THE WEB OF GOVERNMENT

MacIVER

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Foreword

Now man, having a share of the divine attributes, was at first the only one of the animals who had any gods, because he alone was of their kindred; and he would raise altars and images of them. He was not long in inventing articulate speech and names; and he also constructed houses and clothes and shoes and beds, and drew sustenance from the earth. . . . After a while the desire of self-preservation gathered men into cities; but when they were gathered together, having no art of government, they evil intreated one another, and were again in process of dispersion and destruction. Zeus feared that the entire race would be exterminated, and so he sent Hermes to them, bearing reverence and justice to be the ordering principles of cities and the bonds of friendship and conciliation. Hermes asked Zeus how he should impart justice and reverence among men:—Should he distribute them as the arts are distributed; that is to say, to a favoured few only, one skilled individual having enough of medicine or of any other art for many unskilled ones? "Shall this be the manner in which I am to distribute justice and reverence among men, or shall I give them to all?" "To all," said Zeus; "I should like them all to have a share; for cities cannot exist, if a few only share in the virtues, as in the arts."

—PLATO, *Protagoras*, 322 (Jowett translation).

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THE EMERGENCE OF GOVERNMENT

CHAPTER ONE

MAN AND GOVERNMENT

I

MYTHS AND TECHNIQUES

When the scientists classified man as *Homo sapiens*, man the knowing one, the specific adjective was a kind of ornamental flourish. It was not used to separate man from other species of the genus *Homo*, for there are no other species. It was applied in effect to distinguish man from all other animals. Man is one of the primates, his nearest relations being the anthropoid apes. From them he has changed through the long obscure reaches of human evolution. His brain is much heavier. He walks erect. He has free hands and opposable thumbs. His forehead is advanced. But the organic pattern is the same. Cells, organs, structures of every kind, "all are practically identical in man and the higher mammals." Nevertheless scientists, recognizing that a difference of degree may be more crucial than a difference of kind, erected a separate genus for man and named its solitary species the knowing animal.

From the beginnings of human reflection man has been aware that herein lay his title to eminence. It is said darkly in the book of *Genesis* that our first parents broke the rules and ate of the tree of knowledge. The poets and philosophers of ancient Greece paid many tributes to the knowingness of man. Perhaps the finest of these is found in an ode in the *Antigone* of Sophocles, part of which may be freely translated as follows:

There are many fearful and wonderful things, but none is more fearful and wonderful than man. He makes his path over the storm-swept sea and he harries old Earth with his plough. He takes the wild beasts captive and turns them into his servants. He has taught himself speech and wind-swift thought, and the habits that pertain to government. Against everything that confronts him he invents some resource—against death alone he has no resource.

With the aid of his pragmatic contrivances man has outdistanced all other animals and made himself lord of creation. For our purpose here, which is to show how the government of man over man has come to be, it will serve if we divide man's contrivances into two broad classes. Let us call them respectively *techniques* and *myths*.

By *techniques* we mean the devices and skills of every kind that enable men to dispose of things—and of persons—more to their liking, so as to ease their toil, to increase the return to their labor, to enlarge their satisfactions, to organize and preserve their advantages, to subdue their enemies, to harness the forces of nature, to extend their knowledge, and so forth. A technique is a way of knowing that is primarily a way of control. It is not the instrument man fashions, not the tool or the machine as such, but the craft he employs in making the machine and in putting it into service. A technique is a way of manipulating objects, including persons as objects. It is knowledge compactly applied to the world of objects, changing the relation of the subject and the object in a direction desired by the subject.

By *myths* we mean the value-impregnated beliefs and notions that men hold, that they live by or live for. Every society is held together by a myth-system, a complex of dominating thought-forms that determines and sustains all its activities. All social relations, the very texture of human society, are myth-born and myth-sustained. Take family relations, for example. They are not "biological," they spring from and

express a scheme of valuations centered about sex and the bringing up of offspring. They canalize the biological drives, impose on them form and limit. It is this scheme of dynamic valuations that assigns their role to father and mother, that determines the pattern of mating, that presides over the relations of parents to children, that cements the kin group. And so it is on every level of human organization. Every civilization, every period, every nation, has its characteristic myth-complex. In it lies the secret of social unities and social continuities, and its changes compose the inner history of every society. Wherever he goes, whatever he encounters, man spins about him his web of myth, as the caterpillar spins its cocoon. Every individual spins his own variant within the greater web of the whole group. The myth mediates between man and nature. From the shelter of his myth he perceives and experiences the world. Inside his myth he is at home in his world.

When we speak here of myth we imply nothing concerning the grounds of belief, so far as belief claims to interpret reality. We use the word in an entirely neutral sense. Whether its content be revelation or superstition, insight or prejudice, is not here in question. We need a term that abjures all reference to truth or falsity. We include equally under the term "myth" the most penetrating philosophies of life, the most profound intimations of religion, the most subtle renditions of experience, along with the most grotesque imaginations of the most benighted savage. We include all human approaches and attitudes, all the modes in which men face or formulate the business of living. Whatever valuational responses men give to the circumstances and trials of their lot, whatever conceptions guide their behavior, spur their ambitions, or render existence tolerable—all alike fall within our ample category of myth.

We said above that social relations are myth-born and myth-sustained. For the understanding of society it is im-

portant to observe that the myth sustaining a relationship is often different from the myth that bore it. Once the track is pioneered many men follow it. The original myth may be forgotten and if it endures it changes. The relationship becomes a custom, the custom an institution. Custom and institution gain sanctity through time. New values and new interests cluster round the established. New interpretations give it new persuasiveness. The established may be at length challenged. New conditions give opportunity to new myths antagonistic to the old. The old myths are renovated to meet the changing situation. Thus the myths that sustain and reinforce a social order are no longer those that successively brought into being the constituent relations of that order.

To achieve anything man resorts to his techniques, develops his techniques; but what he seeks to achieve, how far he cultivates or inhibits one set of potential aptitudes or another, how he chooses between the various paths always opening up before him, what play he gives his sheer organic drives as he imposes on their exuberance some proportion and limit—that depends upon his myths. His myths and his techniques are interdependent. As his myths change he turns his techniques to different uses. There was, for example, a vast redirection, as well as a great new development, of techniques when Russia changed from feudalism to sovietism.

On the other hand, as his techniques advance, his myths responsively take a new range. Thus the myth of nationalism grew in strength as new means of communication knit more closely together the area of a country. In all human activity myth and technique are for ever interacting. One man may take the myth cherished by other men and make it an instrument to control them, embodying their myth within his own system of techniques, but he still is moved to do so by his own compelling myth. The technique can never become a substitute for the myth. Only when the myth points out the goal does the technique build the road to it.

Here we draw our first lesson concerning government. The study of government is very old. The Chinese, the Hindus, the Greeks, and other people wrote many ancient volumes on the subject, with many precepts about the nature of government and many observations about its practices. The theory of government has engrossed leading thinkers throughout modern times. Yet it remains very doubtful whether there exists anything that can properly be called a science of government, if we mean thereby a system of knowledge that either formulates infallible rules, scientifically discoverable, for the guidance of the legislator or establishes invariable connections, exactly determinable, between the measures he proposes and the responsive changes in the social milieu. The difficulty is not only that the myths of government are eternally changing in eternally changing situations but that neither the myths nor the situations can be reduced to the exactly definable elements postulated by science. The practice of government always confronts new complexities under new conditions which it cannot adequately explore. The myth takes control and drives as far as it can. Government is the organization of men under authority, and their ever changing myths are themselves sovereign alike over the governors and the governed.

When we speak of a science of government we are not raising doubts concerning the feasibility of political science, as that expression is commonly used. There is an important body of systematic knowledge about the state, about the conditions under which different types of government emerge, about the characteristics of the different types, about the relation of government to the governed in different historical situations, about the modes in which governments carry on their functions according to their kind, and so forth. This body of knowledge may properly be named a science. We do not take sides with the purists who deny the title of "science" to any knowledge that does not present us with eternal laws or that

cannot be expressed in quantitative terms. There is really no intelligent issue here. If in their zeal for immutable exactitude these purists are offended when other kinds of knowledge are referred to as sciences, we can call them by some other name —and the knowledge will be just as good and as useful as before. What, however, we are rejecting is the claim that there is a systematic body of knowledge, already in existence or awaiting development, that can serve as a definite guide to the statesman, a science of how to govern, an applied science that does or can do in its field what medicine, say, or engineering does in its field.

Men have often dreamed of a science of government in this sense, and some have even claimed to inaugurate it. From Plato to George Bernard Shaw there have been champions of the view that in the development of this science lies the salvation of mankind. Plato was dominated by one myth-complex, and George Bernard Shaw by another. So it will always be. What then would a full-fledged science of government be? A science of how men *are* governed? We have much on that score, but it is historical description and not systematic knowledge. A science of how men *should* be governed? But the *should* is always expressive of the thinker's own myth-complex, is always subject to his presuppositions, and so lies outside the ambit of science—a fact that in no wise lessens its social importance, since the *it should be* of the mythical is as necessary as the *it is so* of the evidential. A science of how men *can* be governed? Perhaps this seems more hopeful. Machiavelli set the example to the modern world of presenting to the ruler pragmatic principles for his guidance. Men who have had much experience in public affairs, statesmen, diplomats, policy-makers, party bosses, the counselors of presidents and of kings have written memoirs in which they have exposed the secrets of political success. Psychologists, publicists, propaganda analysts, have studied the modes of mass response and the devices by which they can be manipulated or evoked. En-

lightening as these records are they do not, however, meet the requirements of a science. They are reflections and observations on the art of government rather than the serviceable data for a science of government.

What is the difference? Let us examine, for example, the famous precepts of Machiavelli. Best known of these is his advice to the ruler that he combine cunning and ruthlessness, that he disregard whenever necessary the accepted code of morals but always make a show of observing it. Machiavelli's experience in politics led him to believe that by following this advice a prince could best safeguard his throne. He wrote at a time marked by turbulence and instability. For such times, and for such rulers, the advice might be good, within discretionary limits—but who can assign the limits? Many who have followed Machiavelli's precepts have ended in disaster. Where is the clean-cut nexus that science desiderates? Discretionary precepts for the attainment of particular goals—that is all we are given. That is all we find in the whole series, down to the latest behind-the-scenes writer who informs us that a successful President of the United States must be all things to all men.

Moreover, most of these precepts are concerned not with the larger issues of government but with the much narrower question of how a ruler or a ruling group can gain or retain power; and we cannot reduce the vast business of government to a few precarious techniques for holding on to office. The tasks of government are manifold and comprehensive, emerging from complicated and ever changing conditions. What science prescribes these tasks? The people over whom government is exercised are moved by various conflicting sentiments and impulses, have different needs and different demands from time to time. What science envisages the endless conjunctures to which government must address itself?

Policy-making depends on the assessing of alternatives with a view to translating one of them into action. A bill or an exec-

utive action is up for consideration. There is then the primary question: will the proposed measure advance the purposes of the government? It must be not only such that the government itself regards it with approval, it must furthermore not entail any untoward consequences such as in the judgment of the government would outweigh the direct advantages. To what reactions will it give rise? There are numerous pros and cons. How weigh the one against the other? At the close of the war, to take an example, there rose the question whether the United States, Great Britain, and Canada should either immediately communicate to their allies in the struggle the secret of the construction of the atomic bomb or should reserve the secret until at least the negotiations for the peace settlement were concluded or until arrangements for a satisfactory system of control over that terrifying agency were completed. This is, for short, a rough and inadequate statement of the alternatives. It was an issue that no government had ever faced before, but in this respect it differed only in degree from every other question that comes before a government, since every situation is for the policy-maker a new one. There were many aspects to the situation; many interests would be affected by the decision. There was the major question whether a world system more satisfactory to the holders of the secret would be attainable if the other allies, and one of them in particular, were—or were not—entrusted with the secret. We need not enter into detail. A plausible case could be made for withholding, another for giving. It is so with every issue of policy. Always the situation is many-sided. Always there is a complex set of reactions to be foreseen and assessed. What science can lay down exact rules for that task? What science can postulate explicit and clearly relevant principles to guide the legislator or the minister in the exploration of the alternatives, in the forevision of the consequences, in the practical evaluation of the various considerations that are relevant to his decision?