

**THE LIBERAL STATE.
A SPECULATION**

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BY

THOMAS WHITTAKER

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PREFACE

IN calling this essay a speculation, I do not mean that it is an attempt at prophecy. I have, indeed, found prophecy interesting, and I do not think it need always be a form of error ; but it is rather for poets and novelists (who, of course, come under the poetic type) than for philosophers and critics. What I have attempted is a sketch of an ideal going in some respects beyond the present order ; but, nevertheless, having its roots in the European past. I have aimed neither at the reality nor at the appearance of starting without assumptions, and doing everything from the beginning. Had such been my aim, I might (if endowed with sufficient concrete imagination) have brought out a *NOVA UTOPIA*, by *HYTHLODÆUS UCHRONIENSIS*.

The title does not refer to party distinctions. What I mean by the "Liberal State" is a State that accepts democracy (not necessarily untempered) and intellectual freedom, not as mere temporary phases of a transition, but as permanent elements in an ideal polity. I suppose both the historic English parties would admit this in principle, though with some shades of difference. The real opposition to the Liberal State is to be found in a hierarchical or bureaucratic State, in which a

caste or an order of experts or the representatives of a doctrine govern without systematic popular control. Speculations regarding ideal States of this type also are not purely Utopian, but have roots of their own in the past.

So far as they look to a system of this kind as ideal, the polities alike of Plato and Comte belong to the anti-liberal opposition. Yet both Comte and Plato were eminently progressive minds ; and believers in the liberal system may perhaps learn more from them—not dialectically only, but in the way of actual suggestion—than from contemplating the empirical development of the type of polity which they themselves prefer. The normal order as evolved in Europe, they may hold, is government by an assembly ; in the ancient city-State by an assembly of all the citizens, in the modern national State by a representative body. Yet this is apt to run to an anarchy of interests, and to fail of achieving a synthesis. Great constructive minds feel this want. Hence in part comes the influence exercised on them by a fully elaborated social order, without the crudities of new beginnings, such as Greek or modern democracy. Archæological research has shown how long such an order had existed before the historic civilisation of Greece emerged. The Egyptian civilisation had been fully formed during a period far beyond anything that the Greeks, who were really an old race, but had lost the record of their own past, could imagine of history. It was by this, as contemporaries already perceived, that the hierarchical structure of Plato's ideal polity was

inspired. Similarly, Comte was inspired by the Catholic order of mediæval Europe. And this order was not only in essence, but in actual derivation, the authoritative system revived, after the Greek and Roman experiments in the direction of freedom appeared alike to have failed, and a religion from Western Asia had been adopted as its ally by the new imperial autocracy. The conservatism of Egypt and Babylon and Persia had come to life again in the outward form of the new order. Though the inner workings of the spirit were manifold and could be controlled only for a season, yet through this millennium Asia had its revenge for Salamis.

It was not, of course, the actual religious and social systems of Egyptian or Chaldæan or mediæval Christian priests that thinkers like Plato or Comte desired to impose on what they regarded as the contemporary dissolution, Athenian or European. Human life, in their view, ought to be guided by rational insight arrived at after the most penetrating inquiry, not by an immemorial system of custom and tradition, however much in some moods they might admire this. Yet their object at last came to be the imposition of a new system, modifiable in detail when there was sufficient intelligence among the rulers, but in the main to be accepted henceforth as laid down.

To this conception of a definitely fixed order there is, after all, not much fear that any line of philosophic thinkers will succumb. The school of Plato in antiquity was remarkable above the rest for its variations; and among the thinkers

most influenced by Comte have been some of the chief representatives of English liberalism. As Mill observed in his excellent account of the *Positive Polity*, the difficulty is to do justice to what is really valuable in Comte's later work, undeterred by the absurdities of his detailed regulations. Even Plato's sense of humour has not altogether saved him from liability to similar comment; so that we must beware, above all, of underrating the amount of direct insight into the true order contained in both systems. Plato started ideas for social reform of which the suggestiveness is not yet exhausted, if, indeed, it has ever been quite realised. And Comte, even from his inferior speculative point of view, was able to furnish on one side the rational formula of a new European polity. The Western Europe of the future, according to him, is to be a community of republican States under the spiritual direction of philosophy. With the qualification that philosophers ought not to aim at organising themselves in a universal Church, and that the visible power in the State must be that of popularly-elected representatives and not of a patriciate—least of all an "industrial patriciate"—liberal thinkers may accept this in principle. That philosophers as a class should not aim at the government Comte also admitted; but then, as he was careful to point out, even the mediæval Church did not assume the direct government of temporal affairs. We must here return from his chosen model to the outline of a rational order adumbrated in classical antiquity. The social power of philosophy

must in the end proceed from its due recognition as an element in culture, and from the permeation of opinion by the ideas elaborated in the schools when these have been sifted by common sense. Philosophers individually may aim at a higher degree of satisfaction than is given by the effective popular philosophy, ethical and other, which we may hope will again emerge ; but the schools must not attempt to get their last refinements adopted officially by the State. These are, as it were, the growing part of philosophy, which cannot yet bear fruit. To attempt to force them means in the beginning the suppression of liberty, and in the end the sterilisation of knowledge itself.

In one respect only is the task of modern philosophy more serious and difficult than that of classical ancient philosophy. It is confronted with a popular religion of hierarchical type and inheriting theocratic pretensions. Shall it try to modify this in substance while retaining its form ? Or shall it definitely set itself to replace the religion of the past ? Or shall it stand wholly apart ? On the general problem here stated, something is said in the latter part of the book.