

Political Reality and Human Reality

John Cogley

Even today, politics is based on power relationships and the kind of calculations that have been canonized since the rise of the nation-state. Get a group of Washington practitioners together and you will still hear echoes of the old saw that "politics is the art of the possible."

But this kind of thinking, in our new situation, has already brought mankind to the brink of disaster and promises to destroy political life altogether. It is so clearly anachronistic, at least to the young, that the newest postwar generation to come to maturity simply refuses to play the game. To their ears, even the soaring political rhetoric of John F. Kennedy sounds hollow and unconvincing. I recently heard a brilliant college student charge that the President's famous "Ask not what your country can do for you . . ." smacked of fascism. Taken literally that, of course, was nonsense; yet I think I know what the young man was trying to get at.

He simply rejected the traditional understanding of patriotism, with its nationalistic overtones, and the idea that in some larger sense the destiny of the political community transcends one's personal fate. That did not mean, he insisted, that he was anti-political. What it did mean, I discovered, was that his idea of politics was based on a new perception, not of political reality but of human reality — and when men start thinking about themselves in a new way, their political understanding changes.

My friend, I finally came to realize, saw the world as a unit, in a way that men of my generation were not brought up to do. For him, there are no longer any strangers anywhere. Communications, he believes, are possible wherever men meet, across lingual, ideological, religious, and cultural borders.

Such terms as Communist and capitalist, European and African, Protestant and Catholic, Arab and Jew still have meaning for him, to be sure. But his politi-

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cal judgments are based on a loyalty to mankind as a whole. The starting points for his political thinking are in the first instance not the ideas but the individuals who fall under the grand headings in the philosophical, theological, and ideological lexicons. Beginning here, rather than from a preoccupation with abstractions and systems, he now finds himself alienated from the world of the State Department, the Kremlin, even the city hall. The clear image of mankind's oneness above everything else shapes his response to political events. He is not likely to be enlisted willingly in any great crusade or to feel chills running up and down his spine at the sight of the Stars and Stripes flying bravely in the breeze.

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My young friend wants to be a leader — but not so much an American leader as a leader of mankind itself. Any less noble or more provincial notion of the tasks of political leadership strikes him as self-defeating.

The reason is because latterday technology has done what all the preachments of the prophets, the prayers of the saints, the vision of the poets, the principles of the philosophers, and the wisdom of the savants have not succeeded in doing through the ages: it has made existentially, palpably clear that the fate of all men is linked together.

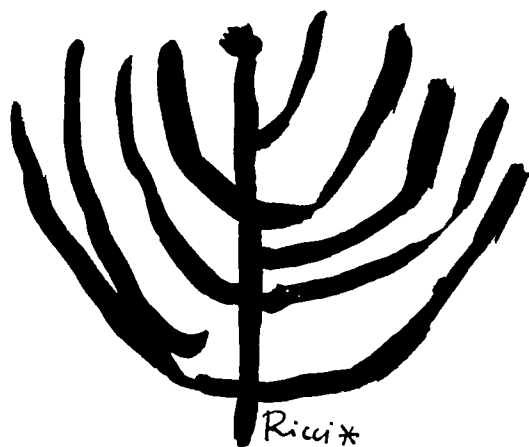
Racism, nationalism, religious exclusivism — the division of the world into villains and heroes, superior and inferior kinds of men, "our own kind" and "foreigners" — all the spurious divisions of the past are, in his mind, simply beside the point in the nuclear age. Political leaders who one way or another sustain these ancient myths — and he is persuaded that practically all do — he regards as the leading enemies of mankind.

The young in all corners of the globe are thinking this way. More and more of them, figuratively speaking, are burning their old racial, confessional, ideological, and nationalistic draft cards and have decided to join the human race. To be sure, race consciousness has grown mightily among American Negro youth. But black power is, I believe, a transitional stage, necessary if America's ghetto inhabitants are to establish their credentials first as black men but ultimately as men, period. The underlying notion of human community, paradoxically enough, is the foundation on which black-power exclusivism is built.

Another sign of the times is equally basic, equally important. I have in mind the growing awareness of individuals everywhere of what it means to be human, simply human. More and more, young people are taking their personal destinies into their own hands

—breaking with convention, when convention strikes them as meaningless; questioning moral standards, when they can find no reasonable basis for upholding them; deciding for themselves what is worthy of their spiritual loyalty; resisting Establishments — political, social, corporate, ecclesiastic, military, educational — when an Establishment strikes them as self-perpetuating or self-seeking; questioning long taken-for-granted values and striking out on their own in the pursuit of meaningfulness.

In this new way of reckoning, the end of life is looked upon as building a Self worthy of respect. This trend, I believe, is basically sound, though it has led to some absurd posturing, to self-deception, mindless rebellion, and a library of thoughtless slogans passing for thought. Such things exist. It would be foolish to deny them. Nevertheless, shouldn't we remember that every lasting movement has begun with an excess of zeal — the emancipation of women, Marxism, even Christianity, for example. There is no reason really why we should expect the movement for self-realization to be entirely free of the grotesque. Yet, to acknowledge that much about the human condition is not to question the significance of the movement I speak of. I think the movement is here to stay and more and more will determine the nature of genuine leadership in the years ahead. Within the next decade it may become a decisive factor. No politician, cultural leader, or churchman will then be able to ignore it.



There are signs everywhere that the traditional canons of political leadership have already been outmoded. The man who would lead others is finding out that, at least where the younger generation is concerned, he can get nowhere until he realizes what the growth in human awareness means. His task, he already knows — though he does not know quite what to do about it — is not to lay down the law; it is to

show others how their desire to be themselves can be creatively implemented for the good of all, rather than employed in a destructive way against society itself.

In twenty years that task will be almost a definition of a political leader — one who is able to show people how to work *with* others and *for* others without sacrificing their own individuality, betraying their private values, or silencing their consciences, their sense of wrong and right.

The revolutionary personalist tendency in the world will inevitably be expanded, now that it is underway. Basic notions of the political order are being challenged. With the coming of the affluent society, the fundamental purpose of political action is being seen in a new light. Where it was long regarded as fundamentally a way of insuring economic well-being or national "security," politics is beginning to be thought of as the way to insure the Good Life for all.

In the name of politics, ancient questions about universal happiness, morality, and the responsibility one has for others are being asked anew. The unspoken idea that the only thing to do when one has lost sight of one's goals is to double one's efforts is, for example, being challenged today on every university campus in the nation. By the 1980's it may be challenged in the halls of Congress, the executive suites of Madison Avenue, and the board rooms of Wall Street.

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Given the fact that the participational movement is here to stay, as I believe it is, and that it represents the next great development in political behavior (which I also think is true), the need for creative political leadership has never been more critical than it will be in the years immediately ahead.

New methods of decision-making will have to be devised, new safeguards for the protection of both the individual person and the body politic will have to be established, new concepts of political leadership will have to be invented.

So far the response of political leaders to this development has been largely a matter of sheer bafflement and blind reaction. The reason, I believe, is because there has been so little understanding of what is happening, not primarily in the political arena but in the internal life of man itself: the astounding growth in self-awareness I am talking about is the heart of the matter — the new element that has changed the entire political and social algebraic. Until political leadership catches up with these inward changes, disorder, confusion, and a vast disillusionment are only to be expected.