



**Yes, you are right—I am a moralist in disguise; it gets me into heaps of trouble when I go thrashing around in political questions.**  
—Mark Twain

---

---

**THE COMMON SENSE OF POLITICS**

By Mortimer Adler

**Introduction:**

[In 2 Parts]

(1)

**I**N every country of the Western world, three flags are flying—the national emblem of the establishment and two revolutionary flags, one the red flag of communism, the other the black flag of anarchy. If the repressive forces of the police state were not operative in countries that have adopted the red flag for the emblem of their establishments, counter-revolutionary flags might be flying there too.

The present age is revolutionary the world over. But this does not distinguish it from earlier centuries, certainly not the nineteenth, or even the eighteenth. Because of almost instant global communication, we may be more conscious than earlier centuries that revolution is in the air everywhere, but in one form or another revolution has always been pervasive, just as establishments of one kind or another have always prevailed—from the very beginning of organized society. In fact, it might almost be said that establishment and revolution have been inseparable and reciprocating features of organized social life; government and opposition thereto, or institutions and the change thereof, are everywhere found together in the pages of history.

That this has been the case does not by itself warrant the conclusion that it must always be the case. The facts of history, even when they are without exceptions, do not demonstrate universal laws and should not mislead us into thinking that the past shows us what the future must necessarily be like. One of the questions with which we shall be concerned, especially in the concluding chapters of this book, is the question about the future of revolution; or to put it another way, whether revolution must always be, as it has so far been, an inseparable feature of man's political life on earth.

Both the red flag of communism and the black flag of anarchy represent opposition to the establishment, but they also stand for tendencies or impulses that are themselves opposed. It is one thing to seek to overthrow the existing establishment in order to replace it by another that is thought to be better, and it is quite another thing to call for the demolition of all establishments in order to usher in a totally new state of affairs in the social life of man on earth—a state of affairs in which men will live together in peace and with justice but without any form of dominion of man over man or any exercise of organized force. The proponent of anarchy, if we consider only his opposition to an existing establishment, can be regarded as a revolutionist, since the revolutionary impulse is characterized by such opposition. But the proponent of anarchy is misunderstood if he is classed as just another revolutionist. His opposition is not to this or that establishment, but to all establishments—to government itself and to all the other institutions of organized society that he unites together under the name “state.”

To keep this significant difference clear, I propose to call the revolutionist who wishes to overthrow an existing establishment in order to replace it by another a “political revolutionist,” in contra-

distinction to the “anarchistic revolutionist,” who seeks to overthrow all establishments and replace them by none.

I will presently comment on the various meanings of the word “political,” but for the moment I would like to use it to cover all the institutions of organized society—that total ensemble of established arrangements and practices that the anarchist lumps together under the name “state.” Employing the word “political” in that sense we can say that the political revolutionist is one who seeks to improve human life or society by institutional changes of one sort or another—through supplanting one set of institutions by another. In contrast, the anarchistic revolutionist—or, for short, the anarchist—is one who seeks to improve human life or society by non-institutional means or, what is the same, by emancipating mankind from the trammels of the state.

I pointed out a moment ago that revolutionary movements, activities, or impulses cannot be regarded as a distinctive characteristic of the present age. But I think that it can be said with historical accuracy that anarchism is. I do not mean that it is the dominant tendency of the present age, that it enlists the support of a substantial or numerous following, or that it is in the foreground rather than in the wings of the stage on which the conflicts of our day are being acted out. What I have in mind is that the doctrine of anarchism—sometimes called “philosophical anarchism”—was born in the last two hundred years and has gained a certain currency in our own day. Its first appearance can be dated with the publication of William Godwin’s *Inquiry Concerning Political Justice* in 1793. There are traces of it in the writings of Thoreau, as an implication of his doctrine of civil disobedience, and a very special form of it appears in the Marxist theory of the withering away of the state—as the ultimate, not the proximate, objective of the revolutionary program. But it is not until the latter half of the nineteenth century and the first quarter of the twentieth that revolutionary anarchism receives its first full dress promulgation in the writings of Bakunin and Kropotkin in Russia and of Proudhon and Sorel in France. It is only with them that the annihilation of the state becomes an uncompromising and immediate objective of revolutionary action.

While it cannot be said that these writings have been widely read or carefully studied by large numbers in the present century, no more than it can be said that many of those who sympathize with Marxism have been close readers or careful students of the major treatises of Marx, Engels, or Lenin, anarchistic sympathies

are nevertheless widespread in the world today, especially among the younger generation and most especially among those who are in the forefront of the opposition to the present state of affairs, both in the United States and abroad. There may not be many in this group who are full-fledged anarchists—committed followers of the doctrines of a Bakunin or a Sorel. Nevertheless, among those who express profound dissatisfaction with the way that things are set up and being run, we find a manifest and growing loss of faith in institutional change as the way to remedy the trouble.

What is new in the world today and distinctive of our time is the conflict between those who think that, where our institutions are defective, the defects can be removed by institutional changes of one sort or another and those who despair of institutional change itself and who turn, in their desperation, to noninstitutional means of reaching the promised land of a better day.

( 2 )

Preeminent among the motives responsible for the writing of this book is the desire on my part to do what I can to restore faith in politics—to combat the current hopelessness about improving the condition of mankind by improving our institutions.

Before I mention another of my controlling motives, I cannot refrain from referring to a recent paper by Robert M. Hutchins. He proposed “five possibilities that [might] brighten the prospects of this scientific and technological age.” The first four are the redefinition and restoration of liberal education; the redefinition of the university; the redefinition and restoration of the idea of a profession; and the revival of philosophy. The fifth, he wrote, “is the restoration of and the resort to politics.” Antecedent thereto, I would add, is the restoration of our faith in politics; and that, as this book will suggest, is dependent both on the restoration of liberal education and the revival of philosophy.

“The decay of political philosophy,” Mr. Hutchins went on to say, “means that politics is nothing but the exercise of power.” . . . Politics so conceived cannot help us find the means of guiding and controlling science and technology. On the contrary, the conception of politics as power has produced and will continue to reproduce the situation we have today, in which science and technology are being exploited for the purposes of power in such a way as to threaten the existence of the race.

“Politics,” Mr. Hutchins continued, “is and ought to be the architectonic science. It is the science of the common good. Good is a moral term. The common good is a good that accrues to every member of the community because he belongs to it; he would not have it if he did not belong to it. The task of politics,” he concluded, “is to define the common good and to organize the community to achieve it.”

I will shortly attempt to expand on these remarks of Mr. Hutchins by a fuller explanation of the approach that will be made in this book to a conception of politics and to a statement of the principles of political philosophy—an approach that is motivated by a desire to restore faith in political or institutional means for achieving progress. But first I would like to dwell for a moment on the other consideration that motivates my approach to the subject. It is my sense that the present generation of the students in our colleges and universities not only manifest a growing loss of faith in politics, but also reveal a massive ignorance of history and, worse, a rejection of what can be learned from the past as totally irrelevant to present-day concerns.

The two phenomena are hardly disconnected. I draw my faith in politics from my reading of history. I think this is true of others who find in history not only the record of institutional progress, but also the promise of further progress to be made by further institutional changes. Only ignorance of history could lead to the mistaken impression, mentioned earlier, that a revolutionary spirit or revolutionary activity distinctively characterizes the present age. Ignorance of history might also generate the false supposition that anarchism has always been one of the revolutionary forces at work in the efforts of men to improve their condition. It is not just ignorance of history that matters, though the gravity of such ignorance can hardly be overestimated. ‘What is even more serious is the dismissal of the past as irrelevant—even so recent a past as the opening decades of the present century up to the end of the Second World War.

Let me concede at once, lest I be misunderstood, that the past is not of critical relevance to all our human concerns. There are speculative and scientific questions that can be fruitfully investigated without recourse to history. This is even true of the basic questions concerning the good life for man. But it is not true of the basic questions concerning the good society. Here we have a fundamental difference between ethics and politics as the two main branches of moral philosophy. I will have more to say on this

point presently, when I discuss the ways in which these two branches of moral philosophy are related to one another. For the moment, I wish only to stress the fact that historic changes in the institutions of society have occasioned seminal political insights and have led to the general acknowledgment of political truths. The historic changes did not establish the truth of the political principles thus discovered; but they did make these truths discoverable and make them generally known.

All who are concerned with the improvement of human life on earth, and especially with the improvement of human society, must ultimately choose between two views of the main source of progress in human affairs. One looks to meliorative changes in human nature; the other to meliorative changes in human institutions. Let me declare at once my commitment to the second view, postponing until later my reasons for thinking it the only sound view of the matter. I am asserting, in short, that all the progress that has so far been made in the social life of man has been accomplished by cumulative improvements in man's social institutions, without any improvement—indeed, without any significant change—in the nature of man. Those who have lost faith in politics and who brand the past as irrelevant should be able to show that this proposition is factually false if they wish to defend the position that they take on more than emotional grounds.

( 3 )

So far I have concerned myself with the state of mind of those who may need a corrective for their tendency to turn away from politics and from the past. But such considerations do not define the scope and subject-matter of this book, which, I hope, will be instructive as well as therapeutic. Its title contains two words that I must comment on if I am going to make clear what it is about and, just as important, what it is not about. One is the word "politics"; the other, "common sense."

That second term has played a pivotal role in two earlier books of mine which, like this one, were based on the Britannica Lectures that I delivered at the University of Chicago. In the book based on the first series of Britannica Lectures, common-sense opinions, formed in the light of common experience, were shown to be the rudiments out of which philosophy develops by critical reflection. The sub-title of the book based on the third series of Britannica Lectures was "The Ethics of Common Sense."

The shift in the phrasing—from the ethics of common sense to the common sense of politics—does not portend a change of intention. In both cases, my aim is identical: to expound the truths of moral philosophy—in the first case those of ethics, in the second case those of politics—which are known to the reflective man of common sense in the light of common experience. The moral philosopher, concerned with the problems of ethics or of politics, shares these truths with the man of common sense. In both fields, common sense, consisting of the insights that men develop by reflection on the facts of common experience, is the point of departure and the occasion for philosophizing. In both fields, such philosophizing as we can do is nothing but the rational development of common sense—by definitions, distinctions, analyses, and arguments. Such wisdom as we can attain in either ethics or politics is common sense philosophically defended and philosophically developed.

In politics, as in ethics, the attempt to expound such philosophical wisdom as we possess should set forth principles that a reasonable man of common sense would recognize as true, in the light of his common experience (without the need of anything to be learned by specialized research or additional investigation), by bringing to bear, on that common experience, his intellectual resources—his ability to think clearly, cogently, and critically; in short, his capacity for being reasonable and rational.

However, the word “ethics” used in connection with “common sense” does not give rise to as many possible misunderstandings as the word “politics” used in the same connection, largely because the latter word has such diverse connotations in everyday discourse and in academic parlance. The word “ethics” in everyday discourse usually connotes the consideration of what is good and bad, or right and wrong, for the individual in the conduct of his life. The word “politics” is rarely used in a parallel fashion, to connote the consideration of what is good and bad, or right and wrong, in the institutions of society. On the contrary, it is for the most part used in a variety of other senses.

Most frequently, in ordinary speech, it is used to refer to engagement in the affairs of government. Thus, we speak of men going into politics or getting out of politics. With almost equal frequency, it is used even more broadly to refer to any kind of maneuvering or machination aimed at getting and holding power—any form of power play. Not only in the sphere of government but in all forms of corporate enterprise—in universities, hospitals, muse-

ums, and businesses—we describe men as engaged in politics when they vie with one another for power. It was in this sense of the term that many years ago Professor Harold Lasswell wrote a book entitled *Politics: Who Gets What, When, How*. And it is in this sense that politics is thought of as the art for which Machiavelli wrote the rules.

This book is not concerned with politics so conceived. Nor is it concerned with politics as a branch of descriptive behavioral science. Here once again we find that the words “ethics” and “politics” are no longer used, as they once were, in a parallel fashion. For the most part, ethics is still regarded as a branch of philosophy, and it is usually so taught, not as a behavioral science. But unless one specifically names the subject of one’s interest as political philosophy or political thoughts a reference to politics in academic circles will usually be understood as signifying political science. What is at stake here in insisting on the distinction between political philosophy and political science—or politics as a branch of philosophy and politics as a behavioral science—is the importance of maintaining the line that separates the evaluative or normative from the purely descriptive approach to politics.

With regard to human conduct, there is a clear difference between questions concerning how men do in fact behave and questions concerning how they ought to behave—what end they ought to seek and what means they should employ in seeking it. So with regard to human society, there is an equally clear difference between questions concerning how in fact society is organized, how its institutions are formed, and how they are operated, and questions concerning the ends that organized society should serve and the institutional means that should be employed to achieve those goals.

Questions of the first type are questions of fact, to be answered by empirical investigations productive of scientific knowledge. Such questions are beyond the competence of common sense to answer in a reliable fashion. More than common experience is needed to answer them. Questions of the second type are, in contradistinction, usually called questions of value—questions about what is good and bad, right and wrong. Here common sense, based on common experience and enlightened by rational reflection, can provide the rudimentary answers that philosophical analysis and argument is then able to perfect and defend.

Hence it should be clear that a book concerned with the com-



mon sense of politics is concerned with politics as a branch of practical philosophy and as a normative discipline not with politics as a branch of descriptive behavioral science and as an empirical or investigative inquiry.

*From his book of the same title, 1971 and 1996.*

---

---

## WEBSITES OF INTEREST

### **Thunder Bay Right to Life**

*We seek to persuade others of three simple truths:*

1. The right to life is basic human right upon which all other rights depend. The right to life is inalienable and infeasible. The right to life cannot be given up, taken away, overridden or deferred, without a moral wrong being committed.
2. All human beings have an equal right to life, before and after birth.
3. Society has a duty to uphold and to protect that right.

*To accomplish this goal, we neither picket, nor protest, nor bomb.  
We inform and we educate.*

**Go to:** <http://www.thunderbayrighttolife.com/>

---

---

## WELCOME NEW MEMBERS

**Simon Hadsy, Netherlands Antilles**

**Evandro Ferreira e Silva, Brazil**

**Morgan Walsh, Esq.**

\*\*\*\*\*

**THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE**

is published weekly for its members by the  
Center for the Study of The Great Ideas  
Founded in 1990 by Mortimer Adler & Max Weismann  
Max Weismann, Publisher & Editor  
E-mail: [TGIdeas@speedsite.com](mailto:TGIdeas@speedsite.com)  
Homepage: [TheGreatIdeas.org](http://TheGreatIdeas.org)  
A not-for-profit (501)(c)(3) educational organization.  
Donations are tax deductible as the law allows.