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TIME, TECHNOLOGY, AND THE CREATIVE SPIRIT IN POLITICAL SCIENCE¹

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I

Let us transport ourselves for a moment on the magic carpet of fancy to the year 1783 that saw the formal close of the war for independence, and listen to a few passages from an imaginary lecture delivered by a prescient professor of moral and natural philosophy in an unnamed American college to a group of boys preparing themselves for labor, achievement, and destiny in the republic so recently ushered into a chilly and doubting world.

“Young gentlemen: You who hear my voice, if you cross the normal span of life, will be living when the first quarter of the nineteenth century has turned. Those among you who are blessed with the four score years of the Scriptures will approach the borders of the mid-century before the long night falls upon your path. Your children, who will learn their early lessons and derive their bias from your instruction, will be among the citizens who govern the country in 1850, and your grandchildren will face with dimming eyes the dawn of the twentieth century. These facts, we might say, to anticipate the language of a coming philosopher in this ancient college, are ‘stubborn and irreducible.’

“Since this is so, it becomes my duty,” continues the imaginary lecturer, “to prepare you and those who will learn directly from you—as far as lies within my power—for the stern business

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of dealing with the realities that lie ahead—realities that will come down upon you like doom, twist and turn as you may. For the future is as real as the past and is your heritage. Having lived through a tempestuous and revolutionary period ourselves and having just won our independence from the most puissant empire in the world, breaking with the might of General Washington's army the legalities of the colonial age, we are now prepared to consider the future with more flexibility of spirit than our immediate ancestors.

"Therefore, young gentlemen, I venture to look down the coming years to see whether I can discern, amid the shadows, some of the fateful things with which you and your children and your children's children must wrestle.

"First of all, I discover that the present system of government, the Articles of Confederation, will be overthrown, not by mere amendment in accordance with the express stipulations of the existing law, but by a convention appealing over the heads of the Congress and the state legislatures to the people in a grand referendum; and instead of the existing order there will be established a Constitution founded on different principles and directed to different economic ends.

"In the next place, I prophesy the complete abolition of the present property qualifications on the right to vote and hold office—qualifications approved by our fathers as absolutely essential to the safety of the state—and the substitution of the principle that every adult male citizen, no matter how poor in earthly goods, shall have the right to vote. Nay, more, and I beg you to refrain from any unseemly demonstrations, I predict that the time will come when women as well as men will have the precious privilege of voting and holding office! The high quality of your laughter is a tribute to your geniality.

"And now, if the young gentlemen in the class who are preparing for the ministry will permit, I discover in my horoscope the disestablishment of the Congregational Churches in Massachusetts—indeed of all churches everywhere—and the practical abandonment of religious limitations on the suffrage and office holding. The time will come when even our sister commonwealth

of South Carolina will cease to rely on fear of hell as a sanction for morality, political and civil.

“Moving forward into the middle of the nineteenth century, I find according to my auspices a terrible social war in which the institution of chattel slavery is abolished by a dictatorial act of military power worthy of Caesar; and a revolution made in the Constitution soon to be substituted for the Articles of Confederation—a revolution subjecting all states, towns, villages, counties, and cities in all matters pertaining to life and property to the judgment of five gentlemen learned in the law at the new national capital, wherever that may be.

“Going on, I see the election of federal Senators, safely entrusted to state legislatures, wrested from those bodies and thrown to the tender mercies of the populace. Beyond that, I find grievous taxes laid upon incomes, inheritances, and business profits, rising progressively to staggering percentages, and the vicious principle adopted of discriminating between wealth earned and wealth unearned—as if that distinction could be made without denying the very basis of property right. That is not all. I see flaming in the letters of the statute books declarations that the rich may be taxed to educate the poor, to reduce interest rates on farm mortgages, to provide hospitals for the improvident, and innumerable conveniences free of charge for the commonalty.

“Leaving aside, in the hurry of the hour, a hundred other innovations never dreamt of by our thoughtful and thrifty fathers—innovations which make the claims of our restless western neighbors now gathering under the banner of that modern Tiberius Gracchus, Daniel Shays, seem moderate by comparison; I say, leaving these aside for the moment, I venture to suggest that the steam engine so recently patented by James Watt and the spinning machinery contributed by Crompton and Arkwright in England will completely destroy the industry and agriculture by which we now live, introduce a machine régime, and open before humanity the possibility of an indefinite increase in the necessities, comforts, conveniences, and luxuries of life, bringing upon us the fateful doom of a levelling social democracy. With respect to this prognostication, I venture to say that it will be

more revolutionary in its effect upon social orders and political opinions than all of the cataclysms that lie behind us taken together.

“Now, gentlemen, I can see by the amazement, incredulity, and scorn in your countenances that my discourse has been by no means pleasing; and I expect to receive letters from your angry fathers very soon denouncing me for suggesting that the perfect world in which we find ourselves this beautiful December day will be turned upside down by this and coming generations. But I beg of you to pause a moment and ask yourselves how I can discharge my duty of preparing you for the coming realities of life if I make no reference to what I imagine those coming realities will be? Anyway, such is my view and those who wish to confute it have a free forum.

“Finally, I would add that, distasteful as many of the impending changes promise to be, I am constrained by my faith in the wisdom and beneficence of Almighty God to suppose that His ways are slightly more important than mine, to speak modestly, and that perhaps it may be as useful to work with Him as against Him. Yet I would not have any of my moralisings obscure the stubborn and inexorable facts that loom large on the horizon of the future.”

Returning to earth on our magic carpet, may we not, without claiming any of the prescience of our distant professor, venture now and then to turn our faces from the dead past and the fleeing present to the indubitable future? Can those who teach and write to-day honestly avoid the challenging fact that their students must work in the substance of the approaching years, not in the ashes of the yesterday? Since the answer is a Draconian affirmative, then what of the hour?

It is not, of course, given to any of us to discharge successfully the rôle of a prophet, but unless science and the scientific method are jokes, then at least we ought to be able to get ourselves into a receptive frame of mind with respect to the decades and centuries lying before us. Certainly two things in “the intellectual climate” in which we work thrust themselves upon us with sovereign

exigence. The first is the pitiless reality of the time-sense, the consciousness of an irresistible flow of seconds, hours, days, years, and centuries—to which is now coupled that fruitful eighteenth-century concept, the idea of indefinite progress—the continuous conquest of material environment by applied science.

Beyond all doubt, this is one of the striking mind-phenomena of the modern age and the Western world. Unquestionably Oswald Spengler is right in laying emphasis upon that commonplace but revolutionary device created by Western Europe, separating it from antiquity and the Orient—the clock, with its moving hands and its relentless bell tolling out the hours of man's little span, joining the point-moments of the future and the past in an infinite relation, and giving to the masses that live under its endless monody a time-sense utterly incompatible with the fixed destiny of the ancient Egyptians and the modern Orientals—before the Western invasion of the Far East. Unsparring time, that is the measureless arc under which we labor, think, and teach.

Not one whit less inflexible is technology—also a modern and Western Leviathan. Like time, it devours the old. Ever fed by the irrepressible curiosity of the scientist and inventor, stimulated by the unflinching acquisitive passion—that passion which will outlive capitalism as we know it and all other systems now imagined by dreamers—technology marches in seven-league boots from one ruthless, revolutionary conquest to another, tearing down old factories and industries, flinging up new processes with terrifying rapidity, and offering for the first time in history the possibility of realizing the idea of progress so brilliantly sketched by Abbé de Saint-Pierre at the opening of the eighteenth century.

Under the convulsive pressures of technology pouring through time, turning social orders into ever-new kaleidoscopic patterns, all thought, all policies, and all actions in the sphere of statecraft—political science—must be formulated unless, forsooth, we are to resort to utopias and academic sterilities. This, it seems to me, is the most fundamental fact of our discipline. By what methods, then, can those among us who desire to labor at the hazardous business of trying to think hope to bring our flow of consciousness

into such intimate relation with the world stream that we may, by creative effort, better help to prepare our students—and through them the nation—for its destiny? Somewhere near this intellectual target we must shoot unless we prefer to play safe with myopic research into the unimportant and with descriptive studies of a buried past.

II

But with respect to creative work in this relation we carry on our backs a heavy burden of acquired rights and servitudes. In the United States political science has too long been a household drudge for lawyers—political lawyers at that. In a large measure, the printed subject matter of our discipline—at all events the part most easily accumulated and exploited—is composed of statutes, ordinances, decrees, and judicial decisions—often shadowy reflections of the stern realities of life. Now of all brain workers, except perhaps the bureaucrats, the lawyer is the closest slave of precedent. Of necessity this is so, for were he to cut loose from set patterns, the lawyer would be lost, with what effect upon justice as distinguished from judicial determination, I shall not venture to say. At all events, while time and technology ever stream forward, the lawyer is always looking backward to see what his predecessors said and did. Even when he finds it necessary under the stress of novel contingencies to reverse himself, the lawyer must twist his new emotions to fit the rhetorical mould of some historic symbols.

The second great incubus carried by political science, making the business of creative thinking difficult, is the baggage provided by the professional historian. Even more intently than the lawyer, and with less personal interest in the pulsating substance of life, the historian looks backward. However great his services in the preservation of national memorials, the historian makes few weighty contributions to political science. In mortal fright lest he should be wrong about something, he shrinks from any interpretation—from the task of seeking any clue to what William James called the big, buzzing, booming confusion of this universe.

Indeed the historian proudly tells us that he has nothing to do with interpretation, that he deals only with indubitable facts,

with things as they actually were. Unquestionably, good work has been done under that inspiration, but we should not be deceived. The historian himself knows, on sober thought, that with reference to any theme of any importance, he does not present all the facts, no matter how minute his analysis, but in truth selects a few from the multitudes that have by chance merely found a pale record on the pages of the books and manuscripts and papers that have escaped the ravages of time. And any selection, except one made by lot, is an interpretation, no matter how vehemently the historian protests his innocence of ideas. More than that, the very denial of any desire to interpret is perhaps the most profound interpretation of all—namely, a confession that there is not even a discoverable fringe of order in the universe, that anarchy is the name for the chaos; that, for example, a Wall Street lawyer like Alexander Hamilton might very well have been the leader of Jefferson's agricultural interest and that the Virginia planter might very well have headed the party of fiscal prowess. More than thirty years ago, Henry Adams begged the historians in his presidential letter to have a care for perils inherent in the philosophy of Alice in Wonderland, but without any appreciable effect upon their conduct.

Besides the impedimenta which lawyers and historians have thrown in the way of connecting political science with the flowing stream of time and technology, the circumstances of academic life in America have not made for venturesome explorations, with their terrible risks of error, failure, ridicule, and futility. Though time and technology are remorseless, as Matthew Arnold said of thought, sapping institutions and resting on that which is eternal, colleges and universities are essentially conservative. Our supervising trustees are business men to whom orders for goods in hand and in sight and the next dividend date are realities more vivid than the onrushing stream of years that devours us all, or they are political appointees, living or moribund, no less poignantly concerned about the day's grist.

Given these invincible circumstances, college presidents, when searching for funds to sustain their institutions, must move respectfully among business men and transitory politicians.

Hence for all executives of the higher learning "safety first" is the most effective battle slogan—safety first with reference to the instant need of things, not the long view. And a college professor who is disloyal to the complex that supports him is supposed to be lacking in the qualities of a gentleman—and in a sense is wanting in those very characteristics.

Then to this general environment of circumspection are added several academic usages detrimental to creative thinking. First of all is the weight of teaching hours—the absence of generous economic support for political science. In natural science there are many research professorships practically freed from class-room routine and well supplied with huge buildings and laboratories; but to the professor of political science we assign from eight to twenty hours teaching a week and money enough to buy a few dog-eared textbooks. It does not appear in the records that any college or university in the country gives its instructors in government either the leisure or the money necessary to travel and observe political institutions at work in all parts of the earth. Finally, we seldom promote a lively young instructor to a position of comfort and financial ease until he has crippled his mind by writing text-books acceptable to the president and trustees or has grown so old that the fiery hopes of youth out of which the future is made have died down into the dull embers of reminiscence.

The fourth great menace to creative thought in America today is research as generally praised and patronized, the peril of substituting monocular inquiries for venturesome judgments, the peril of narrowing the vision while accumulating information. Research in detailed problems with reference to specific practical ends no doubt produces significant results—findings of the highest value to practitioners, and are to be commended and supported more generously than ever; but still with respect to large matters of policy and insight there are dangers in over-emphasis.

In the first place, by making success in some minute and unimportant academic study the gateway of admission to the profession, we admit to our fellowship students with no claims

whatever to capacity for independent thought, venturesome exploration, or stimulating speculation. In the second place, research under scientific formulas in things mathematically measurable or logically describable leaves untouched a vast array of driving social forces for which such words as conviction, faith, hope, loyalty, and destiny are pale symbols—yielding to the analysis of no systematist. In the third place, too much stress on the inductive method of minute research discourages the use of that equally necessary method—the deductive and imaginative process which often makes the poet or artist a better fore-teller and statesman than the logical master of detail and common-sense.

Nor are these contentions without practical illustration. Certainly it will be admitted that Germany before 1914 was the country in which microscopic research was carried to the greatest lengths—certainly far beyond the confines reached by England and France—and yet with all their high practical knowledge and terrific organizing power German statesmen were beaten by imponderables that escaped doctors of philosophy.

Now, if perchance anyone is inclined to think these reflections on our creative capacities unwarranted, I venture to ask him whether, with the possible exception of John Taylor's monumental *Inquiry*, a single immortal work in political science has been written in America since Hamilton, Jay, and Madison struck off from the flaming forge of controversy the enduring philippic that bears the title of *The Federalist*?

III

If my thesis is right, namely, that time and technology move relentlessly upon all mankind and all institutions, and my anti-thesis is correct, namely, that the conditions pertinent to creative thought in American academic life run against, not with, the constructive imagination necessary for any harmonious adjustment of humanity to its destiny, then we may well say: What is the upshot? That is, of course, a deadly question; for, resorting to the language of metaphysics, we do not know whether man, long the victim of natural forces and many delusions, can emanci-

pate himself from the involution of life and environment that produced him and assume the Jovian rôle of interpreter and director. But, perhaps, it will not be amiss to bring together in a kind of mosaic some of the ideas that lie scattered in broken fragments in the path of experience.

First of all, it seems to me that the intellectual climate in which we work can be profoundly altered by the very recognition of its factors. For example, if, instead of abusing college trustees and presidents after the fashion of Mr. Upton Sinclair, we frankly invite them to take note of their operating defence mechanisms, we may do more to change the spirit of the academic world than by preaching heavy sermons on the logic of academic freedom. No doubt a little whole-souled laughter, even when conferring honorary degrees, would help loosen up the mental lattice work through which we peer.

Then we might learn something pertinent by a study of the factors that have entered into the personality of each great thinker in our field. By common consent, are not Aristotle, Machiavelli, and the authors of *The Federalist* giants? Though some would admit other philosophers to this formidable group, none will deny to these a place of preëminence. And the significant thing in relation to the present argument is that every one of these creative workers acquired his knowledge and insight not only through books, but also through first-hand contact with government as a going concern. In any case, none of them wrote with an eye on a committee of the trustees on salaries, promotions, and pensions. In the course of observant experience supplemented by historical inquiry they all penetrated to the substance of politics; and it may well be doubted whether, apart from contributions to administrative and operating detail, there has been any substantial addition to the body of principles enunciated by these formidable forerunners.

From cognate sciences also we may learn something of advantage to us in the quest for the methods of more creative thinking. No small part of our intellectual sterility, as already indicated, may be attributed to the intense specialization that has accompanied over-emphasis in research. Certainly nothing is truer

than Buckle's profound generalization to the effect that the philosophy of any science is not at its center but on its periphery where it impinges upon all other sciences. If we could early insert that devastating concept into the minds of our callow young novitiates, we should do more to break their intellectual hobbles than by requiring at their hands ten years' research on the statute of mortmain or the derivative features of Rousseau's political philosophy. Particularly can we fertilize political science by a closer affiliation with the economists, who now seem to have cast off their Manchester dogmas and laid their minds alongside the changing processes of production and distribution.

Finally, what hope lies anywhere save in the widest freedom to inquire and expound—always with respect to the rights and opinions of others? As my friend James Harvey Robinson once remarked, the conservative who imagines that things will never change is always wrong; the radical is nearly always wrong, too, but he does incur some slight risk of being right in his guess as to the direction of evolution. It is in silence, denial, evasion, and suppression that danger really lies, not in open and free analysis and discussion. Surely if any political lesson is taught by the marvelous history of English-speaking peoples it is this. And yet everywhere there seems to be a fear of reliance upon that ancient device so gloriously celebrated by John Milton three hundred years ago—the device of unlimited inquiry. Let us put aside resolutely that great fright, tenderly and without malice, daring to be wrong in something important rather than right in some meticulous banality, fearing no evil while the mind is free to search, imagine, and conclude, inviting our countrymen to try other instruments than coercion and suppression in the effort to meet destiny with triumph, genially suspecting that no creed yet calendered in the annals of politics mirrors the doomful possibilities of infinity.