

Introduction:  
Common Sense and Politics

( I )

**I**N every country of the Western world, three flags are flying—the national emblem of the establishment and two revolutionary flags, one the red flag of communism, the other the black flag of anarchy. If the repressive forces of the police state were not operative in countries that have adopted the red flag for the emblem of their establishments, counter-revolutionary flags might be flying there too.

The present age is revolutionary the world over. But this does not distinguish it from earlier centuries, certainly not the nineteenth, or even the eighteenth. Because of almost instant global communication, we may be more conscious than earlier centuries that revolution is in the air everywhere, but in one form or another revolution has always been pervasive, just as establishments of one kind or another have always prevailed—from the very beginning of organized society. In fact, it might almost be said that establishment and revolution have been inseparable and reciprocating features of organized social life; government and opposition thereto, or institutions and the change thereof, are everywhere found together in the pages of history.

That this has been the case does not by itself warrant the conclusion that it must always be the case. The facts of history, even when they are without exceptions, do not demonstrate universal laws and should not mislead us into thinking that the past shows

us what the future must necessarily be like. One of the questions with which we shall be concerned, especially in the concluding chapters of this book, is the question about the future of revolution; or to put it another way, whether revolution must always be, as it has so far been, an inseparable feature of man's political life on earth.

Both the red flag of communism and the black flag of anarchy represent opposition to the establishment, but they also stand for tendencies or impulses that are themselves opposed. It is one thing to seek to overthrow the existing establishment in order to replace it by another that is thought to be better, and it is quite another thing to call for the demolition of all establishments in order to usher in a totally new state of affairs in the social life of man on earth—a state of affairs in which men will live together in peace and with justice but without any form of dominion of man over man or any exercise of organized force. The proponent of anarchy, if we consider only his opposition to an existing establishment, can be regarded as a revolutionist, since the revolutionary impulse is characterized by such opposition. But the proponent of anarchy is misunderstood if he is classed as just another revolutionist. His opposition is not to this or that establishment, but to all establishments—to government itself and to all the other institutions of organized society that he lumps together under the name "state."

To keep this significant difference clear, I propose to call the revolutionist who wishes to overthrow an existing establishment in order to replace it by another a "political revolutionist," in contradistinction to the "anarchistic revolutionist," who seeks to overthrow all establishments and replace them by none.

I will presently comment on the various meanings of the word "political," but for the moment I would like to use it to cover all the institutions of organized society—that total ensemble of established arrangements and practices that the anarchist lumps together under the name "state." Employing the word "political" in that sense, we can say that the political revolutionist is one who seeks to improve human life or society by institutional changes of one sort or another—through supplanting one set of institutions by another. In contrast, the anarchistic revolu-

tionist—or, for short, the anarchist—is one who seeks to improve human life or society by non-institutional means or, what is the same, by emancipating mankind from the trammels of the state.

I pointed out a moment ago that revolutionary movements, activities, or impulses cannot be regarded as a distinctive characteristic of the present age. But I think that it can be said with historical accuracy that anarchism is. I do not mean that it is the dominant tendency of the present age, that it enlists the support of a substantial or numerous following, or that it is in the foreground rather than in the wings of the stage on which the conflicts of our day are being acted out. What I have in mind is that the doctrine of anarchism—sometimes called “philosophical anarchism”—was born in the last two hundred years and has gained a certain currency in our own day. Its first appearance can be dated with the publication of William Godwin’s *Inquiry Concerning Political Justice* in 1793. There are traces of it in the writings of Thoreau, as an implication of his doctrine of civil disobedience, and a very special form of it appears in the Marxist theory of the withering away of the state—as the ultimate, not the proximate, objective of the revolutionary program. But it is not until the latter half of the nineteenth century and the first quarter of the twentieth that revolutionary anarchism receives its first full dress promulgation in the writings of Bakunin and Kropotkin in Russia and of Proudhon and Sorel in France. It is only with them that the annihilation of the state becomes an uncompromising and immediate objective of revolutionary action. [1]

While it cannot be said that these writings have been widely read or carefully studied by large numbers in the present century, no more than it can be said that many of those who sympathize with Marxism have been close readers or careful students of the major treatises of Marx, Engels, or Lenin, anarchistic sympathies are nevertheless widespread in the world today, especially among the younger generation and most especially among those who are in the forefront of the opposition to the present state of affairs, both in the United States and abroad. There may not be many in this group who are full-fledged anarchists—com-

mitted followers of the doctrines of a Bakunin or a Sorel. Nevertheless, among those who express profound dissatisfaction with the way that things are set up and being run, we find a manifest and growing loss of faith in institutional change as the way to remedy the trouble.

What is new in the world today and distinctive of our time is the conflict between those who think that, where our institutions are defective, the defects can be removed by institutional changes of one sort or another and those who despair of institutional change itself and who turn, in their desperation, to noninstitutional means of reaching the promised land of a better day.

( 2 )

Preeminent among the motives responsible for the writing of this book is the desire on my part to do what I can to restore faith in politics—to combat the current hopelessness about improving the condition of mankind by improving our institutions.

Before I mention another of my controlling motives, I cannot refrain from referring to a recent paper by Robert M. Hutchins. He proposed “five possibilities that [might] brighten the prospects of this scientific and technological age.” The first four are the redefinition and restoration of liberal education; the redefinition of the university; the redefinition and restoration of the idea of a profession; and the revival of philosophy. The fifth, he wrote, “is the restoration of and the resort to politics.” Antecedent thereto, I would add, is the restoration of our faith in politics; and that, as this book will suggest, is dependent both on the restoration of liberal education and the revival of philosophy.

“The decay of political philosophy,” Mr. Hutchins went on to say, “means that politics is nothing but the exercise of power. . . . Politics so conceived cannot help us find the means of guiding and controlling science and technology. On the contrary, the conception of politics as power has produced and will

continue to reproduce the situation we have today, in which science and technology are being exploited for the purposes of power in such a way as to threaten the existence of the race.

"Politics," Mr. Hutchins continued, "is and ought to be the architectonic science. It is the science of the common good. Good is a moral term. The common good is a good that accrues to every member of the community because he belongs to it; he would not have it if he did not belong to it. The task of politics," he concluded, "is to define the common good and to organize the community to achieve it." [2]

I will shortly attempt to expand on these remarks of Mr. Hutchins by a fuller explanation of the approach that will be made in this book to a conception of politics and to a statement of the principles of political philosophy—an approach that is motivated by a desire to restore faith in political or institutional means for achieving progress. But first I would like to dwell for a moment on the other consideration that motivates my approach to the subject. It is my sense that the present generation of the students in our colleges and universities not only manifest a growing loss of faith in politics, but also reveal a massive ignorance of history and, worse, a rejection of what can be learned from the past as totally irrelevant to present-day concerns. [3]

The two phenomena are hardly disconnected. I draw my faith in politics from my reading of history. I think this is true of others who find in history not only the record of institutional progress, but also the promise of further progress to be made by further institutional changes. Only ignorance of history could lead to the mistaken impression, mentioned earlier, that a revolutionary spirit or revolutionary activity distinctively characterizes the present age. Ignorance of history might also generate the false supposition that anarchism has always been one of the revolutionary forces at work in the efforts of men to improve their condition. It is not just ignorance of history that matters, though the gravity of such ignorance can hardly be overestimated. What is even more serious is the dismissal of the past as irrelevant—even so recent a past as the opening decades of the present century up to the end of the Second World War.

Let me concede at once, lest I be misunderstood, that the past is not of critical relevance to all our human concerns. There are speculative and scientific questions that can be fruitfully investigated without recourse to history. This is even true of the basic questions concerning the good life for man. But it is not true of the basic questions concerning the good society. Here we have a fundamental difference between ethics and politics as the two main branches of moral philosophy. I will have more to say on this point presently, when I discuss the ways in which these two branches of moral philosophy are related to one another. For the moment, I wish only to stress the fact that historic changes in the institutions of society have occasioned seminal political insights and have led to the general acknowledgment of political truths. The historic changes did not establish the truth of the political principles thus discovered; but they did make these truths discoverable and make them generally known.

All who are concerned with the improvement of human life on earth, and especially with the improvement of human society, must ultimately choose between two views of the main source of progress in human affairs. One looks to meliorative changes in human nature; the other to meliorative changes in human institutions. Let me declare at once my commitment to the second view, postponing until later my reasons for thinking it the only sound view of the matter. I am asserting, in short, that all the progress that has so far been made in the social life of man has been accomplished by cumulative improvements in man's social institutions, without any improvement—indeed, without any significant change—in the nature of man. Those who have lost faith in politics and who brand the past as irrelevant should be able to show that this proposition is factually false if they wish to defend the position that they take on more than emotional grounds.

( 3 )

So far I have concerned myself with the state of mind of those who may need a corrective for their tendency to turn

away from politics and from the past. But such considerations do not define the scope and subject-matter of this book, which, I hope, will be instructive as well as therapeutic. Its title contains two words that I must comment on if I am going to make clear what it is about and, just as important, what it is not about. One is the word "politics"; the other, "common sense."

That second term has played a pivotal role in two earlier books of mine which, like this one, were based on the Britannica Lectures that I delivered at the University of Chicago. In the book based on the first series of Britannica Lectures, common-sense opinions, formed in the light of common experience, were shown to be the rudiments out of which philosophy develops by critical reflection. [4] The sub-title of the book based on the third series of Britannica Lectures was "The Ethics of Common Sense." [5]

The shift in the phrasing—from the ethics of common sense to the common sense of politics—does not portend a change of intention. In both cases, my aim is identical: to expound the truths of moral philosophy—in the first case those of ethics, in the second case those of politics—which are known to the reflective man of common sense in the light of common experience. The moral philosopher, concerned with the problems of ethics or of politics, shares these truths with the man of common sense. In both fields, common sense, consisting of the insights that men develop by reflection on the facts of common experience, is the point of departure and the occasion for philosophizing. In both fields, such philosophizing as we can do is nothing but the rational development of common sense—by definitions, distinctions, analyses, and arguments. Such wisdom as we can attain in either ethics or politics is common sense philosophically defended and philosophically developed.

In politics, as in ethics, the attempt to expound such philosophical wisdom as we possess should set forth principles that a reasonable man of common sense would recognize as true, in the light of his common experience (without the need of anything to be learned by specialized research or additional investigation), by bringing to bear, on that common experience, his intellectual resources—his ability to think clearly, cogently,

and critically; in short, his capacity for being reasonable and rational.

However, the word "ethics" used in connection with "common sense" does not give rise to as many possible misunderstandings as the word "politics" used in the same connection, largely because the latter word has such diverse connotations in everyday discourse and in academic parlance. The word "ethics" in everyday discourse usually connotes the consideration of what is good and bad, or right and wrong, for the individual in the conduct of his life. The word "politics" is rarely used in a parallel fashion, to connote the consideration of what is good and bad, or right and wrong, in the institutions of society. On the contrary, it is for the most part used in a variety of other senses.

Most frequently, in ordinary speech, it is used to refer to engagement in the affairs of government. Thus, we speak of men going into politics or getting out of politics. With almost equal frequency, it is used even more broadly to refer to any kind of maneuvering or machination aimed at getting and holding power—any form of power play. Not only in the sphere of government but in all forms of corporate enterprise—in universities, hospitals, museums, and businesses—we describe men as engaged in politics when they vie with one another for power. It was in this sense of the term that many years ago Professor Harold Lasswell wrote a book entitled *Politics: Who Gets What, When, How*. [6] And it is in this sense that politics is thought of as the art for which Machiavelli wrote the rules.

This book is not concerned with politics so conceived. Nor is it concerned with politics as a branch of descriptive behavioral science. Here once again we find that the words "ethics" and "politics" are no longer used, as they once were, in a parallel fashion. For the most part, ethics is still regarded as a branch of philosophy, and it is usually so taught, not as a behavioral science. But unless one specifically names the subject of one's interest as political philosophy or political thought, a reference to politics in academic circles will usually be understood as signifying political science. What is at stake here in insisting on the distinction between political philosophy and political science—



or politics as a branch of philosophy and politics as a behavioral science—is the importance of maintaining the line that separates the evaluative or normative from the purely descriptive approach to politics.

With regard to human conduct, there is a clear difference between questions concerning how men do in fact behave and questions concerning how they ought to behave—what end they ought to seek and what means they should employ in seeking it. So with regard to human society, there is an equally clear difference between questions concerning how in fact society is organized, how its institutions are formed, and how they are operated, and questions concerning the ends that organized society should serve and the institutional means that should be employed to achieve those goals.

Questions of the first type are questions of fact, to be answered by empirical investigations productive of scientific knowledge. Such questions are beyond the competence of common sense to answer in a reliable fashion. More than common experience is needed to answer them. Questions of the second type are, in contradistinction, usually called questions of value—questions about what is good and bad, right and wrong. Here common sense, based on common experience and enlightened by rational reflection, can provide the rudimentary answers that philosophical analysis and argument is then able to perfect and defend.

Hence it should be clear that a book concerned with the common sense of politics is concerned with politics as a branch of practical philosophy and as a normative discipline, not with politics as a branch of descriptive behavioral science and as an empirical or investigative inquiry. [7]

( 4 )

I trust that I have now roughly indicated the scope and subject-matter of this book—what it will try to do and what it will not attempt. I know, of course, that full clarity about this cannot be achieved at the outset; I can only hope that it will develop.

Nevertheless, it may be useful to call attention here to three additional points that will prepare for what is to follow.

First of all, let me say that unless I specifically indicate some other meaning, I will always use the word "politics" to stand for political philosophy—a branch of practical or moral philosophy. Philosophy is practical rather than speculative when it is concerned with *what ought to be* rather than *what is or happens*—with the norms or standards of action rather than with the modes of being or becoming. And practical philosophy is, in my conception of it, identical with moral philosophy. Questions about what is good and bad, or right and wrong, whether with regard to individual conduct or with regard to the institutions and operations of society, are moral questions. The word "ethics" is sometimes used as if it were identical in meaning with "moral philosophy." But, clearly, ethics does not exhaust moral philosophy when the latter is understood as covering questions about the good society as well as questions about the good life. I will presently discuss ethics and politics as the twin branches of moral philosophy—how they are related to each other and how they differ. For the moment, the only point that I wish to reiterate is that moral philosophy is not to be identified with ethics exclusively, for it includes politics as well.

Second, let me comment briefly on the two meanings that I will attach to the adjective "political." One is the narrow meaning that we employ when we distinguish the political from the economic or the social. In this narrow meaning, political institutions are the institutions of government—its framework, its constitution, its offices, its laws. Used narrowly, "political" does not apply to all the aspects of society; it does not cover social arrangements, customs, or practises that lie outside the sphere of government and law, though they may be affected by it; nor does it cover the economic institutions and processes of society, though these too may be affected by government and law. We have this narrow meaning in mind when we speak of political as contrasted with economic or social justice, or distinguish between political and economic or social revolutions.

The other and broader meaning with which I will use the word "political" covers all aspects of society—not only the institu-

tions of government, but social and economic institutions as well, *insofar as the latter are in any way affected by the institutions of government*. Please note the proviso that I have just mentioned: "insofar as social and economic institutions are in any way affected by the institutions of government." According to this stipulation, whatever social or economic arrangements or practices are *in no way affected* by the institutions of government lie outside the sphere of the political, even in the broad sense of that term.

The term "political economy" was once used to signify the consideration of the economic aspects of society insofar as these are affected by the institutions of government. The parallel term, "political sociology," might have been invented to signify the consideration of social arrangements and practices that are similarly conditioned or affected. If one were to add the further stipulation that political economy and political sociology, thus conceived, are, like politics itself, normative disciplines and parts of moral philosophy, there would be little danger of confusing them with scientific economics and sociology as these are now pursued in our universities. The latter are descriptive, not normative disciplines; they are branches of behavioral science; and they do not limit themselves to the study of those economic and social phenomena that are affected by the institutions of government. In what follows, I will always indicate whether I am using the term "political" in the narrow or the broad sense whenever, for clarity, it becomes necessary to do so.

Third, and most important of all, I must call attention to the strict limitation that I will observe in this treatment of the problems of political philosophy. Not only will it deal with normative questions exclusively, but it will also limit itself to such answers as can be found on the level of universal principles, applicable to every variety of circumstance. It will not go below that level to questions of policy or to matters that call for decisions in particular cases. Let me explain this threefold division of the levels of normative or practical thought—thought aimed at action and concerned with what goals should be sought and what means should be chosen to achieve them. [8]

The highest level is the level of universal principles. In the

sphere of ethics, this is the level on which we deal with the conception of the good life as the ultimate end that men should seek and with the means that they should employ in seeking it. Statements about the end and the means constitute the universal principles of ethics, applicable to men at all times and places, without regard to the vast range of individual differences among men and the wide variety of external circumstances under which men live at different times and places. Politics, on this highest level of practical thought, deals with the ideal of the good society as a means to the good life and with the shape that its institutions must take in order to realize the ideal thus conceived. Here, as in the case of ethics, statements about the end and the means constitute the principles of politics, having a universality that is comparable to that of the principles of ethics, even though historic circumstances critically condition our discovery and acknowledgment of them. I will have more to say on this last point, for it represents a major difference between ethics and politics as related branches of practical or moral philosophy.

The second or intermediate level of practical thought is the level of rules or policies, which have a generality that is relative to a given set of circumstances. In the sphere of ethics, this is the level of practical thinking on which a certain type of man formulates general rules or policies for applying universal principles to his own life, different from that of other men by virtue of the type of man he is and also, perhaps, by reference to the type of circumstances beyond his control that condition his life. On this level, practical thinking in politics is concerned with adapting universal principles to the contingent circumstances of a particular historic society. Thus, for example, the institution of political liberty may be an indispensable means for realizing the ideal of a good society, but understanding and acknowledging the truth of this universal principle leaves open many difficult and complex questions about the establishment and operation of political liberty in a given society under its special set of historic circumstances—questions of policy about which reasonable men can disagree.

The third and lowest level of practical thought is the level of decisions, the level at which the thinking we do is proximate to action. It is the level on which we make a judgment about what is to be done here and now in this singular case that confronts us and calls for action on our part. In the sphere of ethics, this is the level on which universal principles, mediated and adapted by general rules or policies, are applied by the deliberation in which we engage when we have to decide how we should act here and now in our effort to make a good life for ourselves. It is on this level that political decisions are made, whether by the officials or by the constituents of government. The members of a legislature enacting a law, the judge deciding a case, the executive determining for or against a particular administrative act, and the citizen voting for this candidate and the policy he stands for rather than for his opponent—all are operating on this level, and they do so more or less wisely to the extent that their decision is reached by deliberations that involve the consideration of the universally applicable principles of politics and the relevant general policies which makes those principles applicable to a particular society.

In the strict sense in which practical philosophy consists of such wisdom as men can achieve about the problems of action, practical philosophy is necessarily limited to the first or highest level—the level of universal principles. At its very best, it consists of no more than a slim body of fundamental truths. This is not a limitation that I am imposing arbitrarily or as a matter of convenience. It is a limitation that philosophy must impose upon itself if it wishes to make good its claim that its formulations have the character of practical wisdom.

I am not saying that philosophers have always observed this limitation. On the contrary, they have usually transgressed it, especially in the sphere of politics. From Aristotle to Mill, the great political philosophers or theorists have not restricted themselves to questions of principle at the highest level; they have also dealt in detail and at length with problems that occur at the two lower levels. The solutions of such problems do not have the universality and cannot be demonstrated with the degree of certitude that is requisite for wisdom. In consequence, they have also in-

roduced into their writings matters that belong to descriptive political science rather than to normative political philosophy. [9]

I am going to try scrupulously to observe the limitation that I think a political philosopher should impose upon himself. If I succeed, one consequence will be the omission of many matters that are traditionally discussed in treatises on political theory. I hope that I can retain the reader's interest even though I will not touch on many of the issues or deal with many of the problems that occur to him when he thinks about politics—problems that are genuine, important, and urgent on the second and third level, but which are, in my judgment, beyond the special competence of philosophy as such.

( 5 )

May I anticipate the objection, or protest that will probably occur to the reader? Does not such purism prevent political philosophy from being practically useful? And from being of vital interest? How can it be said that political philosophy is practical when the universal principles that exclusively occupy its attention, even if they constitute the best wisdom we can achieve, are obviously inadequate by themselves for the solution of the practical problems of society and social life?

The answer to that question must begin by admitting—more than that, by emphasizing—the inadequacy of practical philosophy, be it ethics or politics, to solve the difficult, complex practical problems that arise for men living in a particular society, under the special circumstances prevailing at a given historic time and place. Universal principles do not by themselves decide what is to be done in particular cases; nor do they automatically determine our choice of the best among conflicting policies, all reasonable, and all applicable to a particular set of circumstances. Failing in these two respects, the universal principles of political philosophy are woefully inadequate for the solution of practical problems.

However, though ethical or political wisdom is inadequate for the solution of the practical problems that confront us, it is never-

theless indispensable for achieving sound solutions to them. Universal principles constitute the framework—the broad outline or plan—within which sound solutions can be and must be developed. They point us in the right direction. The framework they provide is like a map that helps us to find our way to our destination, even though it does not tell us everything that we need to know in order to get there. This framework of universal principles cannot tell us which of two sound policies to adopt or which of two reasonable courses of action to take, but it does provide us with the basis for discriminating between sound and unsound policies and between reasonable and unreasonable courses—those that fall within the framework of principles and so are wise decisions and those that do not and so are unwise.

Thus it is political wisdom, achieved only at the level of universal principles, that safeguards against making fundamental errors and keeps us from going in the wrong direction. As I have written elsewhere, “without it we would have no assured guidance at all, even though the guidance it does provide does not suffice at every turn of the road.” [10] Hence when we confess that political wisdom is by itself inadequate for practical purposes, we should be quick to add that it is also practically indispensable.