

# Politics Without Economics

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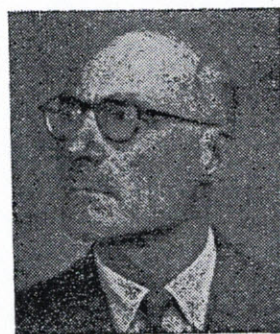
"No true scientist thinks he can improve on natural law:  
politicians think they can."

IF ONE WISHES to get a general view of the contemporary academic attitude to political theories both of the past and present, one could hardly find a more suitable introduction than *Political Ideas*, edited by David Thomson, Master of Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge.\*

The editor contributes an introductory chapter on the nature of political ideas, and the concluding chapter on the idea of equality which he considers the main political question of today. Each of the intervening chapters is contributed by a professor of high standing and the series extends from Machiavelli to Marx. The university lecturer in philosophy at Oxford, who contributes a chapter on recent political thought, does not, like the others, group his subject around any main figure, because, as he says, the tendency has been to reject theory altogether in favour of empiricism. He might have noticed the same tendency in economic thought. All the contributions are well written and although the authors, like academicians in general, do not commit themselves to definite conclusions, they certainly justify the editor's claim that they "stimulate and nourish intellectual curiosity about political ideas as a worthwhile educational enterprise." At the end of each chapter a list is given of books, almost all the authors being modern education-

alists. The political thinkers considered in each chapter, says the editor "have been selected because the conclusions reached in their thinking represent different facets of the evolution of government and of ideas about society which mattered in modern history and which still matter today . . . The ideas of a great thinker are not necessarily or even probably 'representative' of the thought of his time. They are more likely to be heretical and unrepresentative. What concerns us is their eternal, not their temporary, characteristics." Nine of the fifteen chapters of the book were broadcast on the B.B.C., which is not surprising considering the academic prestige of the authors. But what of some of the great thinkers these authors spoke about, especially those on the libertarian side? If there had been radio and national dailies in the times of these authors what chance of publicity would have

\*Penguin Books, 5s.



been given to such unqualified persons as the vagabond Rousseau, the obscure failure Tom Paine, or the clerk J. S. Mill who never went to school? Perhaps in some future time, if anything like civilisation endures, some authors not mentioned in this book, such as Adam Smith, Henry George, Max Hirsch, Professor Hayek, and Frank McEachran might be given some publicity in academic circles.

The main defect in this collection of essays is the apparent assumption by all the authors that political ideas can be studied independently of economic ideas, although this could not be entirely maintained in the case of Karl Marx. But the confusion this assumption creates crops up again and again in the case of other political philosophers mentioned, many of whom were so conscious of the affinity between political and economic ideas, that they wrote also on economic questions. Among other examples, in the essay on John Locke, it is stated, "by the right to property Locke meant that no ruler could be allowed to retain his office if he seized any man's property, other than by a proper system of taxation." This is politically meaningless unless it is explained what is meant by a proper system of taxation, and taxation is an economic question. From Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*, 1755, the essayist quotes: "The first man who, having enclosed a piece of ground, bethought himself of saying, 'This is mine' and found people simple enough to believe him, was the real founder of civil society. From how many crimes, wars and murders, from how many horrors and misfortunes might not anyone have saved mankind, by pulling up the stakes, or filling in the ditch, and crying to his fellows, 'Beware of this imposter; you are undone if you once forget that the fruits of the earth belong to us all, and the earth itself to nobody.'" Here Rousseau, whatever his errors in other respects, touches the very basis of political economy and of political justice; but the essayist appears unaware of the significance, although it is he who considers that the question of equality is the main problem today.

The chapter on Marx is written with a lightness of touch refreshing for such a subject but the writer's view of basic economic principles is so tentative that he virtually admits he can come to no firm conclusion.

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sion. He mentions Marx's debt to Hegel whose conception of the all-embracing nation-state necessarily in conflict with others helped Marx to formulate his doctrine of the class-struggle, but it was Marx himself who thought up the theory of surplus value,



according to which, he asserted, every employee is exploited by his employer because the employer pockets the alleged difference between the value of what the labourer produces and the value of the wages he receives. "Obviously," says the writer, "there *is* such a difference; otherwise there would be no point in employing labour; but whereas most people accept this as just one of the facts of life, it was in Marx's view an appalling and far-reaching evil." The writer overlooked the fact that production requires capital as well as direct labour and if the payer of wages ignored the cost of capital (interest) production would cease. If labourers and capitalists could bargain on equal terms, each party would receive the full value of their contributions; neither could exploit the other. At present the intervention of land monopoly, which exploits both parties, obscures the bargaining position and it is this which constitutes the far-reaching evil; and land monopoly is not one of the facts of life but a political creation. Marx sometimes had glimpses of this but his failure to distinguish the basic difference between land and capital obscured his perception of its prime importance to his whole case. Nevertheless the first article of *The Communist Manifesto* demanded the nationalisation of land and the first decree of the Bolshevik government in Russia professed to put it into operation. But the chapter on Marx and modern capitalism omits all reference to these things.

In the chapter on Montesquieu we read, "His faith in liberty, in what we would now call 'the open society,' was founded perhaps on the belief, deep seated in all eighteenth-century savants, that private interests did ultimately harmonise, that, through the benevolent dispensation of Nature, men could be rogues or frauds individually but decent or honest in the mass." Despite the tremendous implications of this belief to political ideas and to the happiness and peace of all mankind, the writer does not develop this theme. Like the other writers in this book, whenever the reader's judgment on a political idea depends upon his judgment on an economic law, the writer side-steps the issue and the reader is left guessing as to what is true or false in political ideas.

Either the dispensation of Nature (or the essential

conditions into which all men are born) make it possible for all, but for their errors, to live and prosper in harmony—or it does not. If the latter alternative is accepted then all political ideas must be judged by expediency, by what is most efficacious according to time and place in the struggle against everybody. If the former alternative is accepted then those political ideas are best which accord closest with nature's conditions; but in both cases one's judgment in economic matters must precede one's judgment in political matters. The two subjects cannot be studied in isolation, especially today when all politicians constantly refer to "the economy."

All societies, from the simplest to the most complex, must use land, they must exert labour, practice thrift, use capital (or tools) exchange goods and services; there must be some system of revenue to provide for public services and there must be some protection, whether perfect or imperfect, for life and property. Economic law governs the operations of all these things; it indicates what is natural and harmonious. Politics can try at any stage to reverse the economic order and thus create strife, or it can try to accord with that order and thus promote harmony; and it is on this basis that political ideas must be judged.

The great anomaly of our times is the contrast between the progress of scientific discovery and the retrogression in social ideas. No true scientist thinks he can improve on natural law; politicians think they can.