

REITH LECTURES 1948: Authority and the Individual

Bertrand Russell

Lecture 2: Social Cohesion and Government

TRANSMISSION: 2 January 1949 - Home Service

The original mechanism of social cohesion, as it is still to be found among the most primitive races, was one which operated through individual psychology without the need of anything that could be called government. There were, no doubt, tribal customs which all had to obey, but one must suppose that there was no impulse to disobedience of these customs and no need of magistrates or policemen to enforce them. In Old Stone Age times, so far as authority was concerned, the tribe lived in a state which we should now describe as anarchy. But it differed from what anarchy would be in a modern community owing to the fact that social impulses sufficiently controlled the acts of individuals. Men of the New Stone Age were already quite different; they had government, authorities capable of exacting obedience, and large-scale enforced cooperation.

Alliance through War

This is evident from their works; the primitive type of small-tribe cohesion could not have produced Stonehenge, still less the Pyramids. The enlargement of the social unit must have been mainly the result of war. If two tribes had a war of extermination, the victorious tribe, by the acquisition of new territory, would be able to increase its numbers. There would also in war be an obvious advantage in an alliance of two or more tribes. If the danger producing the alliance persisted, the alliance would, in time, become an amalgamation. When a unit became too large for all its members to know each other, there would come to be a need of some mechanism for arriving at collective decisions, and this mechanism would inevitably develop by stages into something that a modern man could recognise as government.

As soon as there is government some men have more power than others, and the power that they have depends, broadly speaking, upon the size of the unit that they govern. Love of power, therefore, will cause the governors to desire conquest. This motive is very much reinforced when the vanquished are made into slaves instead of being exterminated. In this way, at a very early stage, communities arose in which, although primitive impulses towards social co-operation still existed, they were immensely reinforced by the power of the government to punish those who disobeyed it. In the earliest fully historical community, that of ancient Egypt, we find a king whose powers over a large territory were absolute, except for some limitation by the priesthood, and we find a large servile population whom the king could, at his will, employ upon state enterprises such as the Pyramids. In such a community only a minority at the top of the social scale—the king, the aristocracy, and the priests—needed any psychological mechanism towards social cohesion; all the rest merely obeyed. No doubt large parts of the population were unhappy; one can get a picture of their condition from the first chapters of Exodus. But as a rule, so long as external enemies were not to be feared, this condition of widespread suffering did not prevent

the prosperity of the state, and it left unimpaired the enjoyment of life by the holders of power. This state of affairs must have existed for long ages throughout what we now call the Middle East. It depended for its stability upon religion and the divinity of the king. Disobedience was impiety, and rebellion was liable to call down the anger of the gods. So long as the upper social layers genuinely believed this, the rest could be merely disciplined as we now discipline domestic animals.

Unity after Conquest

It is a curious fact that military conquest very often produced in the conquered a genuine loyalty towards their masters. This happened in time with most of the Roman conquests. In the fifth century, when Rome could no longer compel obedience, Gaul remained completely loyal to the Empire. All the large states of antiquity owed their existence to military power, but most of them were able, if they lasted long enough, to generate a sense of cohesion in the whole in spite of the violent resistance of many parts at the time of their incorporation. The same thing happened again with the growth of modern states during the Middle Ages. England, France, and Spain all acquired unity as a result of military victory by a ruler of some part of what became a single nation.

In antiquity all large states, except Egypt, suffered from a lack of stability of which the causes were largely technical. When nothing could move faster than a horse it was difficult for the central government to keep a firm hold upon outlying satraps or pro-consuls, who were apt to rebel, sometimes succeeding in conquering the whole Empire and at other times making themselves independent sovereigns of a part of it. Alexander, Attila, and Jenghiz Khan had vast empires, which broke up at their death, and in which unity had depended entirely upon the prestige of a great conqueror. These various empires had no psychological unity, but only the unity of force. Rome did better because Greco-Roman civilisation was something which educated individuals valued and which was sharply contrasted with the barbarism of tribes beyond the frontier.

Until the invention of modern techniques it was scarcely possible to hold a large empire together unless the upper sections of society throughout its length and breadth had some common sentiment by which they were united. And the ways of generating such a common sentiment were much less understood than they are now. The psychological basis of social cohesion, therefore, was still important, although needed only among a governing minority. In ancient communities the chief advantage of great size, namely the possibility of large armies, was balanced by the disadvantage that it took a long time to move an army from one part of the empire to another, and also that the civil government had not discovered ways of preventing military insurrection. To some degree these conditions lasted on into modern times. It was largely lack of mobility that caused England, Spain, and Portugal to lose their possessions in the western hemisphere. But since the coming of steam and the telegraph it has become much easier than it was before to hold a large territory, and since the coming of universal education it has become easier to instill a more or less artificial loyalty throughout a large population.

Productivity of Large Organisations

Modern technique has not only facilitated the psychology of cohesion in large groups; it has also made large groups imperative both from an economic and from a military point of view. The advantages of mass production are a trite theme, upon which I do not propose to enlarge. As everybody knows, they have been urged as a reason for closer unity among the nations of Western Europe. The Nile from the earliest times has promoted the cohesion of the whole of Egypt, since a government controlling only the upper Nile could destroy the fertility of lower Egypt. Here no advanced technique was involved, but the Tennessee Valley Authority and the proposed St. Lawrence Waterway are scientific extensions of the same cohesive effect of rivers. Central power stations, distributing electricity over wide areas, have become increasingly important, and are much more profitable when the area is large than when it is small. If it becomes practicable (as is not unlikely) to use atomic power on a large scale, this will enormously augment the profitable area of distribution. All of these modern developments increase the control over the lives of individuals possessed by those who govern large organisations, and at the same time make a few large organisations much more productive than a number of smaller ones. Short of the whole planet there is no visible limit to the advantages of size, both in economic and in political organisations.

I come now to another survey of roughly the same governmental developments from a different point of view. Governmental control over the lives of members of the community has differed throughout history, not only in the size of the governmental area, but in the intensity of its interference with individual life. What may be called civilisation begins with empires of a well-defined type, of which Egypt, Babylon, and Nineveh are the most notable; Aztec and Inca empires were essentially of the same type. In such empires the upper caste had at first a considerable measure of personal initiative, but the large slave population acquired in foreign conquest had none. The priesthood were able to interfere in daily life to a very great degree, except where religion was involved, the king had absolute power, and could compel his subjects to fight in his wars. The divinity of the king and the reverence for the priesthood produced a stable society—in the case of Egypt, the most state of which we have any knowledge. This stability was bought at the expense of rigidity. And these ancient empires became stereotyped to a point at which they could no longer resist foreign aggression; they were absorbed by Persia, and Persia in the end was defeated by the Greeks.

The Greek City States

The Greeks perfected a new type of civilisation that had been inaugurated by the Phoenicians that of the city state based on commerce and sea power. Greek cities differed greatly as regards the degree of individual liberty permitted to citizens; in most of them there was a great deal, but in Sparta an absolute minimum. Most of them tended, however, to fall under the sway of tyrants, and throughout considerable periods had a regime of despotism tempered by revolution. In a city state revolution was easy. Malcontents had only to traverse a few miles to get beyond the territory of the government against which they wished to rebel, and there were always hostile city states ready to help them. Throughout the great age of Greece there was a degree of anarchy which to a modern mind would seem intolerable. But the citizens of a Greek city, even those who were in rebellion against the actual government, had retained a

psychology of primitive loyalty; they loved their own city with a devotion which was often unwise but almost always passionate. The greatness of the Greeks in individual achievement was, I think, intimately bound up with their political incompetence, for the strength of individual passion was the source both of individual achievement and of the failure to secure Greek unity. And so Greece fell under the domination first of Macedonia and then of Rome.

The Roman Empire while it was expanding, left a very considerable degree of individual and local autonomy in the provinces, but after Augustus' government gradually acquired a greater and greater degree of control, and in the end, chiefly through the severity of taxation, caused the whole system to break down over the greater part of what had been the Roman Empire. In what remained, however, there was no relaxation of control. It was objection to this minute control, more than any other cause that made Justinian's conquests so transitory. For those who had at first welcomed his legions as deliverers changed their minds when the legions were followed by an army of tax-gatherers.

Rome's attempt to unify the civilised world came to grief largely because, perhaps through being both remote and alien, it failed to bring any measure of instinctive happiness even to prosperous citizens. In its last centuries there was universal pessimism and lack of vigour. Men felt that life here on earth had little to offer, and this feeling helped Christianity to centre men's thoughts on the world to come. With the collapse of Rome the west underwent a very complete transformation. Commerce almost ceased; the great Roman roads fell into disrepair; petty kings constantly went to war with each other, and governed small territories as best they could, while they had to meet the anarchy of a turbulent Teutonic aristocracy and the sullen dislike of the old Romanised population. Slavery on a large scale almost disappeared throughout western Christendom, but was replaced by serfdom. In place of the vast fleets that brought grain from Africa to Rome, small communities with few and rare external contacts lived as best they could on the produce of their own land. Life was hard and rough, but it had no longer the quality of listlessness and hopelessness that it had had in the last days of Rome. Throughout the Dark Ages and the Middle Ages lawlessness was rampant, with the result that all thoughtful men worshipped law. Gradually the vigour which lawlessness had permitted restored a measure of order and enabled a series of great men to build up a new civilisation.

Power and Liberty

From the fifteenth century to the present time the power of the state as against the individual has been continually increasing, at first mainly as a result of the invention of gunpowder. Just as, in the earlier days of anarchy, the most thoughtful men worshipped law, so during the period of increasing state power there was a growing tendency to worship liberty. The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had a remarkable degree of success in increasing state power to what was necessary for the preservation of order, and leaving in spite of it a great measure of freedom to those citizens who did not belong to the lowest social grades. The impulse towards liberty, however, seems now to have lost much of its force among reformers; it has been replaced by the love of quality, which has been largely stimulated by the rise to affluence and power of new industrial magnates without any traditional claim to superiority. And the exigencies of total war have persuaded almost everybody that a much tighter social

system is necessary than that which contented our grandfathers. There is over a large part of the earth's surface something not unlike a reversion to the ancient Egyptian system of divine kingship, controlled by a new priestly caste. Although this tendency has not gone so far in the west as it has in the east, it has, nevertheless, gone to lengths which would have astonished the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries both in England and in America. Individual initiative is hemmed in either by the state or by powerful corporations, and there is a great danger lest this should produce, as in ancient Rome, a kind of listlessness and fatalism that is disastrous to vigorous life. I am constantly receiving letters saying: 'I see that the world is in a bad state, but what can one humble person do? Life and property are at the mercy of a few individuals who have the decision as to peace or war. Economic activities on any large scale are determined by those who govern either the state or the large corporations. Even where there is nominally democracy, the part which one citizen can obtain in controlling policy is usually infinitesimal. Is it not perhaps better in such circumstances to forget public affairs and get as much enjoyment by the way as the times permit?' I find such letters very difficult to answer, and I am sure that the state of mind which leads to their being written is very inimical to a healthy social life. As a result of mere size, government becomes increasingly remote from the governed and tends, even in a democracy, to have an independent life of its own. I do not profess to know how to cure this evil completely but I think it is important to recognise its existence and to search for ways of diminishing its magnitude.

Different Kinds of Loyalty

The instinctive mechanism of social cohesion, namely loyalty to a small tribe whose members are all known to each other, is something very remote indeed from the kind of loyalty to a large state which has replaced it in the modern world, and even what remains of the more primitive kind of loyalty is likely to disappear in the new organisation of the world that present dangers call for. An Englishman or a Scotsman can feel an instinctive loyalty to Britain: he may know what Shakespeare has to say about it; he knows that it is an island with boundaries that are wholly natural: he is aware of English history, in so far, at least, as it is glorious, and he knows that people on the Continent speak foreign languages. But if loyalty to Britain is to be replaced by loyalty to Western Union, there will need to be a consciousness of western culture as something with a unity transcending national boundaries; for apart from this there is only one psychological motive which is adequate for the purpose, and that is the motive of fear of eternal enemies. But fear is a negative motive, and one which ceases to be operative in the moment of victory. When it is compared with the love of a Greek for his native city it is obvious how very much smaller is the hold which fear has on the instincts and passions of ordinary men and women.

Government, from the earliest times at which it existed, has had two functions, one negative and one positive. Its negative function has been to prevent private violence, to protect life and property, to enact criminal law and secure its enforcement. But in addition to this it has had a positive purpose, namely to facilitate the realisation of desires deemed to be common to the great majority of citizens. The positive functions of government at most times have been mainly confined to war: if an enemy could be conquered and his territory acquired, everybody in the victorious nation profited in a greater or less degree. But now the positive functions of government are enormously enlarged. There is first of all education, consisting not only of the acquisition of

scholastic attainments, but also of the instilling of certain loyalties and certain beliefs. These are those which the state considers desirable, and, in a lesser degree, in some cases those demanded by some religious body. Then there are vast industrial enterprises. Even in the United States, which attempts to limit the economic activities of the state to the utmost possible degree, governmental control over such enterprises is rapidly increasing. And as regards industrial enterprises there is little difference, from the psychological point of view, between those conducted by the state and those conducted by large private corporations. In either case there is a government which in fact, if not in intention, is remote from those whom it controls. It is only the members of the government, whether of a state or of a large corporation, who can retain the sense of individual initiative, and there is inevitably a tendency for governments to regard those who work for them more or less as they regard their machines, that is to say merely as necessary means. The desirability of smooth co-operation constantly tends to increase the size of units, and therefore to diminish the number of those who still possess the power of initiative.

Worst of all, from our present point of view, is a system which exists over wide fields in Britain, where those who have nominal initiative are perpetually controlled by a civil service which has only a veto and no duty of inauguration, and thus acquires a negative psychology perpetually prone to prohibitions. Under such a system the energetic are reduced to despair; those who might have become energetic in a more hopeful environment tend to be listless and frivolous; and it is not likely that the positive functions of the state will be performed with vigour and competence. It is probable that economic entomology could bring in enormously greater profits than it does at present, but this would require the sanctioning of salaries of a considerable number of entomologists, and at present the government is of the opinion that a policy so enterprising as employing entomologists should only be applied with timidity. This, needless to say, is the opinion of men who have acquired the habit that one sees in unwise parents of always saying 'don't do that', without stopping to consider whether 'that' does any harm. Such evils are very hard to avoid where there is remote control, and there is likely to be much remote control in any organisation which is very large.

The 'Energetic Reduced to Despair'

I shall consider in a later lecture what can be done to mitigate these evils without losing the indubitable advantages of large-scale organisation. It may be that the present tendencies towards centralisation are too strong to be resisted until they have led to disaster, and that, as happened in the fifth century, the whole system must break down, with all the inevitable results of anarchy and poverty, before human beings can again acquire that degree of personal freedom without which life loses its savour. I hope that this is not the case, but it certainly will be the case unless the danger is realised and unless vigorous measures are taken to combat it.

In this brief sketch of the changes as regards social cohesion that have occurred in historical times, we may observe a twofold movement. On the one hand, there is a periodic development, from a loose and primitive type of organisation to a gradually more orderly government, embracing a wider area, and regulating a greater part of the lives of individuals. At a certain point in this development, when there has recently been a great increase in wealth and security but the vigour and enterprise of wilder

ages has not yet decayed, there are apt to be great achievements in the way of advancing civilisation. But when the new civilisation becomes stereotyped, when government has had time to consolidate its power, when custom, tradition and law have established rules sufficiently minute to choke enterprise, the society concerned enters upon a stagnant phase. Men praise the exploits of their ancestors, but can no longer equal them; art becomes conventional, and science is stilled by respect for authority.

This type of development followed by ossification is to be found in China and India, in Mesopotamia and Egypt, and in the Greco-Roman world. The end comes usually through foreign conquest: there are old maxims for fighting old enemies, but when an enemy of a new type arises the elderly community has not the adaptability to adopt the new maxims that can alone bring safety. If, as often happens, the conquerors are less civilised than the conquered, they have probably not the skill for the government of a large empire, or for the preservation of commerce over a wide area. The result is a diminution of population, of the size of governmental units, and of the intensity of governmental control. Gradually, in the new more or less anarchic conditions, vigour returns, and a new cycle begins.

But in addition to this periodic movement there is another. At the apex of each cycle, the area governed by one state is larger than at any former time, and the degree of control exercised by authority over the individual is more intense than in any previous culmination. The Roman Empire was larger than the Babylonian and Egyptian empires, and the empires of the present day are larger than that of Rome. There has never in past history been any large state that controlled its citizens as completely as they are controlled in the Soviet Republic, or even in modern England. Since the earth is of finite size, this tendency, if unchecked, must end in the creation of a single world state. But as there will then be no external enemy to promote cohesion through fear, the old psychological mechanisms will no longer be available. There will be no scope for patriotism in the affairs of the world government; the driving force will have to be found in self-interest and benevolence, without the potent incentives of hate and fear. Can such a society persist? And if it persists, can it be capable of progress? These are difficult questions. Some considerations that must be borne in mind if they are to be answered will be brought forward in subsequent lectures.