Man and Politics I

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Well at the very bottom of the list of my motives for undertaking this lecture was that I was told that if I tried to summarize my knowledge of international politics in 45 minutes it would be a blinding flash of light to myself and I would discover for the first time what was crucial and what was not. So I am happy at the outset to report on the results of this exercise which is that it is a total failure. I have been unable to decide what I could say in 45 minutes that would actually reveal to you what I think to be the absolutely fundamental issues are in international politics.

Where then do I go from here? I begin by presenting the conclusion. The one thing you might hold on to is the notion that international politics, at the present time, is split. In part one can think of it as operating as it has conventionally, that is as a set of states - 148 of them - which pursue their interests, partly in conflict with, and partly in cooperation with, the other states in international politics. That is one part of it and I will come back and discuss that later.

At the same time you can think of international politics as a set of issues which more and more transcend the interests of particular states. They therefore make the normal, that is to say traditional, patterns of interstate behaviour if not inapplicable, at least insufficient. I present the topic in this dichotomous way because if I were to argue, as some people would argue, that the issues in international politics transcend the capacities of the individual states, so far as the soltuions are concerned, then I would be encouraging a form of thinking which I want at the very outset to scotch.

People who don't know very much about international politics, for that matter politics at all, but who conceivably read The Globe and Mail and if not The Globe and Mail, the backpage of the Queen's Journal, are likely to

succumb to a number of pitfalls.

The main one is the attempt to impose what I call blueprints on political behaviour, in other words, it is the problem of attempting to impose an external logic on political events. As I say, I think scientists are particularly vulnerable to this because they bring with them - you bring with you - a certain kind of intellectual apparatus of logical thought which inescapably you apply to other areas. In other words it is a form of thinking in preconceived ideas about international politics. In essence I am trying to tell you that it will get you nowhere.

I want now to give you an illustration which I take from a not so well-known book written in the interwar period. It is by E.H. Carr and in it Carr is discussing, not the failures of scientists or the weaknesses of scientists when they look at international politics, but the weakness of what he would consider to be uneducated, that is to say unsophisticated people in politics. In that he included many politicans. He said their behaviour, their attitude towards politics, was quite similar to the behaviour of medieval chemists. In a social situation where there was a shortage of gold, these chemists decided to make gold. In their wisdom they chose to try and make gold from lead. They worked very hard at this for quite a while and then concluded it was physically impossible to turn lead into gold. Carr says that is what people do when they go into politics. They come with a purpose, the purpose is some kind of equivalent to wanting to make more gold because that is what society needs and so they look around and decide upon the most plausible method, one which most appeals to their intellectual notions and training.

What Carr in this case is trying to argue, is that you will never be able to understand international politics, or even to influence it in the "right" direction, by such an approach. He says it is the characteristic of a young science. He goes on to argue that in the fullness of time the medieval chemists came to understand that this was wrong not only because you couldn't make gold out of lead but because you couldn't use this entrenched or enthroned purpose to overthrow fact or physical laws. They were allowing purpose, their desire to make gold, lead their scientific investigations. Now you can perhaps already see the direction of Carr's thought because, unlike other people who might perhaps take a more pessimistic view, Carr wants to argue that politics, all politics, has its own laws, has its own "reality". It is in some measure patterned, subject to reason, understandable and predictable. But it is not to be investigated or understood by subjecting fact, or in his terms "reality", to purpose. Although I don't particularly agree with much of what Carr says, I believe that he has put his finger on a common problem in understanding international politics and one which, as I have said, natural scientists are most likely to be prone to.

A second error that has to be overcome is not so much one that scientists are prone to but one to which humanists are vulnerable. It is the attempt to impose a morality on international politics which is essentially the morality of individual action. I will give you two examples in case there are any humanists in the room. The first is a classic example given by a man who is perhaps still the most famous, perhaps some would call him the most notorious, scholar in international politics, Hans Morgenthau. Morgenthau gives the example of the United Kingdom in 1939 faced with the Soviet attack on

Finland. Britain decided to come to the assistance of Finland, but to do this, to do it legally, they had to ask permission of a neutral, Sweden, for British forces to cross Swedish territory and enter Finland. So they asked Sweden and Sweden said, "No, we are neutral, it would violate the laws of neutrality". Morgenthau says that there, but for the grace of Sweden, goes one of the all-time errors of international politics. The United Kingdom in the name of morality and obligation would have come to the assistance of Finland and ended up doing what the United Kingdom, for that matter what any other great power in Europe, should never do: fight a war on two fronts, in the East against the Soviet Union and in the West against Hitler. You may or may not like his example but I think the point is well made, that if one were to apply, what one might call normal individual principles of obligation or morality, then you could very well end up with an outcome which defeated the moral intention.

We don't really have a particularly good current example but I'll give you another one which is somewhat closer to home. Several years ago, if you are old enough to remember it, there was a campaign for nuclear disarmanent, which was essentially based in the Western countries upon a moral view of the evil, not only of using, but of even contemplating the use, of nuclear weapons. Now perhaps there are some old time nuclear disarmers here who will give me a run for my money on this but my view is that the campaign, in so far as it was not a politically based campaign, rested upon a very simple moral position, namely that it was unthinkable to use nuclear weapons. The possibility remains that had those people been successful, and in some countries they were very close to being successful, they might have brought about the very result which they wanted to avoid. They might in short, have make more likely, not less likely, the use of nuclear weapons and thereafter wrought the kind of castrophe which they thought was utterly repugnant. Now you don't have a chance to answer back, so I leave those two points there and recapitulate simply by saying that what I'm trying to stress here is what I see to be the common fallacies of looking at international politics: the fallacy of trying to impose blueprints which are derived from external sources and the fallacy of trying to impose a morality which is not based on an understanding of political behaviour itself.

Well that is a useful negative start perhaps. What then? How does one understand international politics? I think that to begin with one has to understand it in traditional terms and those traditional terms one can explain relatively easily. At the present time the world is divided into 148 territorial units which claim sovereignty over their own territory. They claim the right, acting completely alone, to make decisions which will be binding on the people who live in the territory they control. That might not by itself be a particularly serious issue but of course it creates an awkward dilemma when they have to interact with each other. If each of these 148 entities claims the sole right to make judgements and decisions, concerning their own territory, what happens when they collectively have to make decisions which concern some or all of the territories concerned? Well what does happen in this situation is still the basis of international politics and the key to understanding it.

The best way to develop it is to make the comparison with a domestic society. Next week I presume John Meisel will come along and tell you some

of the characteristics of domestic politics, but for now it is worth contemplating the difference between domsestic and international politics. That claim to sovereignty within a state can be translated into a number institutions and values with which we are all familiar. We have a parliament which makes laws; we may not like the laws but more or less, more or less, we accept them. Moreover even if we don't accept them as individuals, generally, again with some exceptions, we tend to agree that it is a good idea that people accept them as a whole. So for example, when the government introduces wage and price guidelines the trade unions will say we don't want them, we don't like them and we won't accept them, but they probably won't say we will defy them, in the sense of defying the law. There you see you pass a threshold, you go across the threshold from argument and opposition to actually threatening the legitimacy of the government. Although there are occasions when trade unions have done just that, and of course other groups have done it too, it's not done lightly, it's not like going on strike which is an accepted part of the exchange. So we allow that some kind of institution makes laws which govern us all. We allow that some other kind of institution enforces those laws. More or less, no matter how much you dislike the police, one in the end is bound to accept that some kind of enforcement is necessary. We even go further and in our individual behaviour, again with extremely few exceptions, notwithstanding our opposition, we accept the assumption upon which a police force is predicated. This brings us to one of the more intangible but actually crucial characteristics of domestic society. Why do we in fact accept legislation? Why do we in fact accept enforcement? It is not simply because we get put in jail, although that is a very powerful incentive, but I think because we want to live in that kind of a society. In general but not necessarily in the details, we want the kind of order and regulation which a legislature, an executive, a police force allows us.

Well let us compare this with international politics and go back to the point where I left off, that is, when sovereign states have to interact in order to gain or establish some sort of regulations that will govern some or all of them. The essential dilemma of international politics is that neither the institutions nor the will to support those institutions, which we find in domestic society, are present. (We can dismiss, for the purposes of this argument, various forms of supranational institutions such as the United Nations or the Permanent Court of International Justice.) The international environment therefore is very different because in some way those 148 entities have got to find ways of cooperating with each other. On what basis do they do it? It is not on the basis of a common desire to live in an organized society because in international society the interests of the individual states on the whole, transcend any commitment that there might be to universal values.

I quote to you a well-known French author, Raymond Aron, on this point. He says:

> "Interstate relations are expressed in and by specific actions by those individuals whom I shall call symbolic: the diplomat and the soldier... The ambassador and the soldier live and symbolize international relations which in so far as they are interstate relations, concern diplomacy and war. Interstate relations present one original feature which distinguishes them from all other social relations, they take place within the shadow of war, or to use a more rigorous expression, relations among states involve is essence the alternatives of war and peace."

Well what you could do is to take that symbolization of the basis of international politics and put it in cruder and perhaps excessively simple terms and say that what underlies international politics is the intention to coerce one's opponents if you cannot get them to accede to your will by negotiation. And if that's the case, if that's indeed what is at the basis of international politics, then it is clear that those who can most successfully coerce will be the most powerful. So that at the basis of international politics then lies a relationship of power in its coercive sense. This might then suggest that international relations is anarchic, that it is a total confusion of states attempting to impose their will by coercive means on other states and preferably on weaker states. To some extent that is true; that is what happens in international politics.

The problem is, though, that if the case is as I have described it, what is unusual is not the incidence of war but the incidence of peace. What accounts for peace? We have had long periods of peace. If you took the modern period, 1648 to the present, then I think you would find that it is as much characterized by peace as by war. My account would in fact lead you to wonder why that is so. If I were again to push E.H. Carr just a little, to paraphrase him crudely, I would say that his argument then leads him to the proposition, that the stable patterns of relationships in international politics stem from trade-offs of power or to use a phrase more or less familiar to you, stem from a balance of power. In other words, coercion is kept to a minimum by maximizing the constraints or the limitations on the use of coercive power. And that is done through the classical techniques of balance of power politics.

Now one might then proceed one step further and say in a balance of power situation by opposing the prospect of coercion with the prospect of coercion, do we in fact find ouselves in an equilibrium? In a stable equilibrium where force is minimized? More or less, the practitioners and the students of international politics say yes, that if you understand international politics, if you act wisely, then with luck you will minimize the resort to coercion and the resort to war. The core of international politics is directed towards that objective.

Now that is in effect the first part of my dichotomy. It is an attempt, very briefly, to present to you what I understand to be the basis of the reasoning, both scholastic and practical, behind much of the behaviour of modern states and not-so-modern states. If you were to read the newspapers on a daily basis, I think you would find lots of evidence of this kind of thinking infusing itself in discussions of contemporary issues. In Europe at the present time the attempt in effect to settle the Second World War in the Helsinki Conference is based upon an attempt to invoke a doctrine of balance of power. In all the arguments about the American involvement in Vietnam, the most persistent argument related to the balance of power in Asia. The trouble with balance of power is that it is rather like the jingle about the little girl.

"There was a little girl,
who had a little curl,
right in the middle of her forehead.
And when she was good,
she was very, very good
and when she was bad,
she was horrid."

The balance of power is really quite good when it works and terrible when it doesn't work. Yet I would say that the total experience of the 20th century, through to the present time, is that it is the most reliable way of both attempting to achieve stability and avoid war. Again, to direct you to the newspapers, anything you read about Henry Kissinger's diplomacy is, if I may be so bold, based upon some development or elaboration of the principles I have just been discussing. His intent is to create, to maintain, to manipulate, a balance of power.

Well, when it's good, it's very, very good and when it's bad, it's horrid. I said that there are patterns of behaviour in international politics which are understandable. What are not so understandable are the circumstances in which it breaks down. There is an old joke about a guy who goes to Las Vegas for a weekend and blows all his money and wanders back to the bus station. As he is about to go on the bus to leave he hears a voice say "Go back, go back". So he goes back and he wanders around Las Vegas and he hears the voice say "The Sands, The Sands". He goes to The Sands and he wanders around and as he is wandering around aimlessly the voice says "Roulette, Roulette". He goes to the roulette table and he stands there and looks at it for awhile and the voice says "Number 8, Number 8" and so he bets his last dollar on number 8 and he wins. Very pleased about this, he is standing there and the voice says "Number 16, Number 16", so he bets it and he wins. He wins alot of money and he says this is great, I'm going to quit. He turns around to quit and the voice says "Go back, Go back; Bet it all, Bet it all". He turns around and looks at the table and the voice says "Number 9, Number 9". He puts the whole lot on number 9 and around it goes. It comes up six. He is looking in stunned disbelief at the table and he hears a very small voice in his ear, "Shit". Now you may have those problems in the natural sciences but that essentially is the problem of the social sciences, and more to the point, it is the problem of the policy analyst in international politics.

I said I would counterpoint balance of power thinking and I think the counterpoint is best illustrated by Kenneth Boulding, the economist. Kenneth Boulding says it requires an act of the imagination to think of ourselves as the human species clinging to a slag heap on a small star in a remote corner of the universe. It requires an additional leap of the imagination to try then and understand why it is we have split this slag heap up into 148 different components and why we spend so much time figuring out how to get these components, at the most basic level, to act together. Now that's really a way of saying that when you look at what's happening, not in terms of the traditional politics of the international system, but in terms of what are basically technological changes in the character of interstate relations, then there is an increasingly serious discrepancy between the traditional modes of behaviour and the requirements of, what for the moment, I will describe as a technologically driven set of activities.

First, there has been an enormous increase in economic productivity and the capacity to execute incredibly clever technological tricks. Coupled with that, we have witnessed an increasing specialization in industrial activity, a specialization in training and the development of encormous multi-national corporations, some of which in terms of economic power are much bigger than alot of the alleged sovereign entities in international politics. Also deriving from this technological sophistication is a world population which, at the

present rate of growth, doubles every second generation. Incidentally and somewhat ironically, the doubling occurs mainly in the societies which are the least effected by technological sophistication. Deriving from this great sophistication in technology as well, we come to a couple of problems which are extremely fashionable and which I am sure you are quite familiar with; first, the depletion of the natural resources of the planet and the second, concomitant of that, the pollution of the planet and in a sense the progressive deterioration of the elemental factors upon which we depend for our survival. As if science and technology based development were not enough, we have managed in the last 30 years to produce most spectacular weapons of destruction. With all our skills we can, or at least some of us can, without too much difficulty, totally destroy human life as we know it.

With these developments, we have been able, I say we meaning the human race, given many limitations and inequalities, to extend literacy so we look forward to a time when the world is literate. With the extension of literacy and the development of mass communications we have also created a world in which distance, in the psychological sense, has shrunk. If you go to Upper Volta you will no doubt find that the Upper Voltans are listening on their radios to the debate on the resolution in the United Nations condemning Zionsim. It is no longer possible to contain, in a psychological sense, disputes amongst states. And finally, in what I believe is clearly a technology based development, we find that great strength is accompanied by great vulnerability. It seems that the more industrialized and the more developed the society, the more easily it can be disrupted. Upper Volta on the whole does not have too many problems with hijacking of aircraft, the kidnapping of its diplomats, with urban terrorism or dislocation. It is the more sophisticated and incidentally, as a matter of fact, the more sophisticated, capitalist societies which appear to be the prime victims of their own technological developments. The question is then can in fact the patterns of international politics and the proceedings of international politics, which I described as being rooted in political conflict, cope with the issues which arise from technologically based problems and crises? On the whole, there is fairly extensive pessismism about the capacity of the interstate system to cope. I might then say just one more thing. If one looks at the way in which the states in the international system attempt to cope, one will see that they seek to cope in traditional means. Nothing is more striking at the present time than the disposition, particularly of the advanced, industrialized states, to turn their backs on global supranational organizations.

I think that brings us to, what I would put to you as the last and the most pressing problem of international politics from the point of view of our societies, that is the rich, industrialized, capitalist societies. If we were to accept the need for supranational organizations and forums as a means of solving problems which are beyond the capacity of individual states to solve, we would be victimized in much the same way that over the past 50 years the advanced, industrialized societies have, in effect, exploited the poor countries. Now that is another deliberate simplification which nevertheless I think one could sustain. In short, the societies which are most capable of promoting supranationalism as a means of solving international problems such as pollution, the control of resources, the control of the sea, human rights and what ever, of promoting supranationalism in a technological sense, are the least likely to

do so. They have the most to lose in any form of global problem solving and that I believe is the problem of Western societies in contemporary international politics.