

Toward Politically Responsible Professional Associations*

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1. Introduction

The very idea that professional associations should *not* take political stands is in my opinion an integral part of the liberal make-believe that serves to protect this country against winds of change, in the interest of the most over-privileged class the world has ever seen.

I would like to explain first the basic functions served by this notion, and its place within the master myth of liberal pluralism, before proceeding to state in positive terms why every professional association should be not just free to but obligated to take at least *some* political stands.

2. Some basic assumptions

Every stable social order has its rulers and its ruled; moreover, it is in the interest of every ruling class, or every power elite, to justify existing inequalities and iniquities ideologically, so that those who are lorded over will remain pliant and satisfied, or at least as politically passive as possible. To be sure, it is in the interest of the ruled – and more so to the extent that they are badly exploited or oppressed – to resist ideological manipulation, and to develop a consciousness of their own, of their strength in numbers and of the justice of their desire for a more equal society, with expanding human rights for all. Political consciousness that resists ideological manipulation from above can turn urgent desire into militant demand.

Down through the annals of history, this has generally been an unequal struggle, with the glories of the gods and the furies of hellfire enlisted on the side of the kings and the emperors and the mighty lords, and with only an occasional Spartacus or Jesus or Karl Marx or John Brown to take the side of the oppressed. But in modern times, with literacy and secularism, the vocabularies of political dominance and of resistance have changed radically; and

in the western so-called democracies the classes privileged with power and money have become adept at ruling by proxies, and at draping themselves, and especially their proxies, in the verbiage of democracy and liberalism.

If you grant the facts of continuing oligarchies in our western systems, with economic resources immensely maldistributed and the giant corporations practically invulnerable to effective political control, then how are we to account for the continuing prevalence of the idea that our systems are democratic, propounded not only in high school civic texts for future employees of the system but in scholarly work as well, produced by adult social scientists? This is what I call the *liberal make-believe*, and it requires an explanation; especially when it is adhered to by so many social scientists, who have ample access to the facts – to the voluminous empirical data that demonstrate the stark facts of oligarchy, especially in the United States: only few are politically active; far fewer still, mostly elderly white males, well educated and economically affluent or rich, have political or economic power.

3. The corruption of 'politics' and of man

One key element in explaining this make-believe is in the indignities to which the term 'politics' has become subjected; a second key element is that our collective image of man has also become degraded, for much the same sociological reasons.

Human nature has been made the culprit, by rulers and conservatives in all social orders, as a way of explaining away the iniquities of social institutions. To undercut rational protest, let alone visions of a future just society, people have been scared by dire predictions of how much *worse* things could become, but for the splendid rulers, or but for the inspired Founding Fathers who gave us this brilliant consti-

tutional system; and most organized religions have been great allies of the ruling classes of their times, or indeed have had their worthies well ensconced within them, with the timeless theme that men are brimful of sin and deserve even worse than their present fate. Even great political liberals among theologians, like Reinhold Niebuhr, have got caught in this particular web; but apart from the religious factor, it is a safe bet that conservatism ties in with despair about human nature, and radicalism with hope about man's potentialities. Despair about man is of course something to be encouraged by those who have vast privileges to protect, while hope for man is needed by those who would promote justice and the social gospel of a life, a decent life for all, before death.

Paradoxically, the conservative corruption of the term 'politics' may prove a more stubborn obstacle to political progress, compared to the downgrading of man himself. Man is in our time becoming redeemed, especially in the lenses of social science, which in our liberal society eventually affect our collective popular vision as well; Sigmund Freud and succeeding generations of psychologists and psychiatrists have turned their backs on 'sin' in favor of 'guilt' and other problems that can be dealt with, by cumulative research and preventive and remedial action, as an alternative to the uncertain levers of prayer. They have in effect (though not in Freud's own intention) demonstrated that man's potentialities for goodness and wisdom are not inferior to his capacity for destructiveness and stupidity, depending on the quality of each person's environments and life experience, from his moment of birth (or probably earlier).

There is a direct line from Freud's discoveries to Charles A. Reich's much too extreme optimism in his bestselling *The Greening of America*: more and more young people have come to refuse to be taken in any longer by the ideology that says we must strive to succeed in the rat race of competitive careers, in the service of impersonal corporations that have transformed even their own supposed directors into tools of the system; more and

more young people decide to 'do their own thing', on a live-and-let-live basis, letting institutions and corporations and products become means, not ends.

Reich himself fails to appreciate, however, the awesome obstacle to reason and progress that our corrupted term 'politics' has come to impose. To the Greeks 'politics' referred essentially to the theory and the practice of promoting the Common Good, or justice, and it was taken for granted by Plato and Aristotle that the purpose of political inquiry was to establish as scientifically as possible, on the basis of a radical questioning of the conventional wisdom, how far it would be possible and practicable to remove existing iniquities and to establish a fuller justice, not among all men but among all free men, or citizens.

Modern technology has absolved us from any further need of slavery, and indeed from any further need of exploitation by way of wage slavery as well. However, in our modern world we have in recent decades had practically no political science, and very little politics, in the Greek sense of theory and action dedicated to the promotion of justice. In the communist-governed part of our world, to be sure, the ruling elites claim they have just that kind of a social science, but they make very sure that marxist inquiry does not venture to raise questions about *their* established social order or existing basic policy priorities. Some ruling elites in the western world have had to rely heavily on visible terror, justified in terms of racism, patriotism, Christianity, or anti-communism. But most western systems have opted for the liberal alternative, which leaves political discourse free within wide limits, although effectively closed off as an avenue toward changing the established system. 'Subversives' and 'extremists' who are nonviolent have usually been tolerated because, presumably, the mass media have effectively vaccinated the public against ideas beyond the pale of respectability. Even university students used to be thought well protected; as the liberal former President of the University of California, Clark Kerr, once put it, in advocating a wider toleration of 'subversive' speakers on

the UC campuses, what I make ideas safe for students safe for ideas. It though a tough problem young people today are against subversive ideas a

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the UC campuses, what is needed is not to make ideas safe for students but to make students safe for ideas. It is a hopeful sign, though a tough problem for liberals, that young people today are no longer as safe against subversive ideas as they used to be.

Ostensibly the power in our liberal systems rests with the majority of the people, through their elected representatives. By virtue of their office, however, or of having been candidates for office, these people have become *politicians*, alas, — that is, they are by definition self-serving, at least mildly corrupt, and their word is never to be trusted. An equally emasculating set of stereotypes has become widely accepted with respect to appointed officials in the executive branch of government: they are *bureaucrats*, i.e. at least moderately stupid, grossly ineffectual, and always ready to come up with obstacles to common sense solutions that could get a job done without wasting the taxpayers' money.

'Political science' has in recent decades been devoted to the study not of how human and social needs can best be met by the efforts of governments and allied organizations; rather, the emphasis has been on studying how people with all their baggage of stereotypes and superstitions go about 'electing' representatives, or thinking and acting as if they do; and on how politicians and people in other relevant roles go about making their decisions. The study of behavior had become divorced from the study of justice, or politics as the concept had been understood in the past. What was far worse, politics had not just dropped out of sight, but the very concept had become transmogrified until the term 'politics' came to refer simply to the struggle for power and domination, by means fair and foul, and for ends fair and foul.

I am not crediting individual economic rulers with all this brilliant foresight, but their interests as a class have of course been superbly served by the decline and fall of the very term 'politics', associated with the extremely low repute of politicians and of government bureaucrats.

In the first place, the 'wheeling and dealing' which is normal in the world of private business

is less vulnerable to attack when politicians, who are more explicitly in the public domain, are believed to be up to the same tricks and yet pretending not to be. Similarly, identifying 'bureaucracy' with government officialdom takes the heat off ineffectual or corrupt private corporate bureaucracies. And the stereotype that politicians are out to waste the taxpayers' money increases the liberties corporate directors can take in private by way of price policies that rob the consumers of money, a good part of which is invested in campaigns of bamboozlement aiming at increasing the loot needlessly taken from the same consumers next time around.

Worse still, however, is the loss of faith in man's collective powers of reason, or even the loss of reason itself, in the management of public problems. If we accept the usual kind of definition of 'politics' as referring to a kind of career for unscrupulous individuals, who are forever destined to 'play politics' rather than apply the canons of science and reason in the service of humane goals, then where can we turn, except to prayer, if we want to try to keep our civilization from destroying itself? We are certainly paying a heavy price these days, in terms of accelerating destruction of human lives, and indeed of soil and air and water as well, for a century of private corporative rule by political proxies, in their own short-term interest, in the almost total absence of politics. The *public interest* had been defined out of existence by quite a few reputable political scientists; and even among the rest there were very few who cared to indulge in any research programs based on radical questions about its requirements.

4. *Changing trends*

But these days there are changes in the wind, and the vulnerability of our vast corporate establishment has radically increased, I believe, for several reasons:

(1) The dangers to which a technology run wild has exposed all of us, by the accelerating destruction of air, water and soil, with the poisoning of whole animal species as well, have become too real to too many of us to be ex-

plained away. The need for radical changes has become widely perceived as pressing, among young people first of all; in Charles A. Reich's phrase, a Consciousness III has been mushrooming all over North America, bent on rejecting 'the system' and on living simply and authentically. In any event, it now no longer would cut any ice in any important American audience to declare that concern with pollution is just a disloyal ploy to take our minds off the Red menace. The recent SST debacle demonstrated most dramatically the new power of the anti-pollution and perhaps also anti-technology sentiments, in the United States today.

(2) The continuing horrors of the American warfare against the Indochinese peoples, and through other local proxy regimes against other oppressed peoples, have become too much to live with, even for many military career people as well as for quite a number of politicians who once supported our intervention in the Vietnamese civil war. More and more political moderates have come to see that the Pentagon now has become a blight on mankind, even though, short of a new kind of politics, there appears to be as yet no way to harness its powers of continuing destruction. An outright defeat for the pro-military forces in the U.S. Congress this election year appears as unlikely, alas, as a Vietnamese occupation of the District of Columbia. But the political pressure on President Nixon to speed up troop withdrawals will help, since no 'Vietnamization' gimmicks can long conceal the fact that a detested regime cannot postpone its own collapse much longer on radically decreasing rations of American intervention. The My Lai trials, too, will help, also because their justice has fallen so embarrassingly short of reaching the real responsibilities higher up.

(3) The continuing disparities between rich and poor in the United States, and most explosively between whites and blacks, have become more starkly visible and more bitterly resented every recent year, with increasing exposure of the facts of American life on television. The increasing militancy of black and other underdog leaders has kept upping the

antes; clearly, the corporate rulers cannot keep the country from deepening civil strife, not even with the most articulate liberal politicians in ostensible charge of dealing with the large public issues.

Up to now our established leaders, save for the outright reactionaries in the South and in a part of the Republican Party, have continued their traditional struggle to pacify the basically decent, liberal instincts of most American voters, by way of pushing for better welfare benefits now and for bigger hopes for justice in the distant future – without, however, touching the powerful interests that are so well served by all this gentle moderation. Yet for the first time 'white liberal' is widely becoming a term of opprobrium, even among whites. Political liberalism in America is, it would seem, near the end of its usefulness as a dependable cushion between a basically decent and fair-minded but gullible and easily scared electorate, and an immensely self-serving minority of real power holders. The make believe of democratic pluralism and patriotic idealism is wearing off.

5. *What can we learn?*

Our only hope, I believe, is in a new political consciousness, one that first of all affirms a sense of individual political responsibility for what we do, or fail to do. And it is essential, in this connection, that we endeavor to rescue the term 'politics' from its modern corruption. 'Politics' must once again come to refer to the theory and practice of promoting the common good. Let us therefore call 'pseudopolitics' all activities in the public domain that clearly do *not* aim at justice for the underdog, or at equal rights to life and its amenities for all peoples and for the generations to come.

With this approach to the language of politics, it will make sense to say that *political responsibility* is much the same as *moral responsibility*; one can choose not to be political, much as one can choose not to be moral, but at the price of being less of a human being. And this price is not just an abstraction, as Adolf Eichmann learnt, and as William Calley learnt; thousands of other Germans or Ameri-

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cans, respectively, have escaped the same heroic fame by their good luck, not by having lived with more moral or political responsibility than an Eichmann or a Calley.

Thousands of Americans have lost their sons in Vietnam, surely a price even heavier than what Lt. Calley has had to pay so far; lives which would not have been lost had they themselves been able to dissent and show their sons a way to refuse to become killers in a monstrously unjust war. For another illustration, take the wives of American prisoners of war in North Vietnam. It has been pathetic to see all the sentimental publicity given by the mass media to the sufferings of these wives; I certainly wish them their husbands back, but how many of these otherwise privileged ladies have given any thoughts to or have ever agonized in public over the horrors that their husbands (if they were shot down on bombing raids) had almost certainly inflicted on Vietnamese families; have any of these ladies in public expressed their sorrow for the suffering of their Indochinese counterparts, the wives and widows of victims of the Saigon regime's interrogators and jailers?

There are indications that the political illiteracy of the bulk of my own generation of North Americans is on the wane. Vietnam has been a costly but effective object lesson, made more effective by television. Our young people, always better learners than their elders, have therefore also been able to teach better than we. And this generation of young people apparently feel ever so much more secure in an economic sense, compared to those who grew up in the 1930's or earlier, whose political radicalism could usually be cured by prospects of a steady job.

The increasing sense of affluence in present-day America, especially among the young in the white middle class but not limited to them, has led to the widespread conviction that nobody is going to starve; that, in any event, either a college education or independent study or just communal living will lead to worthwhile friendships and an interesting life; and that it is becoming increasingly ridiculous to devote one's life to General Motors or Dupont or

some similarly worthy corporate objectives. Consciousness III is spreading, and is further fortified by the belief that to be on Welfare is a right, not a humiliating receipt of charity. Sooner or later, many believe, a guaranteed annual income is bound to come, so why not devote one's life to meaningful objectives of one's own?

6. *What can professional associations do?*

Of this is the trend, as I believe it is, many of our institutions are nevertheless going to change only by degrees. The important objective over the next decades is to radically increase the formal and informal *education* of our professionals, and especially their political education. This can be done to some extent in the classrooms, but far more effectively by way of drastically changing, by way of student political action, the structures of the schools and colleges, so that all training henceforth must become enlightened by moral and political perspectives.

What is important right now, as a small but significant first step, is to shed the notion that professional associations should refrain from taking political stands. If my discussion up to this point has been even mildly persuasive, it will be understood why our ruling elites want as little meddling in politics as possible from outsiders, and especially from professionals who might be suspected of having enough information to become knowledgeable critics and (what is worse) who might have integrity enough to become subversive critics. Our rulers like politics to be limited to those who will 'play the game' as ostensible leaders, and for the majority to be nice and 'silent' and merely take part in the usually quite harmless rituals of campaigning and voting.

For much the same reasons I believe that the assumption of political responsibility by professionals, through our associations, can do something to give the new politics a chance, by way of our helping to expose frauds and cruelties, and by championing the public interest, especially in areas in which we have, as professionals, more experience or insight than the average group of our compatriots.

Naturally, if by 'politics' is meant nothing more than the usual competition for power, between candidates with nothing but party labels or clichés to distinguish their appeals, nobody in his right mind would want a professional association to take sides. But our organizations still ought to be politically involved, at least to the extent of charging both or all candidates, in such situations, with their failure to take up serious issues that ought to have been at the center of their attention.

It will be objected that professional associations should reflect, in their activities, only the aspirations and objectives that all members have in common, by virtue of their training and professional roles; and that professionals should engage in political activity, if at all, merely as citizens. My answer is that this distinction between the two hats, 'professional' and 'citizen', has only a blindly pro-system bias to recommend itself (all banning of 'politics' serves to uphold the established ways, which those in power always like to think of as non-political); it reflects exactly the lack of political education, or indeed of almost any critical intellectual education that has been the costliest failure of most of our professional schools. And the politicization of our professions is probably the most practicable way to gradually seek to make up for some of the education that has been missed, starting right now. Let us in the meantime work for a more distant objective as well: some day our professional schools and colleges must become engaged in education for moral and political responsibility, and invest as serious energies in this task as in the task of training their students for the skills specific to each profession.

If 'politics will create turmoil', in the professions as it has in our better colleges and high schools, that is all to the good. If basically decent fellows like Adolf Eichmann or William

Calley had been students in Berkeley at the heyday of the Free Speech Movement, or had been members of professions enlivened by vigorous political controversy, chances are that neither of them would have become infamous henchmen of immoral crusades against alleged enemies about which they had no autonomous knowledge.

Well educated professionals ought to have a better opportunity than most groups to develop a kind of rational compassionate collective conscience, particularly in areas of policy relevant to their special expertise. But such areas will be quite wide, for most professions, since their clients will be affected in their lives and problems by wide ranges of policies. Reasonable members of professional associations will differ about where to draw the lines, and differ vigorously if they care for justice and human rights, and that is all to the good. They will differ, too, over priorities among organizational concerns. Most professionals will know, or find out, that the political effectiveness of their collective stands will be diluted if they make too frequent pronouncements, or take action with a militancy out of proportion to the relative significance of the issues raised.

Mistakes will be made, obviously. But far better to make mistakes, and to learn from them, than to persist in the past practice of most professional associations: the practice of shunning any and all collective political or moral responsibility. The trend now clearly goes the other way, in many professional associations; let us do what we can to push it forward, and to make it universal within the present and emerging professions.

* This paper draws on a briefer paper which appeared in the Sept./Oct. 1971 issue of *The Humanist*, as part of a symposium on 'The Politicalization of the Professions'.