

# MICHAEL OAKESHOTT ASSOCIATION

The following review of *Rationalism in Politics* was published anonymously. Years later [Richard Crossman](#) declared that he was the author in his *The Crossman Diaries*, ed. Anthony Howard (London 1979), p86:

Sunday, March 21<sup>st</sup>

There have been two episodes in my own semi-private life as Minister which are well worth mentioning. The first was the publication of my book *Planning for Freedom* (London 1965) which took place quietly on Thursday, March 11th. I had assumed that the book would be extensively noticed. Actually, it has been a quite pleasant, harmless flop. Things started off with a jolly well-written review in the *New Statesman* by David Marquand, which was hostile but recognized the book's importance. The only other serious review was in *The Times Literary Supplement*. The full-page anonymous reviewer is obviously Michael Oakeshott, who was so upset by my anonymous review of his book in the *T.L.S.* Apart from the *New Statesman* and the *T.L.S.* nobody has taken the book seriously. It may well be true, as both the *T.L.S.* and the *New Statesman* suggest, that by collecting in one volume my more theoretical essays I have exposed the fact that I am not a serious thinker but a political journalist who takes himself a bit too seriously.

Oddly enough, this closing admission fatally undermines his heretofore self-aggrandisement. Though Crossman had been a brilliant student and had a formidable reputation, his writing career never fulfilled this early promise. The enmity between Oakeshott and Crossman seems to go back to 1958. WH Greenleaf in his *Oakeshott's Philosophical Politics* (London 1966, p55) is reasonably confident that Oakeshott's essay 'Political Education' had Crossman's *The Charm of Politics* (1958) in its sights. Had their enmity been based solely on matters of philosophical principle the polemical exchange would not have been surprising. But this enmity had a more personal aspect, the seeds of which were sown when on Laski's sudden death, Oakeshott took over his LSE chair. Apparently, Crossman had taken it for granted that he'd be 'offered' the chair as the 'natural' successor to Laski. The depth of Crossman's bitterness is evident: 'As he (MO) never tires of reminding his readers, he first made a name for himself while a young don at Cambridge by publishing *A Guide to the Classics*, or

*How to Pick the Derby Winner*. The next time he was heard of was when he succeeded to Laski's Chair in 1951.'

Oakeshott's reputation built upon *A Guide to the Classics?* No mention of *Experience and its Modes!* and all the essays that were to eventually comprise *Rationalism in politics* written while he was still at Cambridge (see the [Oakeshott-Popper](#) correspondence). And where does Oakeshott persistently promote himself as the author the *A Guide to the Classics?* Self-evidently Crossman had the disposition to make a 'good' journalist. For as Lord Northcliffe said, journalism is 'A profession whose business it is to explain to others what it personally does not understand'.

Oakeshott's first foray into 'replying to his critics', in this case Crossman, can be found at [TLS](#). Subsequently, the only other direct engagement with his critics are his 1965 'Reply to Professor Raphael' and the 1976 *Political Theory* response to critics of *On Human Conduct*.

LM.

## **'Political Realities'**

**from *TLS*, 28 September 1962, pp753-754**

Political Theory, Political Science, Political Philosophy or just plain Politics - the name makes little difference to the negative response which the academic study of his motives, principles and philosophy of life arouses in the working politician. Among Conservatives - who are frequently doctrinaire but always officially opposed to the peddlers of doctrine - the feeling is usually one of sophisticated disdain. It is the left-wing politicians whose fury is really aroused by the intellectual lurking in the cloister, commenting on politicians *in abstracto*, and on occasion sniping at them from behind his academic bars.

There was one period in the history of our democracy when academic politics became respected and respectable. In the heyday of Gladstonian liberalism T. H. Green dominated the Oxford Philosophy School. Under his Platonic aegis a race of Guardian was bred to rule the new Republic - a Civil Servant, recruited by competitive examination from the public schools, whose mind had not been contaminated by scientific knowledge, by acquaintance with any language save Greek and Latin or by any historical researches later than the Roman Silver Age. In the generation which saw the creation of the modern state and the second colonial empire, political philosophy became a pillar of the Establishment. Anyone who wants a sniff of the intellectual quality of those days but who is unable to digest the woolly abstractions of Green's *Prolegomena* will find its author incarnate to the life as Mr. Gray in *Robert Elsmere* by Mrs. Humphrey Ward.

But Green had no successor. Under Cook-Wilson and Joseph the Oxford School for Platonic statesmen fell into lesser hands; and in the first years of this century a new breed of political theorists emerged who had more in common with Bentham's radical investigations than with the high-minded metaphysics of Balliol.

This was the decade of *The New Machiavelli* and the appointment of the first Professor of Political Science at the London School of Economics. Graham Wallas was an Oxford man but a rebel against the classical tradition. After resigning a public school-mastership on religious grounds, he earned his living by university extension lecturing, contributed to the original Fabian essays, resigned from the Society in protest against its support of tariff reform, and became a Socialist member of the newly founded L.C.C. In *Human Nature in Politics* he drew on his experiences of London electioneering, and began that scientific study of the voter which in its modern statistical form has acquired the name of psephology.

Soon Balliol was contaminated. A. D. Lindsay and R. H. Tawney were the first to hammer out their political principles on the anvil of the Workers' Educational Association. And while they were transforming Oxford Idealism into a radical democratic critique of Edwardian oligarchy, Lowes Dickinson was refashioning the Cambridge classical tradition along more gracious but not less subversive lines. By the 1920s, when these radical pioneers were reinforced by Harold Laski and G. D. H. Cole, the traditional study of morals and politics was defending itself in each of the three great universities against a new doctrine which claimed that the task of political scientists was not merely to interpret the world but to change it.

Of course there were many - the great majority indeed in the faculties concerned - who resented the introduction of "propaganda" into a discipline which they felt should be kept detached and aloof from social movements and party politics. Long before the victory of the logical positivists, it was fashionable in Oxford Common Rooms and in faculty meetings to write off A. D. Lindsay as a bumbling administrator who had made no serious contribution to political theory, and to denigrate Cole as a brilliant lecturer and fluent journalist. In London too resentment was expressed that R. H. Tawney, the university's most notable historian, was also the Labour Party's most notable pamphleteer, and that the successor to Graham Wallas in the L. S. E. should be even more notorious meddler in practical politics, Harold Laski. Even after liberal economics had been so notably reinforced by Professor Robbins, the impression was still abroad that the London School of Economics had become a School of Socialism with its Professor of Political Science as its guiding spirit. As a result "Politics" became still more suspect.

Paradoxically enough this suspicion reached its zenith in the years immediately after 1945. To the irritation of Conservative politicians and the resentment of the academic establishment was now added the dislike and in some cases the active hatred of the Labour leadership. If Herman Goering reached for his revolver whenever he heard the word "culture", Ernest Bevin's hostility to intellectuals, particularly if they taught political science, was equally violent. Lord Attlee's feelings were better controlled, but he lost no opportunity of wounding Harold Laski and showed little gratitude to Lindsay, Tawney and Cole for their contribution to the theory and the practice of social democracy. Indeed it was under his Government that academic political theory once again became as respectable and neutral a discipline as academic economics had already become before the war.

Since then, one after another, the professorial strongholds of radicalism have been successfully stormed, and a new professionalism has developed. In a corner of the L. S. E. Professor Tittmuss surrounded by a small band of disciples still practices the creed according to Lindsay, Tawney and Laski, demonstrating that research which achieves the highest academic standards can be inspired by a hatred of injustice and hypocrisy, and combined with active work for the Labour Party. But this is an exception. For the most part professional political scientists are now in charge, with their sociological method of investigation, their statistical techniques and their computers. Of this new kind of non-partisan political scientist the most characteristic, if not the most numerous, are, of course, the pollsters. For here is a method of investigation

which can claim to be narrowly scientific and devoid of political bias but which can also bring to its neutral exponents television stardom, as well as a secure niche in the academic establishment.

In the campaign to purge the study of politics of any taint of moral purpose or practical utility no one has fought with such a display of detached cynicism and stylized urbanity as Michael Oakeshott. As he never tires of reminding his readers, he first made a name for himself while a young don at Cambridge by publishing *A Guide to the Classics, or How to Pick the Derby Winner*. The next time he was heard of was when he succeeded to Laski's Chair in 1951, and at once declared war on "Political Science" in the sacred name of Tradition. In his inaugural lecture, now reprinted along with a number of kindred essays, he gave the earnest students he inherited from Laski a foretaste of the way he would treat their household gods. Political ideals and principles, he warned them, are at best abstractions and at worst distortions; political theories are not "a preface to political activity" but "an abridgement of political habits". In politics he concluded, in a characteristic patch of fine writing,

Men sail a boundless and bottomless sea; there is neither harbour for shelter nor floor for anchorage, neither starting place nor appointed destination. The enterprise is to keep afloat on an even keel; the sea is both friend and enemy; and the seamanship consists in using the resources of a traditional manner of behaviour in order to make a friend of every hostile occasion.

With this word "traditional" we touch the core of that cult Anti-Politics of which Professor Oakeshott is the most elegant and esoteric exponent. The academic, he believes, instead of explaining politics in terms of principles or investigating the subject in terms of scientific law, should school his ear to the intricate nuances of a concrete coherent tradition. This kind of appreciation, he tells us, can only be achieved by the historian who studies the past with no scientific or moral purpose, and who "escapes the illusion that politics is ever anything more than the pursuit of intimations: a conversation, not an argument".

Since he spoke these words over a decade has passed, in the course of which Professor Oakeshott has both deepened his defences and widened his attack. In 1951 the false prophets against whom he inveighed were those zealots from Bentham to Laski who believed that political science could do some good. Since then the number of idols due for demolition has greatly increased. Indeed, if

we take these essays at their face value - and there is no reason why we should not, for Mr. Oakeshott is a stylist who weighs every word - we must conclude that in the author's view almost every one of his colleagues working in Political Science today is pursuing either a pseudo-science or an inferior vocational activity that should disqualify him as a university lecturer. Ten years ago it was only the ghost of Harold Laski that had to be chased down the corridors of the London School of Economics. Now the purge has been extended to include Professor Hayek (guilty of indulging in ideology) and Professor Karl Popper (singled out by Professor Oakeshott for what he clearly regards as the crowning insult of being classed in a footnote with Richard Crossman).\*

But how on earth, with such a varied selection of criminals in the box, can the prosecutor find a single crime for which they can *all* be arraigned? Professor Oakeshott's reply is that each in his own way has surrendered to rationalism. It is Rationalism which for the last three hundred years has been corrupting our traditional way of life, "stimulating a reckless appetite for innovation"; masking "our pieties fleeting; and our loyalties evanescent", and "turning us into creatures acquisitive to the point of greed". Nearly all these essays are variations on this single theme.

In the first, which gives the book its title, Professor Oakeshott makes his wittiest attempt to define the enemy. The rationalist, he tells us, is the kind of person who believes in the perfectibility of man and assumes that every political problem must be capable of solution by the application of technical know-how. In so doing he makes the same kind of vulgar mistake as someone who tries to whip up a soufflé out of a cookery book, or write Latin elegiacs out of a thesaurus. The dreadful fallacy that Marx finally fastened on the world was that man could be taught to manage human society wisely by providing him with a political crib.

Beyond question Marx and Engels are the authors of the most stupendous of our political rationalisms . . . and no fault can be found with the mechanical manner in which this greatest of all political cribs has been learned and used by those for whom it was written. No other technique has so imposed itself on the world as if it were concrete knowledge; none has created so vast and intellectual a proletariat with nothing but its technique to lose.

Professor Oakeshott hastens to add that the founding fathers of the United States were just as much infected with rationalism as the Marxists - and so were Bentham and all his liberal and socialist followers. They all shared the Marxist delusion that human

happiness can be increased and the human spirit liberated by reshaping society in accordance with political principles or, even more fatal, with moral ideals. This, indeed, is the fundamental fallacy of the left.

Conservatives, however, are not free from infection. If the heresy of the reformer is the belief in reason as a technique for perfecting the human race, the heresy of the Establishment is the illusion that a mind can best be trained by exercising it in a "pure" discipline unrelated to practical affairs. In an essay entitled "Rational Conduct" the Establishment's belief in pure reason and the trained mind is exposed as a brand of rationalism just as harmful if not quite so vulgar as the cribs provided by Bentham and Marx.

But with so many idols overthrown, what has Professor Oakeshott left himself to revere? The basis both of his positive philosophy and of his iconoclasm is to be found in an essay entitled "The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind". Here we learn that there are four kinds of images - poetic, scientific, practical and historical - which stand in no relationship with each other. Poetry, therefore, can have nothing to do either with truth or with morality - and if it has it is false poetry. History can have nothing to do with science or practical life, and if it has it is "non-history". Science which "deals exclusively with a timeless world of hypothetical situations" is completely separate both from practical thinking and from any study of the past. The true scientist studies pure science. The true historian studies an isolated segment of the past without any reference to the present - "eliciting a coherence in a group of contingencies of similar magnitude".

Once he has made this set of absolute separations between poetry, history, science and practical life, it is not very difficult for Professor Oakeshott to demonstrate that political science must be a pseudo-science. There can, of course, be a practical study of politics. At school, for example, a child may properly be taught civics.

Not perhaps a very inspiring study, and in its more desiccated passages (e.g., the duties of a town clerk, the House of Commons at work, and the pronouncements of a Kennedy, A Khrushchev or a Castro) unlike Greek irregular verbs in holding out no evident promise of better things to come. Nevertheless it is capable of defence as part of school education . . . because this sort of study is no more misleading than many other school studies, like economics and history, are bound to be.

It is also possible to teach "vocational politics" to those who are going to engage in it professionally, as well as to government or trade union officials, and to political commentators. Such persons, Professor Oakeshott, tells us, should be provided with "an unsophisticated literature" in which

the properties of political and administrative devices such as federalism, second chambers, committees of enquiry, public corporations, taxes on capital, sumptuary laws, concentrations of power, &c., are dispassionately examined . . . of course all this outdistances in intellectual content (and sometimes in unengaged general interest) the technical literature concerned, for example, with building houses or growing tomatoes; but the disproportion is not overwhelming, and in design and purport all these technical literatures are indistinguishable one from another.

In universities, however, this vulgar kind of technical politics must be forbidden; the attempt to apply social science to society dismissed as vain, and the effort to reflect philosophically on the nature of political behaviour outlawed as hybrid.

The appropriate engagement of an undergraduate student of politics at a university will be to be taught and to learn something about the modes of thought and manners of speaking of an historian and a philosopher, and to do this in connection with politics, while others (in other Schools) are doing it in other connections.

A chilly conclusion.

Rumination on these perverse, provoking essays stimulates two trains of thought. In the first place it is worth comparing Professor Oakeshott's defence of tradition against reason with that which is to be found in the first chapter of *The English Constitution*. Before making his distinction between the dignified and the efficient parts of the Constitution, Bagehot remarks:

The active voluntary part of a man is very small, and if it were not economized by a sleepy kind of habit, its results would be null . . . it is the dull, traditional habit of mankind that guides most men's actions: and it is the steady frame in which each new artist must set the picture which he paints.

The analysis is the same as Professor Oakeshott's, but Bagehot's conclusion is very different. He saw the importance of the cake of custom and the danger of rationalist innovations. But he was never tempted to make a cult of tradition, and to talk as though it could only be appreciated by a cultured elite, like a picture of a glass of wine. Though he was detached from practical politics, Bagehot loved their bustle and he also loved observing them faithfully and describing them as they were.

And it is here, perhaps, our newest prophet of tradition fails. Professor Oakeshott is so very blatantly bored with politics. He cannot help looking down on politicians and pushing off on to people inferior to himself the job of studying them. His Anti-Politics is really the posture of an aesthete whose true delight is in love and poetry, and who is compelled to earn his living by writing about banausic trades.

We laugh at the snobbish attitude that Plato and Aristotle displayed at the crafts of the mechanic and their well-bred illusion that there was a kind of philosophic contemplation which only a gentleman could enjoy. They were writing in a slave civilization, whereas Professor Oakeshott is not. Yet his attitude is very close to theirs. Describing his old enemy, the rationalist, he can remark

like a foreigner or man out of his social class, he is bewildered by a tradition and a habit of behaviour, of which he knows only the surface; a butler or an observant housemaid has the advantage of him.

And as if to make sure that we do not miss the implicit snobbery, he adds, a couple of pages later, a footnote based on his wartime experience as one of "Monty's" Phantoms:

The Army in wartime was a particularly good opportunity of observing the difference between a trained and an educated man; the intelligent civilian . . . always remained at a disadvantage beside the regular officer, the man educated in the feelings and the emotions as well as the practice of his profession.

With this Platonic sense of divine right Professor Oakeshott combines nostalgic self-pity that reminds one of Rousseau in one of his most confessional moods.

The world today has perhaps less place for those who love the past than ever before . . . it wishes only to learn from the past and it constructs a "living past" which repeats with spurious authority the utterances put into its mouth. But for the "historian" this is a piece of obscene necromancy: the past he adores is dead. The world . . . deals with the past as with a man, expecting it to talk sense . . . But for the "historian", for whom the past is dead and irreproachable, the past is feminine. He loves it as a mistress.

Unless Professor Oakeshott really prefers necrophily to necromancy, this passage suggests that there are moments when Anti-Politics ceases to be a philosophy and becomes a verbal posture, so crammed with dead metaphors that it is completely devoid of intellectual content.

Nevertheless, despite its mannered eccentricity, *Rationalism in Politics* should not be dismissed as literary "sport" without any significance. Professor Oakeshott has exposed one or two fallacies, and pricked some reputations that deserved deflation. But far too often he is bombarding with serious arguments rationalist Aunt Sallies so antique that they are hardly worth a single shy. If he would only shake off his pose of bored languor he could undertake in our generation the kind of sceptical critique - amused, amusing and yet profound - to which Bagehot subjected the politics and the political theories of the 1860s.

For we too live in an epoch when the whole political establishment - those who write about politics as well as those who practice them - form a tight oligarchy, determined to prevent anyone outside tearing apart the thick curtains of constitutional humbug and seeing where power really lies and how it is exercised. How exciting it would be if Professor Oakeshott would forget his poetic intimations, take a walk from Houghton Street down Whitehall to Westminster, and put his sceptical wit to work on the exposure of the difference between political myth and political reality.

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\* The reference is to the essay 'The study of "politics" in a university' (1961). The body of the relevant text is: 'Together with this went the study of some notable books (like Plato's *Republic*, Hobbes's *Leviathan*, Rousseau's *du Contrat Social*, Mill's essay on *Liberty* and Bosanquet's *Philosophical Theory of the State*) and some less notable tracts, believed to be in some sense 'about politics' and therefore assumed to have a political 'ideal', or

programme, or policy, or device to recommend. And the manner in which they were studied was designed to elicit and criticize this programme: they were recognized , in short, as books of 'political theory'.<sup>4</sup>

Footnote 4: 'And we had commentaries, like Hobhouse's *Metaphysical Theory of the State* (and later Crossman on *Plato Today* and Popper on *The Open Society and its Enemies*), to encourage us in this recognition.'