

THE SCHOLAR IN A TROUBLED WORLD¹

BY WALTER LIPPMANN

I

IN addition to the anxieties which he shares with all other men in days like these, there is a special uneasiness which perturbs the scholar. He feels that he ought to be doing something about the world's troubles, or at least to be saying something which will help others to do something about them. The world needs ideas: how can he sit silently in his study and with a good conscience go on with his thinking when there is so much that urgently needs to be done? And yet, at the same time he hears the voice of another conscience, the conscience of the scholar, which tells him that as one whose business it is to examine the nature of things, to imagine how they work, and to test continually the proposals of his imagination, he must preserve a quiet indifference to the immediate and a serene attachment to the processes of inquiry and understanding.

As in Browning's *Grammarians*, there is in him the peculiar grace that before living he would like to learn how to live. But as a man of his time he is impelled against his instincts to enter the arena, to speak with a certainty he does not possess about measures which he knows to be a mere gamble with the unknown. When the telephone begins

to ring, calling him to give out interviews, and to draft memoranda, and to attend conferences, he is afraid to say with the high assurance of the *Grammarians*: 'Leave Now for dogs and apes! Man has Forever.' He drops his studies, he entangles himself in affairs, murmuring to himself: 'But time escapes: Live now or never!'

Thus his spirit is divided between the urgency of affairs and his need for detachment. If he remains cloistered and aloof, he suffers in the estimation of the public, which asks impatiently to know what all this theorizing is good for anyway if it does not show a way out of all the trouble. If he participates in affairs, he suffers no less. For it will quickly be revealed that the scholar has no magic of his own, and to the making of present decisions he may have less to contribute than many who have studied his subject far less than he. But most of all he suffers in his own estimation: he dislikes himself as he pronounces conclusions that he only half believes; he distrusts himself, and the scholarly life, because, when the practical need for knowledge is so great, all the books in all the libraries leave so much unsettled.

II

This conflict of the spirit is, of course, most acute among those who profess knowledge of the affairs on which nations are now divided. It cannot much

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concern the mathematician and the astronomer, the physicist, the chemist, or the biologist. They may be distracted by the uproar about them, but they are not invaded by demands that they provide solutions. But the conflict must greatly oppress every student of economics and of politics, of law, of education, and of morals. For in these realms there is an insistent presumption that prolonged study should have produced immediate practical wisdom, that from the professors should issue knowledge of how to decide the current controversies.

It is this presumption that I should like to examine. For from it springs the conflict between the demands of the contemplative and the active life. We assume that a profound study of politics ought to produce a statesman, a profound study of economics ought to produce a man of affairs, a profound study of the law ought to produce a legislator, a judge, or an advocate. Yet we know that it rarely happens. Nevertheless, we continue to assume and expect, and then are disappointed when the scholar is ineffective in affairs, or half-hearted and distracted in his search for truth. Yet the notion that the contemplative life is a preparation for immediate participation in the solution of current problems is by no means to be taken for granted. In fact, the traditions of human wisdom are against it. They are replete with lamentations, like those of Gregory when, having left his monastery to assume the Papacy, he cried out that he was 'borne ever onward by the disturbance of those endless billows' and had almost lost sight of the port which he had left.

It is permissible, then, to question this presumption, even though such doubt is so contrary to the temper of our times. I venture to question it, not on the ground of Pope Gregory's lament, that his soul had to engage in

the business of worldly men and was defiled in the dust of earthly occupations, but specifically on the ground that in the present phase of democracy there is an intrinsic reason why the theoretical study of public affairs does not, and cannot, provide the immediate practical wisdom to manage public affairs.

III

For, at the point where knowledge is to be applied in action, there is a highly variable and incalculable factor. That factor is the will of the people. Therefore, when the student of politics is asked to recommend a particular course of action, he must say, if he is candid, that his system of ideas rests upon a foundation of assumptions about human conduct; that these assumptions are necessarily generalized and abstract; and that, therefore, they discount the willfulness and uncertainty of the immediate situation. But practical decisions depend in large part upon appraising swiftly just this element of willfulness and uncertainty in public opinion and individual response. A knowledge of the past and reflection upon the behavior of men in analogous circumstance may illuminate and steady the appraisal, but there is as yet no science which controls it.

The art of practical decision, the art of determining which of several ends to pursue, which of many means to employ, when to strike and when to recoil, comes from intuitions that are more unconscious than the analytical judgment. In great emergencies the man of affairs feels his conclusions first, and understands them later. He proceeds by a kind of empathy, relying upon a curious capacity for self-identification with the moods of others and upon a sense of the realities which he can rarely expound. Those who have this gift must be immersed in affairs; they must

absorb much more than they analyze; they must be subtly sensitive to the atmosphere about them; they must, like a cat, be able to see in the dark. They pay a price for their capacities. Only the very greatest men of affairs see beyond the moment. But at the instant of decision they can often act with an assurance and sometimes with a rightness which it is impossible to deduce from the principles of any theoretical system.

The political sciences, since they deal with conduct, must rest upon some positive conception of human motives. It is not, I think, possible to formulate principles of government or of economics on the assumption that human motives are incalculable. There are no principles that could be worked out which would be equally true for a nation of heroes and saints, a community of ascetics and of swindlers or thieves. The political thinker must make some assumptions about the character and the working motives of people. These assumptions must necessarily be simpler and more stable than those which are actually in play at any particular moment of decision. Shall he, for example, assume that each man intelligently pursues his own interest? If he adopts this abstraction, he can produce an imposing and coherent doctrine. The classical economists did that, and, granting the premise, a perfectly intelligible social policy can be deduced from it. But observation soon shows that even if it were true that men desire their own interest exclusively, they are usually too little informed and too gullible to know what it is.

But, once the economist admits this, he must go further and admit that practical judgment as to the best course at any moment is dependent upon what to him is mere guesswork, upon a surmise as to what choices are open as a result of the particular mix-

tures of understanding and ignorance, partisanship and propaganda, national, sectional, sectarian, and class prejudice, then prevailing among the people, as well as upon the personal idiosyncrasies, and special bias, of the men temporarily in power. As an economist he has no particular aptitude for making these surmises. Thus if, for example, he attempts to estimate a nation's capacity to pay a war debt in the course of three generations, no process of economic reasoning will give him the answer. For the capacity to pay is in some important degree a function of the will to pay, and to judge that he must make a guess about the whole political future of a people. He must guess at the evolution of its prejudices.

It appears, then, that our ability to derive practical guidance from theoretical studies is fundamentally limited by the part which transient prejudice plays in human conduct. I venture to think that this is the core of the difficulty which confronts the man of affairs when he turns to the scholar for advice, and the scholar when he seeks to give advice. No theoretical system of political economy has ever been constructed by the mind of man which rests upon incalculable human conduct. Yet in our modern democracies, most particularly in the modern American democracy which is so unsettled in its life and in its convictions, the working motives of men are so highly volatile that they defy theoretical formulation and systematic analysis.

We are compelled, I think, to recognize that in no other critical period of the modern world has transient opinion played so great a rôle in affairs. If, with this in mind, we examine the deliberations which accompanied the establishment of the Republic, we must be impressed, it seems to me, with the greater capacity of the eighteenth-century thinkers to reach definite prac-

tical conclusions from their general principles. I, for one, never read in the *Federalist* without a feeling of envy that no one living to-day believes in general principles as did the authors of those essays, or is able to use his principles so confidently and effectively. These men possessed an intellectual clarity that we have wholly lost. They were the masters of their subject in a way that we are not.

I do not believe that this is wholly a matter of superior genius. I imagine it must be due, in some measure, to the fact that in their time, and well down into the nineteenth century, the mass of men were, as Gladstone put it, passive. They had prejudices, but they were stable prejudices. The patterns of popular conduct varied very little, so that political thinkers and men of affairs could reason with some confidence about their behavior.

But by the second half of the nineteenth century the passive democracy had become an active democracy. Under the impact of the Industrial Revolution and of popular education, the popular mode of life became radically unsettled, and with it the fixed prejudices, the normal expectations, the established conventions, the enduring convictions of the older world. They were replaced by new ambitions and transient opinions. An immense uncertainty entered public life, and consequently into the premises of all the sciences that deal with public affairs. The modern world became revolutionary in its essence, for no abiding tradition of any kind remained.

If this analysis is correct, then it follows that we must not expect society to be guided by its professors until, or perhaps I should say unless, the fluctuating opinions that now govern affairs are replaced by clear, by settled, moral values. Either men must have the stable prejudices of the an-

cestral order or they must have stable conventions they have rationally accepted: on either foundation a political science which actually controlled events might be built up. But upon a foundation of merely transient opinions derived from the impressions of the moment, undirected by any abiding conception of personal and social values, no influential political science can be constructed, and, it may be, no enduring political state.

IV

A recognition of this underlying difficulty — that systematic principles cannot be derived from or applied to a democracy ruled by willful and uncertain opinions — would go a long way toward resolving the conflict which now unsettles the scholar's spirit. It would give him the courage to preserve that detachment which his instinct demands. It would give him the resolution to shut out the distracting demands for interviews and statements and conferences and all the other paraphernalia of active intervention in affairs. If, nevertheless, he is moved to intervene, he can do so at least knowing that in that rôle he is not a scholar, but merely one more amateur as to things in general, however much he may be the specialist of something in particular. He will no longer be astonished that he is puzzled by the complexity of the actual, or undervalue his own theoretical life and in the presence of the immediate let himself be overawed by the superior assurance of the man of affairs.

The more fully he understands the real reason why to-day theory is so divorced from practice, the more he will realize how supremely important it is that those who have the gift for theory should imperturbably cultivate it. For what is most wrong with the world is that the democracy, which at

last is actually in power, is a creature of the immediate moment. With no authority above it, without religious, political, or moral convictions which control its opinions, it is without coherence and purpose. Democracy of this kind cannot last long; it must, and inevitably it will, give way to some more settled social order. But in the meanwhile the scholar will defend himself against it. He will build a wall against chaos, and behind that wall, as in other bleak ages of the history of man, he will give his true allegiance, not to the immediate world, but to the invisible empire of reason.

In that realm of being, the scholar makes his genuine contact with the affairs of men. The life of man has other dimensions besides the troubled surface and the present moment. To the controversies arising out of the play of transient prejudice upon circumstances he can perhaps contribute technical knowledge. He can contribute no particular wisdom that is peculiarly his own. His concern is with the formulation and establishment of modes of thought that underlie and might reorganize the prejudiced will, and cure it of that transiency which is the fundamental source of all our troubles. He does not manage the passing moment. He prepares the convictions and the conventions, the hypotheses and the dispositions which might control the purposes of those who will manage future events. Thus in this crisis his chief duty is to understand, so that the next one may be more intelligible. This crisis is what it is. The men who will decide the issues may change their opinions a little; it is too late for them to change their habits, and within the grooves of those habits the immediate decisions will be made.

The true scholar is always radical. He is preoccupied with presumptions, with antecedents and probabilities; he

moves at a level of reality under that of the immediate moment, in a world where the choices are more numerous and the possibilities more varied than they are at the level of practical decisions. At the level of affairs the choices are narrow, because prejudice has become set. At the level of thought, in the empire of reason, the choices are wide, because there is no compulsion of events or of self-interest. The immediate has never been the realm of the scholar. His provinces are the past, from which he distills understanding, and the future, for which he prepares insight. The immediate is for his purpose a mere fragment of the past, to be observed and remembered rather than to be dealt with and managed.

This view of the scholar's life will seem to many a mere elegy to a fugitive and cloistered virtue. Yet I doubt whether the student can do a greater work for his nation in this grave moment of its history than to detach himself from its preoccupations, refusing to let himself be absorbed by distractions about which, as a scholar, he can do almost nothing. For this is not the last crisis in human affairs. The world will go on somehow, and more crises will follow. It will go on best, however, if among us there are men who have stood apart, who refused to be anxious or too much concerned, who were cool and inquiring, and had their eyes on a longer past and a longer future. By their example they can remind us that the passing moment is only a moment; by their loyalty they will have cherished those things which only the disinterested mind can use. They are the men who will forge the instruments that Shelley dreamed of:

Those instruments with which High Spirits call
The future from its cradle, and the past
Out of its grave, and make the present last
In thoughts and joys which sleep, but cannot die,
Folded within their own eternity. . . .