

# The Styles of Modern Politics

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The Styles of Modern Politics by Peter Berkowitz

A review of *The Politics of Faith & The Politics of Scepticism* by Michael Oakeshott and edited by Timothy Fuller. Yale University Press. 139 pp. \$25.00.

In the Editor's Introduction, Timothy Fuller informs the reader that those who were best acquainted with Michael Oakeshott and his thought cannot explain why he did not see fit in his lifetime to even make known the existence of the manuscript which Fuller has published under the title *The Politics of Faith & The Politics of Scepticism*. It is appropriate to raise the question of the extent to which this posthumously published book reflects Oakeshott's considered opinions, but there is no need to be long detained by it. Though it may have fallen short of Oakeshott's own standards, this small book illuminates, as do few recent publications, the fascinating and treacherous terrain of modern European political thought. Indeed, its deft and gracefully learned exposition puts to shame the steady stream of hot-off-the-press scholarship that has flooded the field of academic political theory. To read this unexpected new book by Oakeshott is to be reminded of the artistry of the intellect and the dignity of the human mind.

Michael Oakeshott, who was born in 1901, was appointed in 1950 to the Chair of Political Science at the London School of Economics. At the time of his death in 1990 he was revered by thoughtful conservatives in England as perhaps their leading philosophical spokesman. Yet Oakeshott's work is still not very well known in America, either among conservative intellectuals or among scholars of political theory.

This is regrettable but understandable. As a thinker, Oakeshott's first and overriding allegiance was neither to party nor school but to clarity of thought. He not only defies easy classification but also devotes himself to exposing and criticizing the intellectual propensity to force the complexities of moral and political life into tidy conceptual categories. He was a political theorist who constantly warned against the dangers of allowing theory to govern practice. In politics he was a trimmer but not because he thought that the complexities of political life were incomprehensible. On the contrary, through a kind of theoretical inquiry --- really an eclectic mix of conceptual analysis, history of ideas, and political history --- he sought to show that a deep "ambiguity and ambivalence" were constitutive characteristics of our political life and therefore could not be removed but instead must be negotiated or navigated.

In *The Politics of Faith & the Politics of Scepticism* Oakeshott seeks to identify sources of the ambiguity and ambivalence inhering in the fund of ideas we have inherited from modern European political thought about the proper task and scope of government. He argues that at the dawn of modernity, owing to the sudden and dramatic increase of power available for controlling nature and manipulating man, the question "What shall government do?" became fresh and urgent and open to distinctive answers. But the range of answers was not limitless and the variety was not devoid of pattern. Indeed, it is Oakeshott's contention that views about what government ought to do with its new found ability to control and supervise swung between two charged poles or historical and theoretical extremes, "two opposed styles of politics."

At one extreme, the politics of faith affirms that the chief purpose of government is the perfection, or improvement of the material condition, of mankind. This purpose is accomplished by the imposition of a "comprehensive pattern of activity upon the community." In the quest to perfect mankind or to put it on the one right road to improvement, the politics of faith proclaims that government and not some other agency or agents must play the decisive role. This style of politics, according to Oakeshott, receives its classic exposition in the writings of Francis Bacon and is also manifest in seventeenth century English puritan politics and the eighteenth century projects of the philosophes.

It welcomes power, ineluctably seeks to expand the scope of government, prefers the common good to individual rights, and shows little patience for dissent or opposition. The "faith" in the politics of faith, it must be emphasized, is not faith in God (though it appears in religiously driven versions), but faith in the capacity of government to bring about the condition "preeminently proper to mankind" by the exercise of minute control over an ever-increasing range of human activities.

At the other extreme of modern political life lies the politics of scepticism. What the politics of faith enthusiastically embraces as grand opportunities for government to set things right, the politics of scepticism condemns as dangerous threats to human freedom and dignity. The politics of scepticism rejects the view that it is government's task to improve or perfect humanity, sometimes because the very idea of perfection is thought to be absurd, but predominantly on the grounds that government is far too blunt an instrument to use in the pursuit of something so complex and elusive as perfection.

Instead, the politics of scepticism views the preservation of public order as government's primary task. This style of politics Oakeshott finds animating the writings of, among others, Hobbes and Pascal, Hume and Montesquieu, *The Federalist* and Burke. It is not against strong government but in favor of strength narrowly channeled in the pursuit of limited goals; it tends to respect precedent and the rule of law as means for maintaining order in an orderly fashion; and, for fear of what imperfect human beings may do with unchecked power, it is inclined to accept with equanimity the cost on the capacity of government to do even its limited business effectively that comes from institutionalized checks and balances. The

"scepticism" in the politics of scepticism is not in the first place scepticism about God or morality, but doubt --- sometimes driven by strong faith and high moral principle --- about the capacity of government officials, human like the rest of us, to wield power efficiently and justly.

Oakeshott points out that modern politics has always been heterogeneous and complex in practice, and that the politics of faith and the politics of scepticism are equally extremes that never appear in pure form. But he is also at pains to point out that as styles of governing they have not proved to be equally influential or equally wise. The spirit animating the politics of faith breeds the pathology Oakeshott elsewhere diagnoses as rationalism in politics: the search, through the exercise of theoretical reason, for universal solutions to the problems of politics and the reduction of governing to the exercise of technique for the manipulation and regulation of human conduct. Our century has witnessed the ravishes of unspeakably virulent and savage strains of this disease in the totalitarian nightmares of fascism and communism.

But grasping that twentieth century totalitarianism is a monstrous manifestation of the extreme represented by the politics of faith does not justify a headlong flight into the arms of the opposite extreme. While the politics of scepticism, in Oakeshott's view, has the better argument, the deeper insight into human nature, and the more urgent message for politics today, left to its own devices it reveals itself as partial and even self-defeating. For in its focus on formality as the means for maintaining public order, the politics of scepticism sinks into a rigid, passive, and impervious condition that prevents it from adapting to changing circumstances and unexpected events. And in its concentration on tempering and limiting government, the politics of scepticism sends an uninspiring message that works to deprive it of citizens' enthusiasm and allegiance.

In their pure form, both the politics of faith and politics of scepticism are incomplete, unstable, and in need of a tendency or truth only the other can supply. The virtue of the politics of faith is an energy and enthusiasm in government that comes from viewing politics as the pursuit of a great cause. The virtue of the politics of scepticism is a forbearance in governing that is rooted in understanding that maintaining a basic public order is always "a great and difficult achievement never beyond the reach of decay and dissolution."

What is needed now, Oakeshott's analysis suggests, is a complex or mixed style of politics that somehow combines the virtues of the politics of faith and the politics of scepticism while avoiding their defects and extreme tendencies. Perhaps such a style of politics would involve energy, enthusiasm, and a high sense of purpose exercised in keeping government focused on the limited tasks it is best suited to achieve.

In its scepticism about principle and its faith in practice, Oakeshott's thought can resemble such fashionable contemporary schools of thought as postmodernism and pragmatism, but it must not be confused with either. For both postmodernism and pragmatism, contrary to their official tenets, exhibit a deep antipathy to the very ambiguity and ambivalence in our

political life that it was one of Oakeshott's abiding preoccupations to bring into focus. The postmodern mind reveals a virtually unshakeable faith in its progress beyond the alleged narrowness and delusions of all previous thought. The pragmatist sees only the uses and none of the disadvantages of converting all questions about the good into questions about what works. Oakeshott's thinking --- his impressive resistance of the powerful temptation (to which his thought is not altogether immune) to turn the distrust of doctrine into a doctrine -- - provides a bracing antidote to the false comforts conferred by postmodern and pragmatist pieties.

Commenting on Friedrich von Hayek's critique of socialism in *The Road to Serfdom*, Oakeshott memorably observed that "a plan to resist all planning may be better than its opposite, but it belongs to the same style of politics." In the same spirit, it needs also to be noted that a principle to resist all principles may be better than its opposite, but it belongs to the same style of thinking about moral and political life. Pursuit of the intimations in our tradition points beyond tradition to the things intimated, and exploration of the ambiguities and ambivalences in our practice leads in the direction of the principles that underlie our politics. It is the encounter with complexities such as these that, in reading Oakeshott, gives one pause and pleasure, sparks the imagination, and excites the desire to understand.

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