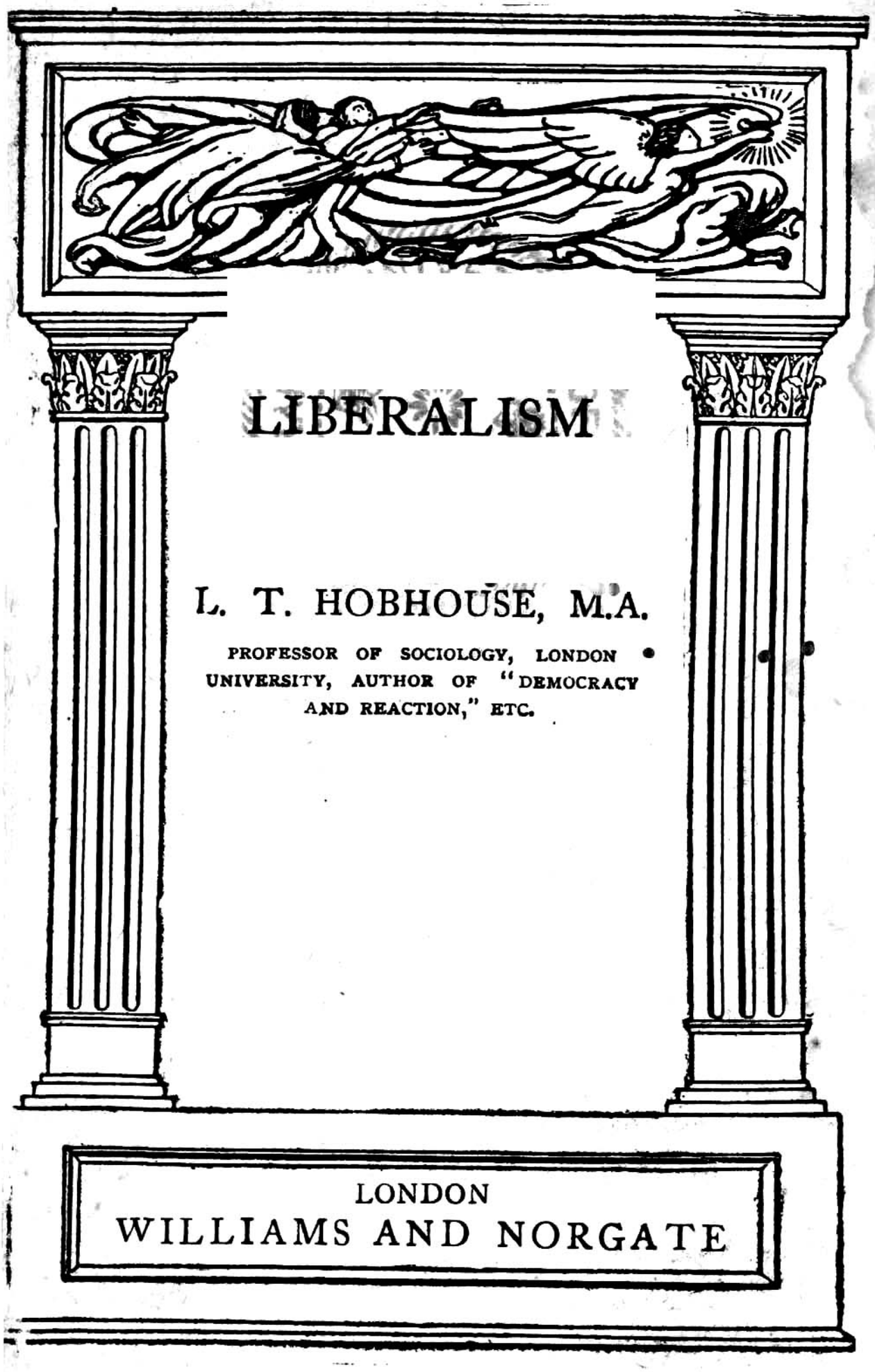

LIBERALISM

L. T. HOBHOUSE, M.A.

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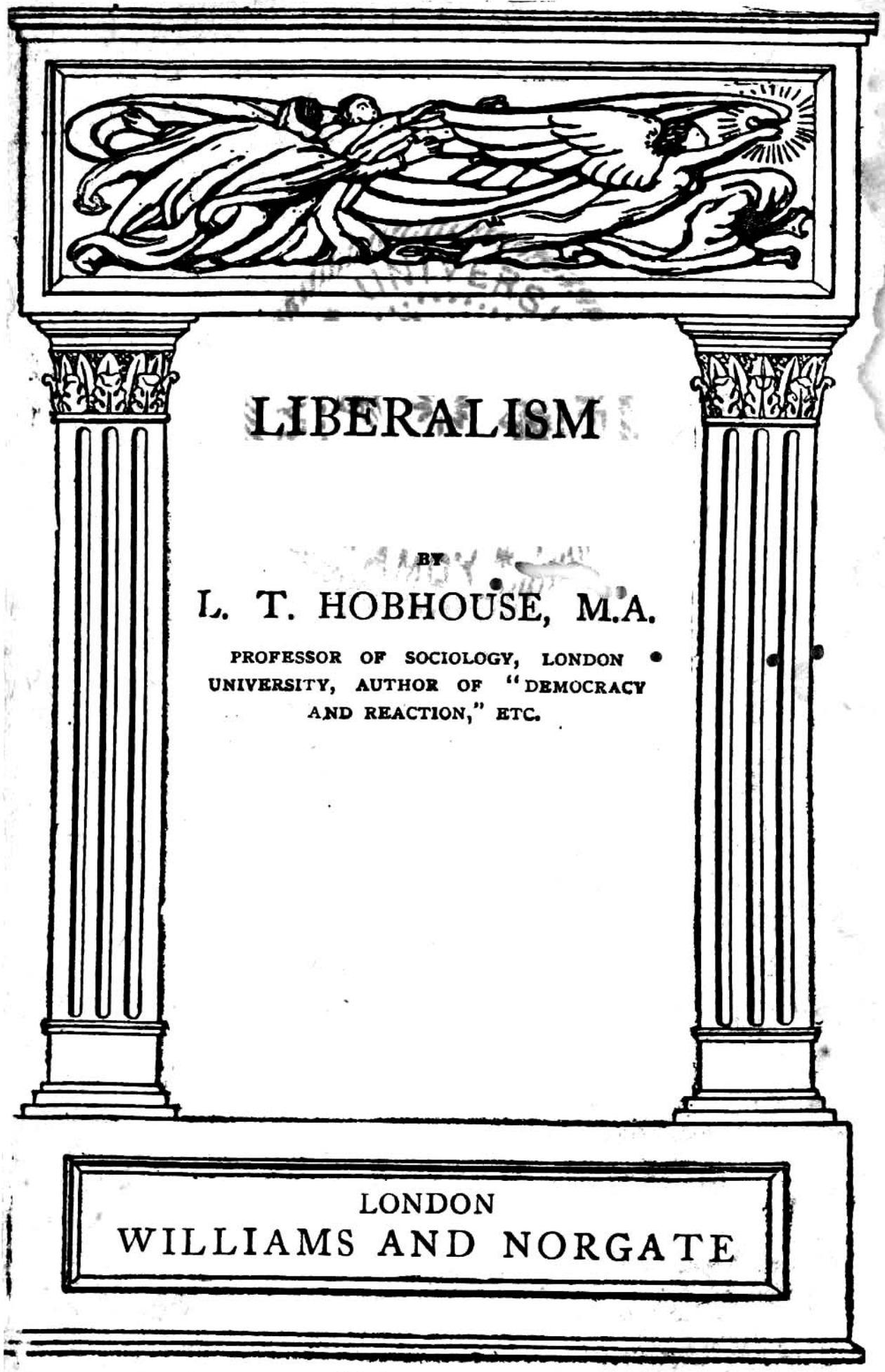

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LIBERALISM

CHAPTER I

BEFORE LIBERALISM

THE modern State is the distinctive product of a unique civilization. But it is a product which is still in the making, and a part of the process is a struggle between new and old principles of social order. To understand the new, which is our main purpose, we must first cast a glance at the old. We must understand what the social structure was, which—mainly, as I shall show, under the inspiration of Liberal ideas—is slowly but surely giving place to the new fabric of the civic State. The older structure itself was by no means primitive. What is truly primitive is very hard to say. But one thing is pretty clear. At all times men have lived in societies, and ties of kinship and of simple neighbourhood underlie every form of social organiza-

tion. In the simplest societies it seems probable that these ties—reinforced and extended, perhaps, by religious or other beliefs—are the only ones that seriously count. It is certain that of the warp of descent and the woof of intermarriage there is woven a tissue out of which small and rude but close and compact communities are formed. But the ties of kinship and neighbourhood are effective only within narrow limits. While the local group, the clan, or the village community are often the centres of vigorous life, the larger aggregate of the Tribe seldom attains true social and political unity unless it rests upon a military organization. But military organization may serve not only to hold one tribe together but also to hold other tribes in subjection, and thereby, at the cost of much that is most valuable in primitive life, to establish a larger and at the same time a more orderly society. Such an order once established does not, indeed, rest on naked force. The rulers become invested with a sacrosanct authority. It may be that they are gods or descendants of gods. It may be that they are blessed and upheld by an independent priesthood. In either case

the powers that be extend their sway not merely over the bodies but over the minds of men. They are ordained of God because they arrange the ordination. Such a government is not necessarily abhorrent to the people nor indifferent to them. But it is essentially government from above. So far as it affects the life of the people at all, it does so by imposing on them duties, as of military service, tribute, ordinances, and even new laws, in such wise and on such principles as seem good to itself. It is not true, as a certain school of jurisprudence held, that law is, as such, a command imposed by a superior upon an inferior, and backed by the sanctions of punishment. But though this is not true of law in general it is a roughly true description of law in that particular stage of society which we may conveniently describe as the Authoritarian.

Now, in the greater part of the world and throughout the greater part of history the two forms of social organization that have been distinguished are the only forms to be found. Of course, they themselves admit of every possible variation of detail, but looking below these variations we find the two recurrent types. On the one hand, there are

the small kinship groups, often vigorous enough in themselves, but feeble for purposes of united action. On the other hand, there are larger societies varying in extent and in degree of civilization from a petty negro kingdom to the Chinese Empire, resting on a certain union of military force and religious or quasi-religious belief which, to select a neutral name, we have called the principle of Authority. In the lower stages of civilization there appears, as a rule, to be only one method of suppressing the strife of hostile clans, maintaining the frontier against a common enemy, or establishing the elements of outward order. The alternative to authoritarian rule is relapse into the comparative anarchy of savage life.

But another method made its appearance in classical antiquity. The city state of ancient Greece and Italy was a new type of social organization. It differed from the clan and the commune in several ways. In the first place it contained many clans and villages, and perhaps owed its origin to the coming together of separate clans on the basis not of conquest but of comparatively equal alliance. Though very small as compared with an

ancient empire or a modern state it was much larger than a primitive kindred. Its life was more varied and complex. It allowed more free play to the individual, and, indeed, as it developed, it suppressed the old clan organization and substituted new divisions, geographical or other. It was based, in fact, not on kinship as such, but on civic right, and this it was which distinguished it not only from the commune, but from the Oriental monarchy. The law which it recognized and by which it lived was not a command imposed by a superior government on a subject mass. On the contrary, government was itself subject to law, and law was the life of the state, willingly supported by the entire body of free citizens. In this sense the city state was a community of free men. Considered collectively its citizens owned no master. They governed themselves, subject only to principles and rules of life descending from antiquity and owing their force to the spontaneous allegiance of successive generations. In such a community some of the problems that vex us most presented themselves in a very simple form. In particular the relation of the individual to the community was close, direct, and natural. Their

interests were obviously bound up together. Unless each man did his duty the State might easily be destroyed and the population enslaved. Unless the State took thought for its citizens it might easily decay. What was still more important, there was no opposition of church and state, no fissure between political and religious life, between the claims of the secular and the spiritual, to distract the allegiance of the citizens, and to set the authority of conscience against the duties of patriotism. It was no feat of the philosophical imagination, but a quite simple and natural expression of the facts to describe such a community as an association of men for the purpose of living well. Ideals to which we win our way back with difficulty and doubt arose naturally out of the conditions of life in ancient Greece.

On the other hand, this simple harmony had very serious limitations, which in the end involved the downfall of the city system. The responsibilities and privileges of the associated life were based not on the rights of human personality but on the rights of citizenship, and citizenship was never co-extensive with the community. The population included slaves

or serfs, and in many cities there were large classes descended from the original conquered population, personally free but excluded from the governing circle. Notwithstanding the relative simplicity of social conditions the city was constantly torn by the disputes of faction—in part probably a legacy from the old clan organization, in part a consequence of the growth of wealth and the newer distinction of classes. The evil of faction was aggravated by the ill-success of the city organization in dealing with the problem of inter-state relations. The Greek city clung to its autonomy, and though the principle of federalism which might have solved the problem was ultimately brought into play, it came too late in Greek history to save the nation.

The constructive genius of Rome devised a different method of dealing with the political problems involved in expanding relations. Roman citizenship was extended till it included all Italy and, later on, till it comprised the whole free population of the Mediterranean basin. But this extension was even more fatal to the free self-government of a city state. The population of Italy could not meet in the Forum of Rome or the Plain of Mars to elect

consuls and pass laws, and the more widely it was extended the less valuable for any political purpose did citizenship become. The history of Rome, in fact, might be taken as a vast illustration of the difficulty of building up an extended empire on any basis but that of personal despotism resting on military force and maintaining peace and order through the efficiency of the bureaucratic machine. In this vast mechanism it was the army that was the seat of power, or rather it was each army at its post on some distant frontier that was a potential seat of power. The "secret of the empire" that was early divulged was that an emperor could be made elsewhere than at Rome, and though a certain sanctity remained to the person of the emperor, and legists cherished a dim remembrance of the theory that he embodied the popular will, the fact was that he was the choice of a powerful army, ratified by the God of Battles, and maintaining his power as long as he could suppress any rival pretender. The break-up of the Empire through the continual repetition of military strife was accelerated, not caused, by the presence of barbarism both within and without the

frontiers. To restore the elements of order a compromise between central and local jurisdictions was necessary, and the vassal became a local prince owning an allegiance, more or less real as the case might be, to a distant sovereign. Meanwhile, with the prevailing disorder the mass of the population in Western Europe lost its freedom, partly through conquest, partly through the necessity of finding a protector in troublous times. The social structure of the Middle Ages accordingly assumed the hierarchical form which we speak of as the Feudal system. In this thoroughgoing application of the principle of authority every man, in theory, had his master. The serf held of his lord, who held of a great seigneur, who held of the king. The king in the completer theory held of the emperor, who was crowned by the Pope, who held of St. Peter. The chain of descent was complete from the Ruler of the universe to the humblest of the serfs.[1] But within this order the growth

[1] This is, of course, only one side of mediæval theory, but it is the side which lay nearest to the facts. The reverse view, which derives the authority of government from the governed, made its appearance in the Middle Ages partly under the influence of classical tradition. But its main interest and importance is that it served as a

of industry and commerce raised up new centres of freedom. The towns in which men were learning anew the lessons of association for united defence and the regulation of common interests, obtained charters of rights from seigneur or king, and on the Continent even succeeded in establishing complete independence. Even in England, where from the Conquest the central power was at its strongest, the corporate towns became for many purposes self-governing communities. The city state was born again, and with it came an outburst of activity, the revival of literature and the arts, the rediscovery of ancient learning, the rebirth of philosophy and science.

The mediæval city state was superior to the ancient in that slavery was no essential element in its existence. On the contrary, by welcoming the fugitive serf and vindicating his freedom it contributed powerfully to the decline of the milder form of servitude. But like the ancient state it

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starting-point for the thought of a later time. On the whole subject the reader may consult Gierke, *Political Theories of the Middle Age*, translated by Maitland (Cambridge University Press).