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THE FORTUNES OF SCEPTICISM

I

The politics of faith, as I have described them, are a creature of modern times. Their versions have been various, but all of them presuppose the circumstances which in respect of government distinguish modern from other times. The religious version, for example, which we are tempted to regard almost as an anachronism in the modern world, is, in fact, such that it could not have appeared (for example) in the Middle Ages; and while it seems to have some sort of affinity to the political style of an ancient Greek city state, it is an affinity which ceases to be convincing as soon as we leave generality for concrete detail. We have, it is true, observed that a primitive society, where the relations and activities of its members are controlled with a minuteness which even the vast power of a modern government has never been able to equal, exhibits something that may perhaps be recognized as a counterpart to the modern politics of faith. But it is never more than a shadowy counterpart: strictly speaking these communities have no politics, and in place of what we know as 'government' there is only the unspecialized care and guardianship of their general interests by those of its members who have charge of the administration of their customs.

In the same manner, the politics of scepticism, properly speaking, have the conditions of the modern world as their context, not because they exist only in opposition to the politics of faith, but because they presuppose the same conditions as those which make possible the politics of faith. Nevertheless, if for a moment we confine ourselves to generalities, the modern politics of scepticism may be recognized to have counterparts elsewhere. They

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are, generally speaking, the politics of the powerless, the style and habit of governing appropriate to circumstances in which government enjoys only a small opportunity of directing the activities of its subjects. And in these circumstances they are likely to be the accepted style of understanding of politics. Small extensions of power, limited enlargements of activity, may be imagined and, being imagined, may be sought as desirable; but nobody thinks it negligent or improper for a government not to be doing what, with the power it actually enjoys (or some small extension of it), it cannot even be imagined to be doing. Consequently, it is not far-fetched to recognize in the government of medieval England, for example, a counterpart to what in the modern world emerges as the politics of scepticism. Indeed, as we shall see, the tactics of this style and the principles of this understanding of government in the modern world are greatly in debt to medieval practice and reflection.

And again, the government of a conqueror will naturally gravitate in the first place towards the sceptical style: the subjects, because they resent it doing anything, will think (if they think at all) that it ought to do little; and the conqueror, in the best of circumstances, will be able to do only little. The conqueror today, it may be thought, is able to impose a comprehensive pattern of activity on his conquered subjects in a manner unknown in earlier times: what neither the Roman nor the Turk attempted is now the common enterprise in conquest, and the conquered subject has come to expect it, even to welcome it, as his fate. But even the contemporary conqueror is often obliged to modify his ambitions, and in the early stages the sceptical enterprise of 'pacification' will take precedence over everything else and will determine his style of governing. And further, in a community where, on account of defeat in war or some natural calamity such as the spread of plague or famine, superficial order is threatened or disrupted, the sceptical style and understanding of government will be recognized as appropriate. In short, in any conditions where the power at the disposal of government is liable to be exhausted in maintaining the superficial order of the community, the politics of scepticism will be the accepted style and understanding of government.

A style of politics, however, exists only in its versions; and while the observation of these generalities may be a suitable beginning to an investigation of the politics of scepticism, their concrete character appears only when we turn to consider them in the conditions of modern times. And, of course, the outstanding

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feature of these conditions is the appearance of governments with a reserve of power beyond what appears to be necessary for the maintenance of superficial order. In the modern world the context of political scepticism is the presence, not the absence, of power.

II

But before we begin to explore the territory which this observation opens up, there is one aspect of the politics of scepticism which may be disposed of first because, although it has a place in the fortunes of the style, it is a relatively unimportant place. I mean the politics of scepticism merely as a reaction against the politics of faith.

We have already noticed the error involved in regarding the history of modern politics as merely the unfolding and eventual flowering of the politics of faith. In this misconceived success story, scepticism, of course, appears among the forces of darkness and is identified with 'reaction'. But if we put this on one side as partizan history, it nevertheless remains true that each of the major triumphs of faith in the modern world has provoked a movement in the opposite direction. Indeed, my thesis, that the history of modern European politics is an unsteady wavering between these extremes, anticipates the appearance of a pull in the opposite direction whenever the practice and understanding of government swings near to either of its theoretic extremes; and it forecasts that each of our styles will in turn become 'reactionary' as it sinks out of fashion or begins once more to capture the initiative. And the plausibility of regarding scepticism as the mere opponent of faith lies in the historic situation in early modern history when the tide was set in the direction of the politics of faith, and scepticism appears, for this important moment, as an impediment. As the story unfolds itself, this situation is, of course, in general, repeated at intervals.

It belongs, then, to the fortunes of scepticism to appear as the opponent of faith, and on these occasions it takes its shape and colouring from the immediate situation. An early example of an occasion of this sort is provided in the history of the English Civil War. We have seen that the civil commotions of seventeenth-century England, though they were not by any means a simple struggle between faith and scepticism, threw up parties which embraced a religio-economic version of the politics of

faith and understood governing as the activity of imposing a comprehensive pattern of activity upon the community, a condition of things which was identified with 'salvation'. And some who took this view regarded the victorious Parliamentary army as the providential means for establishing 'righteousness' and the 'rule of the saints'. If this pressure upon English politics to take the direction of faith, and follow it to the extreme, had been the work of a few eccentrics, it could be expected to subside without having to be opposed. But it had behind it not only significant power, but also what was becoming a well-articulated body of ideas and arguments, both religious and secular, and consequently it provoked opposition. And the extremity of its enterprise is attested by the fact that many of its opponents, like Cromwell himself, were politicians who in other circumstances were more likely to find themselves in the camp of faith than that of scepticism.

These sceptics, Cromwell, Ireton, the Levellers of the *Agreement of the People* and others, can be seen springing back from the vista of the politics of faith, the door which they had helped to open, very much as some socialists today spring back from a vision they have helped to propagate. The arguments of Cromwell and Ireton in the Putney Debates,¹ the early proposals of the Levellers and the arguments of the Independents were an exposition of the politics of scepticism which took its shape and colour from the particular version of the politics of faith that it was designed to oppose. The activity of governing is represented, not as the establishment of abstractly 'good things' or a 'perfect' condition of human life, but as conditioned by what 'the nation are prepared to receive and go along with' – Cromwell had 'few extravagant thoughts of obtaining great things from Parliament'. A crude and elementary philosophy of 'expediency' is appealed to; the antinomianism of Buffcoat and Wildman is opposed by a sceptical doctrine of formalism and of the binding force of even inconvenient engagements.² Governing appears,

¹ Debates in 1647 among members of the New Model Army about the meaning of their cause and the goals for which they were fighting Charles I.

² Buffcoat: actually Robert Everard, agent of Cromwell's regiment, a religious enthusiast who participated in the Putney Debates in 1647. Sir John Wildman (1621–93) was a Leveller who instigated resistance to Cromwell's negotiations with Charles I and who maintained that he 'could serve no man's will, and wished the liberty and happiness of his country and all mankind'.

not as 'settling the condition of the world' or promoting an undefined *salus populi* by the readiest means, but as the activity, limited by 'fundamental law', of protecting established rights; and even the element of contingency and conventionality in the 'fundamental law' is recognized. Political discussion is represented, not as the occasion of divinely inspired pronouncements, or even as the means of arriving at 'truth', but as an effort to understand diverse points of view and reach a *modus vivendi*.

Now, if we are inclined to regard this as a trifling incident in the history of the relations of faith and scepticism, the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, both in England and on the continent, provide an example of an encounter between these two styles of politics which, though it may easily be misunderstood, is not inconsiderable; namely, the sceptical opposition to the economic version of the politics of faith. Nevertheless, its dimensions may be exaggerated if we do not observe the proper distinctions. Mercantilism, as we have seen, the enterprise of a national economy regulated in more or less detail by government, does not essentially belong to the politics of faith; indeed, it is amenable to a sceptical explanation and defence, and it belongs to faith only when it is understood in the Baconian manner as part of a comprehensive plan to direct all the activity of the subject to the exploitation of the resources of the world in the belief that this is the activity preeminently proper to mankind. The minute and inquisitive regulations of Colbertism, and the similar enterprise of English governments, both Royalist and Parliamentary, in the seventeenth century were, therefore, criticized from two different points of view.

First, there were those who opposed them because they believed them to be inefficient. So far from promoting the 'prosperity' which was taken to be the proper pursuit and destiny of mankind, they believed them to be a hindrance: in the way of the most economical exploitation of the resources of the world. This opposition clearly falls short of what I have called scepticism. It is true that there is doubt here about the competence of government to promote plenty, but the fundamental assumption of this version of the politics of faith, that an acquisitive society is the appropriate home for a human being, is accepted without misgiving. The objection is not to the enterprise of exploitation but only to the manner in which it is being con-

ducted.³ But secondly, there were others who were relatively indifferent to the efficiency or inefficiency with which this activity of government promoted a productivist society: they objected to imposition of a productivist pattern upon the society because they objected to the imposition of any comprehensive pattern of activity; they opposed this version of the politics of faith because they would oppose any version. And it is these who bring to bear a genuinely sceptical criticism. Indeed, it is to be assumed that their objection to this version would have been even stronger than it in fact was if this method of promoting the 'Pelagian' state had showed signs of being more efficient than it appeared to be: its inefficiency was almost a merit, intimating as it did that success was to be judged by other criteria. To this school belonged a distinguished body of writers; to go no further than the great names, Hume, Burke, Bentham, Macaulay, and, I think, Adam Smith himself, the context of whose opposition to this version of the politics of faith was not merely an *ad hoc* doubt, but a profound understanding of the principles of political scepticism. And, when their attention is directed to this version of the politics of faith (which was not always the case), the objection of this school of writers was not merely to its lack of economy: they detected in it a whole miscellany of errors – its overoptimistic reading of human behaviour, its tendency to

³ There were, of course, many cross-currents of opinion within this school of critics. The clearest statement of the point of view is to be found in the works of disinterested writers, of whom there is a long line beginning in the early seventeenth century. And here the reader may be referred, for example, to Lipson, *Economic History of England*, vol. III. But it would be a mistake to assume that this was the point of view of every industrialist and merchant eager to make a fortune on his own account. These, it is true, were often accused of neglecting the 'common prosperity' for their own profit, and their accusers often based themselves on the disingenuous view that communal acquisitiveness is somehow morally superior to individual, a view always favoured by the partizans of power. In the main, what the merchants objected to were specific regulations, and they left to others the task of stating the general objections. And this is what we shall expect. It is within our own experience that it is exceptional for a business community not to take the line of least resistance in respect of the regulations of government, regarding them merely as additions to the normal costs and hazards of trade. Such a community will look for (and usually find) means of reducing the hindrance to a minimum, and will even discover ways of turning the imposed conditions to its advantage. The businessman is, normally, a critic of the politics of faith only at two removes.

impoverish mankind by reducing all activity to that which could easily be controlled by government, its radical misconception of the political significance of private property, its bringing the law into disrepute by requiring it to attempt what it could not accomplish, and its promotion, at home and abroad, of that insecurity which in their view it should be the chief office of government to mitigate.

III

But to understand the politics of scepticism merely as opposed to the politics of faith is to understand them imperfectly. Scepticism did not spring up merely as a reaction to faith; it sprang up, in the modern world, in response to the circumstances which made possible the politics of faith. And the resources it drew upon were provided both by some of the circumstances of the modern world and by what may be called, if some latitude is allowed, its inheritance from the medieval understanding of the office and operation of government.

The immense enlargement of the power of man to control human activity was the context of the fond optimism that has been abroad in Europe since the sixteenth century and which, in some measure, has replaced Christianity by a version of Pelagianism. The participation of government in a large share of this power was the condition of the appearance of the politics of faith. It would seem, then, that political scepticism would be without any standing ground in the dawn of modern history: opposed to the contemporary tide, its only generation would seem to be from an abstract idea, the notion, merely, that what was afoot was undesirable. And to extract in detail a sceptical style and understanding of politics out of this idea would seem to be the contemporary task of those who believed it. But in fact the scene at the beginning of modern history is by no means filled with the ambitions and enterprises of faith: not only were there among the circumstantial changes taking place in the office and operation of government some which favoured scepticism, but in addition there was a native tradition of scepticism uninspired by any opposition to the certainties of faith, and there were also lively relics of a sceptical attitude in politics inherited from the past.

Alongside the enlargement of political power (which inspired the politics of faith), there went a greater definition and specifi-

cation of the office of government. Government in the early modern period was beginning to appear as a 'public office' with a special status (soon to be spoken of as 'sovereignty') distinguishing it from the agglomeration of authorities which were understood to belong to the monarch as a person, because they were in effect only intensified private rights. The mediation of this appearance is recorded not only in the history of the legal status of government and its servants, but also (for example) in the history of the 'prerogative' in England, and in the history of taxation and public finance which records the conversion of what had hitherto been a royal income into a national exchequer. This change was a more narrow specification of the activity of governing, and it provoked the view that to govern was not the exercise of an undefined guardianship over the activities of the subject, but the performance of certain public duties. In short, while the enlargement of power pulled in the direction of faith, the concomitant narrowing in the specification of government pulled in the direction of a sceptical style and understanding of politics: closer definition of office evoked a limitation of the sphere of activity.

But besides this circumstantial aid to scepticism in politics, the style in the early modern period drew upon a native diffidence in respect of human power which survived, not without some difficulty, the dazzling prospect of the Baconian enterprise. We are apt to regard the strain of doubt and despondency which appears in so much of Elizabethan and early seventeenth-century literature as a relic of medieval pessimism not yet regenerated by the optimism of Bacon and his associates, or as a wanton, faithless hesitation to take the tide at its flood: in fact, it was neither, but an alternative view of the powers and prospects of the race which faith has never been strong enough to obliterate. This disturbed vision of the weakness and wickedness of mankind and the transitoriness of human achievement, sometimes profoundly felt (as in Donne and Herbert), sometimes philosophically elaborated (as in Hobbes, Spinoza and Pascal), sometimes mild and ironical (as in Montaigne and Burton), was, when it turned to contemplate the activity of governing, the spring of a political scepticism independent of the suspicion which the triumphs no less than the projects of faith might be expected to generate. It has been said, often enough to merit contradiction, that what divides scepticism from faith in politics is a belief in the doctrine of 'original sin'; but this is too hasty a generalization. Not only were the puritan protagonists of the

politics of faith (Milton, for example, among them) as firmly convinced of the truth and significance of this doctrine as anyone else, but Bacon himself does not doubt it; and both Hobbes and Spinoza (whose understanding of politics was preeminently sceptical) were profound, if oblique, critics of the doctrine. It is not a belief in 'original sin', but something much nearer home and less abstract and speculative which distinguishes the sceptical politician in the early modern period: a sense of mortality, that *amicitia rerum mortalium*, which detracts from the allure of the gilded future foreseen in the vision of faith; the earth recognized not as a world to be exploited but as a 'player's stage'; and a doubt in respect of the turn-out of human projects, especially when they are largely designed, which suggested that mankind should at least pause for reflection before committing itself to a single line of movement. It is, then, a very foreshortened view of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries in which they appear as an age of confidence and faith; and we need only turn to Bacon's great contemporary, Michel de Montaigne to find a sceptical comparison to the forward-looking enthusiasts of the time, so convinced that they are on the right road.

Montaigne has no illusions about human power. Custom in human life is sovereign; it is a second Nature, and no less powerful. And this, so far from being deplorable, is indispensable. For man is so composed of contrarieties that, if he is to enjoy any coherence of activity or any tranquility among his fellows, he requires the support of a rule to be obeyed. But the virtue of a rule is not that it is 'just', but that it is settled. Indeed, even by common standards, customs as they exist and laws as they are administered are more likely to be 'unjust', and they are certainly never more than contingent and municipal: we obey them because they serve their turn, and nothing more imposing than this can be claimed for them. And as for the enterprise of making the arrangements of a society subserve human perfection, or of imposing a comprehensive pattern of activity upon the subject, it is a project out of touch with the conditions of human life. *Que sais-je*: what am I so certain about that I would direct all the energy and activity of mankind to attaining it? And to sacrifice the modest orderliness of a society for the sake of moral unity or 'truth' (religious or secular) is to sacrifice what all need for a chimera. Montaigne could have corrected from his own experience the errors of those optimistic historians who have suggested that at this time governments had so far estab-

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lished peace and 'security' that it was proper for them to go forward with the enterprise of organizing 'prosperity'.

But the politics of scepticism at this time, particularly in England, had additional resources to draw upon, an inheritance that spoke directly in habit and institution and needed no elaborate interpretation in order to divulge an understanding of government in this style. The characteristic of medieval government was not only its relatively small power, but also a comfortable notion of governing. The great institutions which it bequeathed to the modern world were all of them courts of law of various kinds, and the understanding of government which they carried with them was that of a *judicial* activity. And on any reading of its office and competence, a court of law is not the kind of institution which is appropriate to take the initiative in organizing the perfection of mankind: where governing is understood as the judicial provision of remedies for wrongs suffered, a sceptical style of politics obtrudes.

This is illustrated most revealingly in the history and character of the English Parliament.⁴ It is clear that the Parliament of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries was not only understood to be a court of law, but was in large measure modelled upon the courts which already existed and to which it was reckoned to be superior. The representatives who were called to Westminster were recognized as suitors to a court in the same manner as a freeholder in the county and the hundred was an obligatory suitor to his county and hundred courts. And just as the task of the suitors in the inferior courts was to 'find' the law and to 'ascertain' the custom, so it was understood to be the task of the suitors at Westminster, in consultation with the King's justices (who as late as the beginning of the fifteenth century seem to have been regarded as an 'estate' of Parliament), to 'find' the law in the wider and more authoritative context of the kingdom. The practices of the early thirteenth century show 'a direct line of connection between the county courts and the King's Council, already established and in frequent use'.⁵

That the Westminster Parliament was understood as a court set over other courts for resolving difficult or doubtful

⁴ See C. H. McIlwain, *The High Court of Parliament*, and G. L. Haskins, *The Growth of English Representative Government* (from which I have drawn most of my information).

⁵ G. B. Adams, *The Origin of the English Constitution*, p. 321.

judgments and providing new remedies for newly emergent wrongs and meting out justice to all according to their deserts⁶ is clear, not only from the writs which called the representatives together (which required experts in the law), and from what contemporaries wrote about the nascent institution, but also from the procedure followed at its meeting. To hear petitions for the redress of grievances was among its most ancient tasks. Indeed it is clear that what was later to be recognized as 'legislation' sprang from a small and almost imperceptible enlargement of the exercise of a judicial office; and the taxes which it early became customary to vote were first understood as no more than the revenue of the King's High Court of Parliament, 'profits of justice' in principle indistinguishable from the 'fines' of the King's Bench.⁷ It may, perhaps, be argued that in this early period we have a condition of things in which the distinction between judicial, legislative and administrative activity has not yet been recognized; and there is truth in this contention. But what is significant is that the character of judicial activity is well recognized and understood and that 'legislation' and 'administration' are understood in the judicial idiom.

All this is common knowledge about the character of medieval parliaments, and it is relevant here because even in the seventeenth century, Parliament is still understood as a court of law. A contemporary of Bacon writes of Parliament as 'the highest and most authentical court in England';⁸ and in the middle of the next century the Commons are referred to as 'the greatest and wisest inquest in England'.⁹ Moreover, whatever enlargements were taking place in the business handled in Parliament, the early centuries of the modern period had constant and explicit experience of its working as a court of law in which trials were conducted and judgment pronounced. 'It required time, a long time, and great changes in the State . . . to alter all this and subordinate the old idea of a court to the newer one of a legislature.'¹⁰ And the slowness of the change is one of the measures of the relative weakness of the politics of faith (to which 'legislation' is indispensable) and the relative strength of the politics of

⁶ Haskins, *The Growth of English Representative Government*, p. 6.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

⁸ Sir Thomas Smith, *De Republica Anglorum* (ed. Alstan), p. 58.

⁹ *Fitzharris's Case* (1681), see C. Grant Robertson, *Select Cases and Documents*, p. 420.

¹⁰ McIlwain, *The High Court of Parliament*, p. 121.

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scepticism.¹¹ For, as I have said, where governing is recognized as the activity of a court, the office of government will be understood as the maintenance of 'rights'¹² and the redress of 'wrongs' and not as the imposition of a comprehensive pattern of activity upon all the subjects of the realm. In short, in the early centuries of the modern period, the best-established interpretation of one of the most significant of English political institutions was an interpretation in the sceptical idiom.

IV

The sceptical style and understanding of government was, then, by no means without a firm foundation, especially in England, in early modern history. And in the years that followed it not only found a number of exponents of its principles, but it also adapted itself in a series of versions to the changing circumstances of the modern period. It is, often, to be found in express opposition to the politics of faith and it was never without a current answer (cogent or otherwise) to the current versions of faith. But in the main the pattern it took was not determined by the twists and turns of the politics of faith. It developed by exploring more deeply the intimations of its own complex world of ideas, by coming to understand itself more fully in the circumstances of the modern world and by drawing upon the resources of the wider tradition of moral scepticism fed by such thinkers as Bayle, Fontenelle and Shaftesbury and Hume, which extends from the sixteenth century to our own day. On occasion it can be seen to be following a blind-alley; but it never lacks vitality, and

¹¹ The opinion may be ventured that the strength which enabled the English Parliament to survive the eclipse which overtook representative institutions on the continent in the early modern period (when the activity of governing was everywhere coming to be understood in the idiom of faith) sprang in some measure from the recognition of its judicial character. Assemblies which were not at all or not preeminently judicial, such as the States General of France, succumbed, while judicial assemblies, like the Parlement of Paris, survived. It must always be more difficult for a government, however powerful, to abolish what is understood as a court of law than an assembly which lacks this character.

¹² The 'rights' and 'duties' themselves, of course, were not recognized as 'natural' or primordial; they were known to have been established by a judicial process out of the 'tangle of personal relationships' which preceded their formulation. F. M. Stenton, *The First Century of English Feudalism*, p. 44; Haskins, *The Growth of English Representative Government*, p. 25.

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its triumphs, though perhaps less spectacular (on paper) than those of faith, were usually more solid, and were triumphs not only in reflection but also in political invention. Two of the three great revolutions of modern times began in the style of scepticism; and while the first issued in the most profoundly sceptical constitution of the modern world, the Constitution of the United States of America, the second, the French Revolution, was soon diverted into the path of faith.¹³ The Russian Revolution alone owed nothing to the politics of scepticism. Moreover this understanding of politics provided a characteristic interpretation or a characteristic criticism of all the new political devices and arrangements, manners of behaviour and institutions which began to proliferate from the beginning of the nineteenth century.

It has been my contention that the politics of the modern world are the *concordia discors* of these two styles of government, and consequently we shall not expect to find any writer or party wedded to one to the complete exclusion of the other. But it is not difficult to discern writers who lean heavily in the direction of scepticism, and to distinguish these from others who lean towards faith, and others again who exhibit the *concordia discors* itself in their often muddled thought, of whom the most important is John Locke. Among the more notable political writers, at the level of principle, who propounded versions, often very individual versions, of the politics of scepticism are Spinoza, Pascal, Hobbes, Hume, Montesquieu, Burke, Paine, Bentham, Hegel, Coleridge, Calhoun and Macaulay. This may be thought an ill-assorted gallery, and so from other points of view it is. But in whatever respects they diverge from one another (and often the divergence will be found to be on the question of the authorization and constitution of governments) they have in common a rejection of the political 'Pelagianism' which lies at the root of all modern versions of the politics of faith, a rejection of the belief that governing is the imposition of a comprehensive pattern of activity upon a community and a consequent suspicion of government invested with overwhelming power, and a recognition of the contingency of every political arrangement and the unavoidable arbitrariness of most. England has been peculiarly

¹³ The Declaration de Droits de l'Homme et du Citoyen of 1789 is a sceptical document and is often in the pattern of the English Declaration of Rights of 1689. The version of 1793 has already begun to be infected with the politics of faith.

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the home of this understanding of government; and in English political literature there are examples of a revealing kind of writing in support of this style of politics which are not easily to be found elsewhere – writing which touches, but lightly, upon principle but which is alive in every line with the idiom of scepticism. I am thinking particularly of the writings of Halifax and Burke, and at a lower level of the authors of the *Federalist*.

The earliest triumph of the politics of scepticism was the recognition of the distinction between politics and religion. This distinction was, of course, implicit in early Christianity, and it had been theorized with profound insight by St Augustine. But circumstances made it necessary to reestablish it both in theory and practice in the modern world, where the politics of faith had removed the boundary. Nevertheless, although even the seventeenth century has something to show in respect of a restoration of the distinction, the achievement then naturally had its immediate relation to the local circumstances of the time: the main enterprise of scepticism was merely to lend its weight to the view that it is inappropriate to saddle government with the task of determining religious 'truth', and in this manner to promote the view that if government were to establish and enforce any form of belief or worship it must be not on account of its 'truth' but on account of the disorder and insecurity which appeared to spring from the absence of an established religion. The immediate task of political scepticism was, at that time, to remove religious 'enthusiasm' from politics; and it was not until much later that the condition was ripe for a more radical attack on the problem. And indeed it gradually became apparent that this was not a problem which could ever be finally solved. The politics of faith is, from one point of view, the continuous reassertion of the unity of politics and religion; and from this point of view it is the comprehensive task of scepticism perpetually to be recalling political activity from the frontier of religion, to be always drawing attention to the values of civil order and *tranquillitas* whenever the vision of a total pattern of activity, imposed because it is believed to represent 'truth' or 'justice', threatens to obliterate everything else. And although the problem as it appears in *Hudibras*, or two centuries later in Macaulay's essay on Gladstone's *The State in its Relations with the Church*, is simple and direct compared with the problems set to political scepticism by more recent approximations of politics and religion, the problem itself is single and continuous.

In England during some part of the eighteenth century the

political style of scepticism may be said, for that moment, both to have won a great victory and to have revealed itself for the first time in modern dress.¹⁴ It was the achievement of Whig politicians and of writers such as Halifax, Hume and Burke to have modernized its political devices and restated its principles in a manner appropriate to the times. What had hitherto remained an inheritance from the Middle Ages became a style and understanding of political activity practised and expressed in a modern idiom. Here again it is interesting to note that this style was not, or not for long, the exclusive property of any political party: for a time, the tide of political activity in England was turned in the direction of scepticism. And perhaps the greatest achievement of this period was to elaborate the practices and principles of a modern sceptical manner of diplomacy and the conduct of relations with other states – a manner which had no place for foreign policy as the prosecution of a religious crusade. But like the achievements of faith, this predominance of the sceptical style was not an interlude, but a moment in our political history from which it was recalled by a resurgence of faith. But before it passed, the principles of political scepticism had been reconstructed in a manner appropriate to the time.

But rather than the occasional triumphs of scepticism, what reveals the character of this style of politics more fully is its failures; not its periodic displacement by the politics of faith, but the occasions when it has behaved out of character. The chief of these, in modern times, was its *mésalliance* with the politics of Natural Rights and with the politics of republicanism.

It was, perhaps, unavoidable that a style of governing in which the office of government is understood as the maintenance of appropriate order, the preservation of rights and duties and the redress of wrongs should be ambitious to establish itself on a firm foundation. The impulse to assure ourselves that our arrangements and authorized manners of behaviour represent not merely fact and habit, but 'justice' and 'truth', and that they have a 'certainty' which is out of reach of the vicissitudes of time and place, has always been strong. But it is an impulse which belongs properly to faith. Historically, so far as scepticism is concerned, it must be regarded as an infection caught from faith, a temporary desertion of its own character induced by the plausible triumphs of faith. And that such a foundation should

¹⁴ See H. Butterfield, *The Englishman and his History*, Part II.

be sought in the notion that the rights and duties to be protected are 'natural' and to be defended on account of their naturalness was an enterprise given in the climate of seventeenth-century opinion. The writer who led Europe in this respect was John Locke, the most ambiguous of all political writers of modern times; a political sceptic who inadvertently imposed the idiom of faith upon the sceptical understanding of government. But how out of character this enterprise was soon became apparent. To turn 'rights' and 'duties' which were known as historic achievements, elicited by patient and judicial inquest from the manner in which men were accustomed to behave, into 'natural' rights and duties was to deny them just that contingency of character which was the heart of the sceptical interpretation, and was to attribute to them an absoluteness and a permanence which in the sceptical understanding of them they could not possess. And political scepticism was recalled from its unnatural alliance with the politics of Natural Rights, not by the criticism of Bentham (which was never quite critical enough), but by the genius of Burke and Hegel.

Of all the follies of the politics of scepticism, the strangest is that which appears in the history of modern republicanism. There have been those, like Algernon Sydney, whose attachment to republicanism was one of adoration, who recognized it as the New Jerusalem and enquired no further. And again there have been republicans who believed that this manner of constituting a government was the only or the best means of making sure that the comprehensive pattern of activity to be imposed by government was after their liking and unmodified by extraneous or sectional interests: for them republicanism represented a government which could be trusted with unlimited power because in such hands this power would infallibly be used for the 'common good'.¹⁵ This is republicanism interpreted in the idiom of faith.

But historically the more significant interpretation has been that of scepticism. The sceptical republican (and the best example of a writer of this persuasion is Tom Paine) saw in this manner of constituting government the infallible means of limiting the activity of government, of making government less costly, of diverting it from the enterprises of faith and concentrating its attention upon the necessary task of maintaining

¹⁵ cp. Lamartine, *La France parlementaire*, II, p. 109.

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peace and order – in short, for setting up a government fixed irrevocably in the sceptical style. Republicanism here is embraced because it is believed to be the one form of government in which the exercise of power will never be in the service of the perfection of mankind. And a modification of this belief is the root of the sceptical faith in the simple device of universal suffrage and popular government as an infallible specific against an over-mighty governing power, which appears in the writings of Bentham and James Mill. But in the fortunes of sceptical politics this alliance with republicanism is a surrender to visions and impulses which properly belong to faith.

The belief that there is a particular manner of authorizing and constituting government which will infallibly result in one and only one manner of exercising the power of government (and that a desirable one) is an illusion appropriate to the politics of faith, and that political sceptics like Paine and Richard Price (and to some extent Milton before them) came to entertain it reveals how insecure a grasp they had upon the principles of political scepticism. For the belief that immense power in the hands of government is innocuous so long as the government has been constituted in a certain manner could only be entertained by men who had forgotten the reading of human behaviour which makes political scepticism intelligible. The insistence of these writers upon annual parliaments (though as a device of limitation it was both impracticable and almost certainly ineffective) may be taken as a sign that they had not entirely forgotten their scepticism. But it is only in recent years, and under the pressure of contemporary experiences, that sceptical politics has begun to divest itself of this inconsistency.

V

In comparison with those of faith, the fortunes of scepticism are difficult to trace. The politics of faith have followed, often slavishly, in the wake of every enlargement of power (fortuitous or otherwise) which government in modern times has been given the opportunity of enjoying. And an account of their fortunes is in the main an account of the projects promoted in carrying out the grand design: the tactics have changed in the course of time, but the understanding of government has suffered no significant development in the last couple of centuries. The fortunes of the

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sceptical style, on the other hand, are not the story of projects undertaken, and are only to a small extent the story of political inventiveness: they are, more properly, the story of the perpetual reformulation of an understanding of government in order to keep it relevant to current circumstances. Scepticism has not always been successful in maintaining this relevance, and there have been times when the manifest pull in the direction of faith has kept it on the defensive, and times also when a sudden enlargement of power (not at all embarrassing to faith) has caught it on the wrong foot. But for the most part it has understood its task as that of keeping alive and relevant the magnetism of this pole of our political activity. As a rule, it has enjoyed a higher degree of self-discipline and self-knowledge than the politics of faith, and has rarely fallen to representing itself as more significant than it is.

In the last hundred years its greatest achievement has been intellectual: to strip itself of that faith in simple expedients which often in the past has qualified its character and restricted its usefulness. And of this there is no better example than what has happened to the doctrine of the separation of the powers of government which for so long was one of its chief expedients. At one time the separation of powers was regarded as a mechanical device in which specific activities involved in governing were to be kept in separate hands, with a consequent dispersal of the total power exercised by government. As a practical principle for the limitation of power, it never corresponded to the political structure of any community. And as a mechanical device it was never clearly intimated even in English political behaviour, and never became operative even in those constitutional constructions which were invented largely under its inspiration. It is not, then, to be wondered at that in the last hundred and fifty years it, too, lost rather than gained in significance. It was soon swept aside as a mere hindrance to the enterprises of faith; and where faith has gone farthest, even the most cherished item in this construction, the independence of the judiciary, has been involved in the collapse. But instead of merely discarding it as a device too antiquated for use in modern circumstances, political scepticism has succeeded in eliciting from this over-formal doctrine a more profound principle and a reading of politics preeminently relevant to contemporary conditions. In short, from being a mechanical device for restricting government by dividing the exercise of its powers between its various specific

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activities, the 'separation of powers' has come to be understood as a principle embodying a suspicion of all great concentrations of power, that of government among them.

The politics of scepticism has understood its contemporary business to be: first, to detect what is afoot; secondly to perceive the manner in which government can perform most economically its perennial office of preserving an order and balance relevant to the current condition and activities of the society; and, thirdly, to recall political activity to this pursuit and turn its inventiveness in this direction.

The pull of faith has led to the emergence of massive assemblies of power. Modern government itself is chief among these; and where this is not defended merely on account of the 'good' that may be expected to spring from it, it is excused on the pseudo-sceptical ground that in a general increase in power a large share must be appropriated to government in order that the rest may be controlled. And in addition, political activity has been forced into narrow channels, its attention riveted upon the current project while the large displacements which follow from this concentration of purpose have been overlooked or insufficiently considered. The distant future has attracted disproportionate attention, and activity being stretched always to its fullest extent, no reserve is left to meet the unavoidable emergencies.¹⁶

In the sceptic's reading of the situation, then, what needs to be restored in contemporary politics is a balance of attention and a balance of power. For example, a condition in which activity is determined wholly by the past, or the present, or the future is recognized as being unbalanced. And, in this connection, the imbalance of contemporary politics springs from the preoccupation with the future which has been pressed upon it by the politics of faith, and which threatens to destroy the continuity of activity by destroying our sympathy with its earlier enterprise. And in order to restore the balance, what needs to be promoted

¹⁶ I think it is not unjust to hold overlong preoccupation with the politics of faith responsible for our being morally unprepared for the emergence of those forms of power known as the internal combustion engine and atomic energy. This understanding of politics sees every accession of power as *prima facie* 'good'; and when a particular accession of power proves dangerous, the habit of faith is to suppose that the danger can be averted by a piece of *ad hoc* political machinery. Faith is hostile to that steady reserve of scepticism which alone is capable of mediating change and controlling it, not merely when it has taken place, but while it is taking place and before it has reached unmanageable proportions.

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is the understanding of politics as a conversation in which past, present and future each has a voice; and while one or other of them may on occasion properly prevail, none is given exclusive attention.

Again, the uncritical welcome which the politics of faith has given to every fresh addition to our power to control men and things and to exploit the world (a welcome determined almost exclusively by considerations of economic prosperity) has assembled great and almost sovereign concentrations of power and has transformed the normal tensions of society into a war of giants. A balance of power has become impossible because, with the destruction of the smaller make-weights, only the massive weights remain, and consequently the scale bumps crudely from side to side. And, as the sceptic understands it, in order to restore the possibility of an equilibrium, the power available needs to be redispersed in its exercise among a multitude of semi-independencies (among them the individual subject protected in his semi-independence by a right to private property as little qualified as may be), none of them (not even government) enjoying enough power to impose a single and comprehensive pattern of activity upon the society.

Moreover, the sceptic is aware that the balance of a society in which power is distributed in its exercise among a great number of beneficiaries is always precarious. Arrangements which in their beginning promote a dispersal of power often, in the course of time, come to create over-mighty or even absolute combinations, alliances or institutions, while continuing to claim the recognition and loyalty which belonged to them in their first character. We need to be clear-sighted enough to recognize such a change and energetic enough to set on foot a remedy while the imbalance is still small. And what more than anything else contributes to this clear-sightedness is relief from the distraction of a rigid doctrine which fixes upon an arrangement a falsely permanent character. The best institutions, in the judgement of the sceptic, are those whose character is both firm and self-critical, recognizing themselves as the repository of a beneficial fragment of power, but refusing the inevitable invitation to absolutism. But institutions, like persons, must always be expected to overreach themselves, and the office of government is to maintain the balance by keeping them in their place.

In these circumstances, it might be thought that government would need to be endowed with extraordinary power, capable of holding all other powers and assemblies of power in check. But

this is not the view which the sceptic will be disposed to take. In his reading of human behaviour there is no more reason to expect that men engaged in the activity of governing will be more moderate than those who pursue other activities, and no less reason to anticipate imbalance from the immoderation of governors than from the immoderation of anyone else. In his understanding, then, the power necessary to govern is more economically collected from the absence of great competing assemblies of power than from the enjoyment of overwhelming power in a world composed of great powers. For overwhelming power would be required only by a government which had against it a combination so extensive of the powers enjoyed by such a variety of different individuals and interests as to convict the government of a self-interest so gross as to disqualify it for the performance of its proper office. Normally government requires to be assured of only a power greater than that which is assembled in any one other centre of power on any particular occasion.

But further, the sceptic observes in what is called the 'rule of law' a manner of governing remarkably economical in its use of power and consequently one that wins his approval. If the activity of governing were the continuous or sporadic interruption of the habits and arrangements of society, even with arbitrary corrective measures (to say nothing of measures designed to impose a single pattern upon activity), extraordinary power would be required, each of its acts being an *ad hoc* intervention; and in addition, in spite of this extraordinary power in the hands of government, the society would be without any known and protective structure exerting a continuous containing pressure upon the forces of dissolution. But government by rule of law (that is, by means of the enforcement by prescribed methods of settled rules binding alike on governors and governed), while losing nothing in strength, is itself an emblem of that diffusion of power which it exists to promote. It is the method of governing most economical in the use of power: it involves a partnership between past and present and between governors and governed which leaves no room for arbitrariness; it encourages a tradition of moderation and of resistance to the growth of dangerous assemblies of power which is far more effective than any promiscuous onslaught, however crushing; it controls effectively, but without breaking the grand affirmative flow of activity; and it gives a practical definition of the kind of limited but necessary service that may be expected from government, restraining us

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from vain and dangerous expectation, and it from overreaching ambition. And if in the end the contemporary sceptic returns to the doctrine of the 'separation of powers' in the more formal sense, it will be to observe not only the benefit to be derived from the maintenance of some measure of independence for each of the specific 'powers of government', but also the appropriateness of a manner of governing in which power is shared conversationally between a multitude of different interests, persons and offices, government appearing, for example, as a partnership between a cabinet and the members of a representative assembly, between a minister and a permanent official and perhaps between assemblies representative of different interests.

What strength a sceptical style of politics of this kind may have in contemporary political activity may be assessed by those who think they know how to assess it. It cannot be said to be the tide upon which our politics is at present riding. But the history of our politics in the last hundred and fifty years would have been very different from what in fact it has been if the pull of political scepticism had been either absent or weak. In so far as this history has been the story not of the promotion of rapid change or the imposition of a comprehensive pattern of activity, but of a succession of political expedients to mediate current changes, to secure workable arrangements and to remove manifest disequilibriums; in so far as speculative ideas and large ambitions have played a subordinate part; in so far as changes have not been pressed to their so-called 'logical' conclusions and the impulse to 'symmetry' has been kept within reasonable bounds; and in so far as abrupt transitions have been avoided and faith in magic transformations and visionary enterprises has been moderated, the politics of scepticism, [in these,] if in no other respects, has made itself felt. But its inspiration, at least in England, has never been merely an opposition to the politics of faith, but an understanding of the office of government, elicited for the most part from some of the ancient traditions of English politics, patiently considered and reconsidered in each generation and applied to the current situations of the modern world.