

The Pure Theory of Politics



Bertrand de Jouvenel

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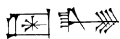
Pure Theory

OF

Politics

BERTRAND DE JOUVENEL

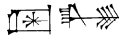
Foreword by Daniel J. Mahoney



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*. . et oculi illius in ea sunt a principio
anni usque ad finem ejus*

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Foreword to the Liberty Fund Edition

The great, recurrent theme of Bertrand de Jouvenel's work is the capacity of "men to move men." In many cases this capacity is for the good through the cultivation and maintenance of a community of free people. All too frequently, however, men move men to tragic consequences—as the cataclysmic politics of the twentieth century give ample and disturbing testimony. Throughout his writings, Jouvenel developed this theme of the intrinsically "dynamic" character of political life, a dynamism accelerated by the ideological and mass-driven character of modern politics. The French political scientist Pierre Hassner has rightly observed that this subject is explored *historically* in Jouvenel's best-known work, *On Power* (1945), with its searching exploration of the development of unprecedented state power in modern times. The subject is then explored *normatively* or philosophically in *Sovereignty* (1955), with its articulation of the notion of the common good appropriate for an open, dynamic society. Finally, the subject is explored *analytically* in Jouvenel's most difficult and austere work of political philosophy, *The Pure Theory of Politics* (1963).

The reader might at first be confused by Jouvenel's claim that *The Pure Theory of Politics* aims at a merely "representa-

tive” and “descriptive” account of the elementary building blocks of human and political action. After all, Jouvenel had ended his previous work of political philosophy, *Sovereignty*, with the claim that “Political Science is a moral science” or more precisely that “Political Science is a natural science dealing with moral agents.” That great work was subtitled “an inquiry into the Political Good.” A mere eight years later, in a book that is self-consciously a sequel to *Sovereignty*, Jouvenel appears to echo the language and argument of behavioral or value-free social science. Strikingly, he claims in *The Pure Theory of Politics* that his is a “strictly non-normative” approach that rigorously attempts to separate description from prescription.

The first part of this book, “Approach: Politics as History,” develops Jouvenel’s argument for a genuinely descriptive political science. In the first chapter, “Configuration and Dynamics,” the author argues that the study of the statics or relational configurations of politics must be supplemented by attentive consideration to its movement or dynamics. A consideration of the ways in which human beings act upon each other and thus shape the future is absolutely necessary for understanding political life from the point of view of the engaged political actor. This is the case because “the future is present to the mind of acting man.”

Pure Theory not only points backward to *Sovereignty*’s emphasis on the dynamic character of modern society, it points forward to Jouvenel’s subsequent work as a “futurist” or forecaster of the development of modern societies. This scientific concern with social “prevision” is most fully articulated in *The Art of Conjecture*, published in the United States in 1967. In fact, Jouvenel’s attempt to map the evolution of modern societies was always civic as well as scientific, and reflected his

deeply held conviction that social science should clarify and inform the choices facing citizens and statesmen.

Already in the first chapters of *Sovereignty*, Jouvenel had defined as “pure politics” those basic human activities which establish coherent “aggregates” or social and political wholes. In *Pure Theory* he widens that definition from a somewhat narrower emphasis on the founders and preservers of aggregates to include the broader processes by which individuals “instigate” and “respond” to human action. He is always careful to emphasize the volitional character of human responses to political initiatives and hence the limits of efforts to manipulate masses of men. He is also careful to avoid “hero worship” or to admire action (or “instigation”) for its own sake.

Jouvenel does not deny that political philosophy ought to play a salutary role in moderating and civilizing the actions of men upon men. Far from it. In his chapter “On the Nature of Political Science” he movingly compares traditional political science to the Catholic bishop of the “dark ages” who used his considerable moral authority to tame and even convert barbarians. But Jouvenel believes that the salutary *ought* proposed by traditional political philosophy needs to be supplemented by a detailed analysis of the *is*, namely, the elementary or raw forces that are the foundation of all political order. Such attentiveness to the behavior of political life is, of course, necessary in order to clarify the subject matter of politics as a science. But it is also necessary if political science is to be of practical use to the statesman whose vocation it is to conserve the political community while accommodating and governing political change. In Jouvenel’s view, “Wisdom” or political philosophy needs to pay greater respect to the claims and activities of practical men. The themes of political science must move beyond an inordinate consideration of the “best regime” or even of

political institutions and forms to a full consideration of all the “material” of practical life. Only by entering fully into the rough-and-tumble of political life, by learning what acting men already know in their bones, can political theorists avoid abstractions and engage politics from the point of view of political actors themselves.

But Jouvenel’s approach also entails an implicit critique of the behaviorist political science that was regnant when he wrote. The behaviorists dogmatically denied that reason could state anything authoritative about the moral dimensions of political life. Behavioral political scientists limited their horizon to the study of “weak” behaviors such as voting patterns or the judicial process, in other words, to those behaviors readily available for observation in established democratic regimes such as the United States or Great Britain. Consequently, during an age that produced Hitler and Stalin, the behaviorists ignored the capacity of statesmen and tyrants to stimulate human passions as well as actions on a grand, even unprecedented, scale. In contrast, the observation of a “political milieu . . . rife with political occurrences” afforded Jouvenel his material. To understand the drama of twentieth-century politics, Jouvenel turned to the works of Thucydides and Shakespeare, two classic authors considered hopelessly antiquated by the adherents of a “scientific” approach to politics.

As a result of this approach, Jouvenel articulated one of the few intellectually and morally serious “behavioral” interpretations of politics in our time. Whether analyzing the social framework of human freedom, the ways in which a few men such as Cassius inspire others to great or notorious deeds (as was the assassination of Caesar), or contemplating the disruptive effects of determined minorities on democratic societies, Jouvenel illustrates the elementary foundation of political action in the capacity of some human beings to move other hu-

man beings. He thereby provides the basis for a realistic political science sensitive to the “Machiavellian” machinations of those who seek to subvert civilized political communities.

Jouvenel himself suggests that his description of “pure politics” is at the service of inoculating defenders of liberal civilization against unguarded optimism or liberal naiveté. The great political dislocations, historical tragedies, and human passions described so luminously in the narrative of Thucydides or the political dramas of Shakespeare are to Jouvenel ever-present human possibilities. The experiences of the French Revolution and of totalitarianism in the twentieth century, in particular, reveal the vulnerability of a politics of civility to disruption by illiberal, tyrannical forces. This is the theme of Jouvenel’s elegant and searching conclusion to the final section of *Pure Theory*, “The Manners of Politics.”

Bertrand de Jouvenel was, in the self-description of Alexis de Tocqueville, “a strange kind of liberal” who — like his declared inspiration, Tocqueville — eschewed historical optimism because he wisely feared the ever-looming prospect of political tragedy. He was, therefore, a conservative-minded liberal who knew that the regime of liberty is never achieved once and for all. He deeply admired Anglo-American institutions of political liberty, but he also marveled at the bloody and tyrannical episodes that dominated English politics in the centuries before the Glorious Revolution of 1688. He believed that the moral agency of human beings is the most fundamental fact of social life even as he feared the propensity of normative political science to resort to a priori notions of the political good in abstraction from the messy contingencies of real political life. In our age of unprecedented political pathologies, marked by totalitarian ideologies, an excessive readiness to violence, and a general decline in personal restraint and political consensus, Jouvenel encouraged partisans of liberal democracy to

come to terms with the full range of political experience. As he stated in his 1980 essay "Pure Politics Revisited," "I believe that one must return to elementary political phenomena, in their raw state, in order to learn how to polish them."¹ This simple observation explains how Jouvenel combined an understanding of politics as a moral science with an effort to confront its elementary phenomena without any a priori moral expectations or evaluations.

The Pure Theory of Politics is a difficult and demanding but wonderfully rewarding book. Jouvenel aims to make his readers, in David DesRosiers's apt formulation, "principled but chastened guardians of the body politic." In the process, he gives his readers a feast for the mind. With the publication of Liberty Fund's edition of this book, Jouvenel's trilogy of political philosophy, beginning with *On Power*, followed by *Sovereignty*, and closing with *The Pure Theory of Politics*, is again available for full consideration by the English-speaking reader. There is no contemporary introduction to politics that is as ample and instructive, or as elegant and enticing, as the political reflection that *The Pure Theory of Politics* completes.

DANIEL J. MAHONEY
Worcester, Massachusetts
1999

1. See Bertrand de Jouvenel, "Pure Politics Revisited," *Government and Opposition*, Summer/Autumn 1980 (Vol. 15, #3/4), p. 434.

Preface

Every political situation is complex and original. The hasty mind, however, seizes upon some single feature because of which it assigns the given situation to a certain class of situations, previously formed, and in regard to which the mind has passed judgement once for all. Thus, for instance: “The situation envisaged involves centralization; I am in general for (against) centralization: therefore my stand is as follows. . . .”

It seems inevitable that such work-saving procedure should be commonly resorted to: which implies a permanent demand for ideologies—taxonomic devices constituting wide classes and inspiring general judgements, allowing us in short to take a stand on problems we have not analysed.

The procedure outlined above gives no inkling as to the mode of appearance and the chances of development of a situation. Convenient as we may find it when we only want to assess, it is radically unsuitable if we wish to explain or foresee. We then need to investigate processes, and this cannot be a joint venture unless we use a common set of elementary concepts.

I gratefully remember the care taken by the teachers of my childhood to familiarize me with the simplest possible relations in each field, such as the attribute of the subject, the dependent variable, and so forth. The geometry master took me

forward from the humble triangle; the chemistry master made sure that I grasped the combination H_2O before moving by degrees to the intricacies of the protein molecule; the law master began with *Spondesne?* . . .

The acquisition of such elementary notions was then, and surely is now, regarded as the indispensable first stage in any discipline.

We speak naturally of more or less “advanced” study, implying that the most modest learner has travelled some way along the trunk road on which others have gone much further, and from which pioneering research branches out in various directions. This in turn implies that anyone who has been trained in a science holds the keys to any message conveyed by its leaders or researchers: he may find it very difficult to understand the message but there is no risk of his mistaking it, the notions are unambiguous—they have been chosen for that virtue.

Political science offers a contrast. The field has been settled by immigrants from philosophy, theology, law, and later sociology and economics, each group bringing and using its own box of tools. Moreover, political words are widely circulating currency, and so tend to lose neatness and acquire emotional associations: politicians are not interested in using them properly but in using them for effect.

Whatever the reasons, political science stands alone in its lack of agreed “elements.” There are no basic concepts, simple enough to allow of only one meaning, therefore conveying exactly the same signification to all and confidently handled by everyone; there are no simple relations, acknowledged by all to form the smallest components of complex systems, and commonly used in the building of models devised to simulate the intricacies of real situations.

Does such a deficiency pertain to the nature of this discipline? I do not believe it. Should it be remedied? I thought

so and therefore embarked upon the undertaking here offered to the reader. I shall be rewarded enough if it is adjudged inadequate but necessary, if it evokes not approbation but emulation.

While the book must speak for itself, there are a few points which require an early mention.

The adjective “pure” in the title is used by analogy with the contrast between “pure” and “organic” in chemistry. Just as “organic” bodies are far more complex than those to which the student is first introduced in the beginner’s course of pure chemistry, so are the situations and relations of actual Politics far more complex than those examined here. Therefore the reader should not complain that the whole of reality is not encompassed.

Because my purpose is to come down to the greatest possible degree of simplicity, political phenomena appear essentially as relations between individuals. This does not imply an “atomistic” view of society, it simply follows from the tautology that the simpler elements are the “atoms.” More importantly my emphasis upon the relation “man moves man”¹ throws me open to the misconception that I deem it a great and admirable thing to move others and am prone to worshipping “political heroes.”² As it happens my disposition is quite radically the opposite: naturally distrustful of power, I distrust it at its very source. But this work has a descriptive, not a normative, purpose.

This brings me to elucidate the meaning of the word “theory” in my title. It is used to denote what goes under that name in disciplines other than political science. Observations by themselves are of course meaningless: to make sense out of

1. I have recently found that my friend Edward Shils emphasized it as early as 1939.

2. This misconception has already appeared in one important critique of my *Sovereignty*.

them, one must formulate a hypothesis which can account for them, that is, one must choose concepts between which one assumes some relations of dependence, thus elaborating a “model” which simulates reality. This activity of the mind is habitually called “theorizing” in sciences other than the political. Models thus obtained perform a representative function: they have no normative value.

What is called “political theory,” on the other hand, offers “models” in the quite different sense of “ideals.” Rousseau’s model of a democratic assembly is one wherein all those who will be subject to a decision participate in taking it; each one of them in so doing is moved only by concern for the good of the whole, and trusts solely to his own judgement, uninfluenced by the opinions of others. This obviously is not meant as a description.

There exists of course a logical relation between representative and normative models, if one holds the view that any observed shape is a mere accidental deformation of one true shape capable of being known immediately by the mind, and though not open to our observation, the only “natural” one. From this view it must follow that observable patterns in their unending variety are not interesting, while the only one worthy of our attention is that of which all others are corrupt copies. But this view implies special philosophical tenets.

The present attempt, solely based upon observation, aims at representing observable phenomena. In other words it is strictly non-normative. This certainly does not mean that I reject preceptive political science, but only that describing and prescribing are distinct tasks of which I have here chosen the former.

Quoting is very pleasurable; moreover it gives a scholarly look: in this case it would have been deceitful, a borrowing of re-

spectable authorities to cloak the foolhardiness of my venture. It seems more honest to admit that observation has afforded me my material. Born in a political *milieu*, having lived through an age rife with political occurrences, I saw my material forced upon me. For its marshalling, I found my best guides in the geniuses who have immortally portrayed the drama of Politics: Thucydides and Shakespeare. While instances from contemporary events crowded my mind, I have avoided referring to them whenever possible because there is lack of agreement on their interpretation, while every reader has in his mind the great scenes from the classics. The very fact that these could — with the advantage of inimitable expression — serve as substitutes for contemporary instances, testifies that political activity remains fundamentally the same.

Whoever talks of Politics calls to the minds of different listeners different experiences and different doctrines, and therefore the same assemblage of words assumes a variety of subjective meanings. The nature of my purpose obliged me to guard as best I could against this danger. “Elements” are useless if they do not preclude ambiguity. It seemed to me that focusing upon “political activity” offered the best chance of a self-contained exposition, capable of being developed, without too much interference from pre-existing states of mind.

This exposition begins in part III and is pursued systematically to the end. If I have been at all successful in my attempt, it should present the same significance to the erudite as to the beginner.

Why does the exposition begin only in part III? As I am dealing with the action of Man upon Man, it seemed necessary to stress that this occurs in a social setting, whose importance and influence is sketched out in part II.

Part I is of an altogether different character. It does not really

pertain to the body of the work but constitutes an extended and somewhat difficult introduction. While in the body of the treatise I have, or hope I have, traced a path, step by step, part I discusses my reasons for tracing this path. Readers who are impatient, or who are not political scientists, are advised to bypass part I: returning to it after going through the work may then explain the author's intention or help to track down the reasons for the reader's dislike of the treatment.

Many a time, during six years of effort, I have grown doubtful about this work. Doubts have been especially fostered by those of my friends who have disapproved of my purpose of describing rather than prescribing. The high value I set upon their opinion has weighed upon my mind. On the other hand, since my first version was completed at the end of 1957, a number of events have occurred, the pattern of which was so close to the patterns here sketched that one might think I wrote after the event instead of before: and this has confirmed me in my purpose.

I have been greatly helped in this endeavour by the opportunities which were generously afforded to me to try out these elements. At the kind suggestion of Professors Brogan and Postan, the Master of Peterhouse, Professor Butterfield, invited me to give three lectures on the subject in Cambridge. The discussions which followed helped me greatly to re-shape these elements. Then came from the Dean of the Yale Law School, Professor Eugene Rostow, an invitation to give the Storrs Lectures at Yale. This honour was once again the occasion of very profitable critiques. In essence this treatise is an expanded version of the Storrs Lectures. The expansion, however, has been considerable.³ A chance to find out whether I

3. The Storrs Lectures corresponded to part II, part III and part of part IV.