

Terry Eagleton replies to Bernard Bergonzi

'Tell me your definition of politics and I will tell you your politics.' The real breakdown in communication between radical and conservative is about the nature of politics itself, and I find this breakdown acute in reading Bernard Bergonzi's article.¹

A radical politics summons and activates fundamental belief about the nature of human relationship and tries to sustain this commitment through the detail of actual debate; if it is truly radical, its detailed involvement is controlled by this commitment to an alternative version of man in society. A conservative politics is not convinced that politics is basically about belief; it is itself suspicious of political activity, as inevitably corrupt and crude, intellectually suspect, and rationalises this suspicion by making politics a 'science' or an 'art', a matter of efficiency or running the machine, a dirty but necessary business, or a career like any other. Because it is not gripped by the conviction that politics activates belief, it is liable to be quickly disorientated when it meets other, opposing beliefs; it is driven back on its own bases, hesitant and self-doubting. A conservative politics shows, for reasons that can be argued and understood, the paradox of a deep failure of belief in itself, as anything more than a technique.

Mr Bergonzi seems to me to illustrate most of these points. For him, politics leaves out a good deal of human activity, as his second paragraph makes clear. This, instantly, is the conservative definition: politics as the actual processes of local and national government. The radical's whole effort has been precisely to extend that particular consciousness, to affirm that a radical politics sees art and sexuality, culture and education, language and work, as integral parts of its vision. Again, for Mr Bergonzi, politics is almost inevitably crude and corrupt: he equates (moral) compromise and the attainment of a consensus', as he later links 'lying' and 'manoeuvring'. Radical politics exists to deny that these equations are necessary, while understanding how they can seem inevitable in a particular society, a society where the meaning of politics has been deliberately narrowed, to suit specific interests. To take this as a universal description of what politics is about is to make the mistake of thinking that elections must inevitably involve 'half-truths and monstrous suppressions'. The conservative takes this as unavoidable,

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part of 'human nature', and begins to shape his politics from there; the radical sees that this particular kind of electioneering, working as it does on formulas of manipulation and 'masses', is part of the reality of the society he opposes, and works for a different politics and a different society.

Finally, the deep hesitation and self-doubt of a conservative politics seems to me there in Mr Bergonzi's puzzling movement between declared political involvement and sudden, serious reservation – reservations which question the whole validity of politics as a human force, as capable of real achievement. The hesitation is there especially in his remarks about South Africa, which seem to me to highlight the conservative and liberal confusion: how can I sustain a belief if this is denied by others? The drive to avoid dogmatism and totalitarianism can become destructive of commitment itself.

I agree that we need a 'theology of politics'; I agree also with Nkrumah's injunction to 'Seek first the political kingdom'. It seems to me that, given the radical definition of politics, this is precisely what Christianity is about.

H. A. Guy

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