major premise, but he can translate that premise into approximate reality. The student of politics deals with phenomena which display a multiplicity of causes, a composition of forces, if we may borrow a term from the physicists. Because he cannot control the conditions of human life, he cannot separate the relevant from the irrelevant, and much less can he evaluate the relative importance of forces working in the same direction, or accurately discount the effect of less intensive forces working in the opposite direction.

Even after truly scientific theories of politics were worked out, there would be at least two obstacles to the use of those theories in a process of political invention. The mechanical inventor not only knows the applicable natural laws, but has a definite end in mind, and can arrange his material in space in such a manner as to cause the forces of nature to produce that definite end. To do this takes a man of skill and imagination as well as scientific training, but compared with the task of the political inventor the process is simple. If we follow out the analogy, the inventor in politics, knowing the way human nature acts under given conditions, would have to alter the conditions before he could get the results he desired. But it is obvious that the physical environment and the social organization of mankind cannot be changed at will. We cannot arbitrarily change these things, as the inventor of a new mechanical device can arrange the relative positions of pieces of steel and wood. The very political institutions which the political inventor would seek to change, in order to get a different human re-

action, are themselves habitual human reactions which are the inevitable product of social heritage and contemporary environment.

Even if this obstacle were overcome, another would remain. That is the difficulty of determining the desirable ends. What are the ultimate aims of political life? Who is to decide what they are? For such a decision there is necessary a grasp of the practical possibilities and an ethical evaluation of alternative results. Ethics cannot be eliminated from the situation, for if we knew exactly what would be the outcome of the adoption of one or the other of two laws, we should still have to decide which outcome was the more desirable. Nor is this as easy as at first blush it might seem. Some would prefer the elimination of the unfit, and the full development of the potentialities of the fittest; others would stand out for the tender care of the defectives and the delinquents. Some would look toward the development of an objective civilization even at the expense of sacrificing the many to an aristocracy; others would insist upon the greatest happiness of the greatest number, upon giving the good things of life to all, even if the quantity of good things were less than under the rule of the many by the few. The lip-service that many Americans give to democracy only hides these underlying differences of opinion.

Of course it must be added that a science of politics and a process of political invention could not be carried through without reference to a simultaneous advancement of the other social sciences, or most of them. The work in these several fields must be correlated. The problem is really one of social invention based upon social ethics and upon a general social science. In that science economics and sociology especially would be brought into their true relationship with political science. Thus, it is seen that the problem broadens out into something that staggers the imagination.

What, then, shall we do? There is only one answer. We are thrown back upon the historical and comparative methods, and such organized efforts at the study of human nature in politics as public appropriation or private beneficence may make possible. Now the scholar who undertakes to elicit principles from history is like a mariner without a compass; if he is a man of wide reading and insight, his conclusions will have some element of truth but never the validity of scientific laws. Likewise, modern political conditions are so very complex that even with elaborate coöperative effort and at enormous expense observers will have trouble in getting results of any value.

There is one field, however, where the beginning of organized surveys

might be made with helpful results. That is the rural areas. The relatively small size of these political subdivisions insures that the student will be less likely to be swamped with details, or be unable to view the field as a whole. As contrasted with other areas, the county, the township, the New England town and the village have simpler problems and a less complicated set of political forces. The growing number and complexity of governmental functions, which have come with the rise of industrialism, have indeed touched these units, but have touched them least of all. We are reminded of the analogous position of the Greeks in their little city states with reference to the issues of political philosophy.

“One virtue of the Greek thinkers lies in the fact that they were enabled to see the problem simply and to see it whole. Their city states were so small and their organization so simple that they could fall within the easy comprehension of every citizen. The simplicity of their institutions made it possible for Greek philosophers to attack fundamental problems confidently in a simple and direct manner; thus it was a comparatively common phenomenon in Greek political life for a reformer to bring forward, not some particular reform on a matter of detail, but a completely new constitution—that is to say, boldly to make a fresh attempt to solve the problem as a whole on quite new principles. This does not seem to have meant that the Greeks oversimplified the issues, but rather that their states were so small and their administrative method so direct, that there was little chance for the theorist to lose himself in irrelevant detail. So it was that in their different ways Plato and Aristotle were able to give a clearer and more complete account of the nature of civil society than any subsequent thinker has achieved.”¹

There is the difference, of course, that the county is but part of a larger whole, while the city of Athens was a state within itself. But, if anything, this would make the problem of the observer all the simpler.

The fact that the county is but a subdivision, which does not have control of the major questions of government, would also make it less dangerous to experiment within this area. Bryce has pointed out that in the federal form there is the opportunity for trying experiments upon a relatively small scale. There is a similar opportunity within a state where there is local autonomy and county home rule. Unfortunately, country people are in some ways so conservative and have been so little

¹ C. R. and Mary Morris, *A History of Political Ideas*, p. ix.

influenced by changing conditions that it may be difficult to persuade them to embark upon innovations. But this may not be impossible, and if it can be done, there will be a main argument against the present tendency toward centralization, toward state supervision and standardization. If carried to its logical extreme, this tendency will leave too little room for that healthy variety, and trial and error upon a small (and hence not dangerous) scale, which produce new ideas and new methods.

In this connection it is not without interest to mention that of late a few writers have begun seriously to discuss the defects of rural government, with its antiquated methods of doing business, its lack of centralization within itself, and its hopelessly inefficient duplication of functions. This is encouraging in view of the fact that until recently there was almost unquestioned acceptance of local institutions developed through the colonies from the mother country. The new movement seems likely to be a sort of repetition of the reform movement in municipal government in the first quarter of the century. The assumptions of that movement, which are being applied to rural government, were not verified hypotheses, but they were the sane guesses of students of the art of politics. Nevertheless, the fact remains that it is difficult to tell whether improvements in municipal government which have followed are due rather to increased popular interest and attention or to the specific changes in the machinery and in administrative methods. Perhaps they were due to both causes working together; and certainly it seems true that a very intelligent electorate could not squeeze the juice of good government out of the pulp of our rural administrative system. The difficulty is mentioned only as a warning against hasty conclusions drawn from experiments or from observation by the *post hoc ergo propter hoc* argument. The only method that it is practicable to consider is the one which is beginning to be employed in rural government. But it takes a Bryce to employ it wisely.

There remains the question how far the findings garnered from an intensive study of local government in action would have any validity for the city, the state, the nation, and the league of nations. In these fields the problems are so different that the same human nature may probably react differently to the different stimuli. And yet we have reason to believe that what we learn in rural units will, with due allowances, have helpful bearing upon the problems of national democracy and international organization. The broader issues of social justice, foreign policy, and the like, are more fundamental or more unpredictable

than matters of school administration and tax assessment within the limits of state law. Yet here again we gain encouragement from the analogous position of the Greeks.

Bryce asks the question whether the operation of democracy in the city state of Athens has any lessons for modern democracy, with its association with nationalism. His answer is in part as follows: "Moderns have been apt to say: 'What light can these little city states give to us who frame our systems for vast countries? Athens and Syracuse in the height of their power had fewer citizens than a single English or French constituency counts today. The voters who at Rome chose a Fabius or a Julius to be Consul were sometimes fewer than those who fill the hall of a nominating Convention at Chicago.' But the difference in scale and in other things, too, are not so remarkable as the similarities. As the problems of good government were essentially the same, so were the motives and the temptations. The gifts by which power is won and the faults by which it is lost are as discernible in the careers of Greek and Roman statesmen as in those which engage our curiosity today. On the small stage of an ancient city republic both figures and tendencies stand out more boldly, the personalities are less conventional, the action moves faster, and it is often more dramatic."² And again: "After all the changes of seventy-five generations the tendencies of human nature remain substantially what they were. . . . Short indeed was the life of these republics, but it was intense, and it was wonderfully fruitful for all later generations. It has for us the unfading charm of showing human thought and passion in their primal simplicity."³

The analogy is not exact, but it suggests that if ancient democracy has lessons for modern democracy, the study of rural government in all its simplicity has lessons for the interpretation of national and international society.

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² *Modern Democracies*, vol. I, p. 166.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 135.