St. John's College Graduate Institute
Convocation Address
Summer 2014

On the Politics & Society Segment

Welcome, new students, returning students, and tutors, to St. John's College, and to the Graduate Institute. Today each of you is beginning, or resuming, your membership in a community of learning, at a College that dedicates itself to inquiry: to asking fundamental questions, and to pursuing answers to these questions. As members of such a community, we must from time to time inquire into ourselves. On this occasion I mean to do so by examining the readings of the Politics & Society segment.

The subject of this convocation address – the fourth of five, each treating one of the segments in the graduate Program – is informed by a claim that I made in an earlier address, delivered in Spring 2012, titled 'What is a Segment?' I said then that the program of the Graduate Institute is a homogeneous whole, and that its segments represent arbitrary divisions of that whole into parts. Accordingly, I claimed that the titles of these segments should be taken as compressed questions in need of answers, and as opportunities for wonder, rather than as names announcing that each segment treats a distinct subject matter. Now I hope to make good on these claims in detail. So what, then, are the wonderful questions raised by the segment title 'Politics & Society? Before I proceed to answer my own question, I should caution you that the threads I mean to follow for the next few minutes – threads that run through the tutorial and seminar readings of the segment, and that are connected to threads that run through other segments – are by no means the *only* ones worth following. I only insist that these threads are present in the

segment readings, and that they *are* truly worth following. So again, what are the wonderful questions raised by 'Politics & Society?'

I hope that you will humor me as I begin, one last time, with what at first looks like the least meaningful element of our segment title: the twisted and enigmatic ampersand. For what brand of 'and' does this old-fashioned symbol stand? Does it stand for the 'and' of a hendiadys, making 'Politics & Society' like 'might and main' – a phrase composed of two elements that mean one thing, a phrase that is therefore superfluous and redundant? Or does the ampersand stand for a genuinely additive, and therefore divisive, conjunction – one that links two things perhaps ordinarily found together, like 'flotsam and jetsam': the one present by nature, the other by art? Are 'politics' and 'society' one thing or two?

Let's try to say what each of these words means. 'Politics' comes first, and is perhaps the easier of the two. The English word comes to us from the Greek *politikē*, meaning 'the things of the *polis*': that is, the things of the city, understanding the city as the body of the citizens. One form of this word appears as the title of one of the books that we read in the Politics & Society seminar: Aristotle's *Politics*. At the beginning of that book, Aristotle tells us that every city is some sort of community, and every community aims at some apparent good. The community that aims at the most authoritative and comprehensive good, he continues, is called "the city or the political community" [1252a1-6]. In the next chapter, Aristotle clarifies his point. The city is the complete or self-sufficient community, so to speak, such that while it comes into being "for the sake of living," out of need and fear, "it exists for the sake of living well," without need and without fear. If the other incomplete and insufficient communities are by nature, like the family, the household, and the village, then this complete and self-sufficient community is also by

nature, as the first to achieve their ends. Evidently, Aristotle concludes, the city exists by nature, and man is by nature a political animal [1252b25-1253a5].

Aristotle picks up this thread at the beginning of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, which we read first in the Politics & Society tutorial. If politics concerns the partnership whose end is the most comprehensive and authoritative good – presuming that there is such a good – then if there is a science of politics, it will be a science of this most comprehensive and authoritative good [1094a15-1094b]. Everyone agrees that this good is happiness, Aristotle continues [1095a15-20], but not everyone agrees on what leads to happiness: some say pleasure, some say political activity, some say contemplation [1095b15-20]. These claims launch him on the main project of the *Ethics*: to examine pleasure, moral virtue, and intellectual virtue to see to what extent each of these merits the title of comprehensive and authoritative good – and so to what extent each of them is of concern to politics.

We find a similar pattern near the beginning of the other Politics & Society seminar text that has a word related to *politikē* in its title: Plato's *Politeia*, better known to us by its Latin title as the *Republic*. In this book, Socrates' long defense of the goodness of the virtue of justice begins with the construction of a city in speech, within which he and his companions hope to see both justice and the good that comes of it writ large [369a]. This city begins as a "city of utmost necessity," composed of four or five men [369e], but under pressure first of the principle of specialization and then of the desire for luxuries, the "city of utmost necessity" balloons, according to Socrates, first into a "healthy city" and then into a "feverish city" [372e]. In the eyes of Glaucon, one of Socrates' young companions, by contrast, the healthy city is a "city of sows" [372d], and only the feverish city is fit for people "nowadays" [372e]. Socrates and his companions end up seeking justice and its consequences in this feverish city. Once again we see

an investigation of virtue, as a candidate for the comprehensive and authoritative good, against the backdrop of a complete and self-sufficient association, as opposed to an incomplete and insufficient one. (That Socrates and Glaucon seem to disagree about what constitutes sufficiency is only one of the interesting details I'm passing over.) The more familiar Latin translation of *politeia*, or 'regime,' as *res publica*, or 'public things,' helps by reminding us that the regime, constituted by a claim about the authoritative and comprehensive good, is the animating principle of all things public and political, as opposed to private and pre-political.

The political realm, we can conclude, is the public realm of authoritative claims about the comprehensive human good. There are several such claims, and politics is their contest with one another for the right to rule. But what, then, is society?

The English word 'society' comes from the Latin *socius*, meaning 'companion.' Any group of companions, this etymology suggests, constitutes an association, and so a society. Society seems, then, to be the genus of which politics is a species. But the first use of this Latin term in the Politics & Society segment comes in one of the tutorial readings: Aquinas' "Treatise on Law," questions 90 through 97 of the first part of the second part of the mammoth *Summa Theologica*. One occurrence of the term is particularly striking for our purposes. In question 95 article 4, Aquinas asks "Is Isidore's Division of Human Laws Appropriate?" In his answer he remarks in passing that it is proved, in Book I Chapter 1 of the *Politics*, that "man is by nature a *social* animal [*animal sociale*; emphasis added]." Lest we think that Aquinas takes the political and the social to be synonymous, he continues: "But those things which are derived from the law of nature by way of particular determination belong to the civil right [*ius civile*] according as each political community [*civitas*] decides on what is best for itself." Though Aquinas does not use Latin terms etymologically related to *politikē*, other than to refer to Aristotle's *Politics*, he

does not lack a term to distinguish politics from society: politics is the realm of the *civitas*, and of civil right. And for someone as familiar with Aristotle as Aquinas clearly was, it's easy to detect in Aquinas' distinction between the social and the civil something like Aristotle's famous distinction in the *Ethics* between what is just by nature and what is just by convention [1134b17-1135a5]. By this distinction, Aquinas suggests that the social is the sphere of natural human association, and is governed by natural law, which is the same everywhere. The civil or political, by contrast, is the sphere of conventional associations, and is governed by civil right, which differs from place to place.

Two other passages from the Treatise on Law support this interpretation of Aquinas' meaning. In question 94 article 2, Aquinas asks "Does the Natural Law Contain Several Precepts or One Only?" His answer is that it contains several, and because human beings have "a natural inclination to know the truth about God and to live in society," two of these precepts are "to shun ignorance, [and] to avoid offending those among whom one has to live." Later, in question 96 article 2, he asks "Does It Belong to Human Law" – the source of civil right, remember – "to Repress All Vices?" And he answers:

> human laws do not forbid all vices from which the virtuous abstain but only the more grievous vices from which it is possible for the majority to abstain and chiefly those that are to the hurt of others, without the prohibition of which human society could not be maintained; thus human law prohibits murder, theft, and suchlike.

In introducing the idea of society into the Politics & Society readings, and distinguishing this idea from the idea of politics, Aquinas thus redefines the political. It is no longer the public realm of authoritative claims about the comprehensive human good. Rather, it is the realm of conventional legal prohibitions against offense, also known as civil rights, which vary in their particular character from place to place. Instead, society is the realm of authoritative claims about the comprehensive good, based on the natural law. This law is comprehensive because it

pertains to human beings as rational; it is good because all law aims at the common good of those it rules; and it is authoritative because it comes from God.

By distinguishing society from politics in this way, Aquinas refounds, and so reorients, the fundamental political question. No longer does the determination of the best regime depend on the adjudication of claims about the best way of life, and so on the investigation of pleasure and the moral and intellectual virtues. Now reason discovers the best way of life in the social dictates of natural law, and politics need only determine which civil rights are required for us to obey these dictates in each case. To a great extent, the political thinkers who come after Aquinas accept this reorientation of the fundamental question. Among the readings in the Politics & Society segment, for example, the first occurrence of the word 'society' in English comes, unsurprisingly, in Hobbes's *Leviathan*. But listen to how he uses it, in a famous passage that demands to be read in full:

> Whatsoever therefore is consequent to a time of war, where every man is enemy to every man, the same is consequent to the time wherein men live without other security than what their own strength and their own invention shall furnish them withal. In such condition there is no place for industry, because the fruit thereof is uncertain, and consequently, no culture of the Earth, no navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be imported by sea, no commodious building, no instruments of moving and removing such things as require much force, no knowledge of the face of the earth, no account of time, no arts, no letters, no society, and which is worst of all, continual fear and danger of violent death, and the life of man solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short [XIII.9].

Hobbes lists society among those commodious things that only a commonwealth, with its common power, can secure. As his argument develops in subsequent chapters of *Leviathan*, we learn, as in Aquinas, that reason can discover the best way of life in the social dictates of natural law – dictates such as "seek peace," and "defend ourselves" [XIV.4] – and that politics need only determine which civil rights are required for us to obey these dictates in each case. But notice Hobbes's striking innovation on Aquinas. The natural human state is the original human state,

and the original human state is a state of war. Man is not naturally social according to Hobbes; rather, society is always and everywhere the artificial product of the science of politics. The tremendous gravity of the state of war requires a draconian allocation of rights to resist its downward pull: all for the sovereign, and next to none for the subjects. And there is no ground for disagreement with this allocation of rights, since there is no other comprehensive and authoritative human good whose provision will guarantee peace [XI.1].

Though the political thinkers who follow Hobbes, like Locke, Rousseau, and the American founders, disagree about the precise allocation of rights needed to constitute society, they agree that this is the goal of politics: to make naturally asocial human beings social through the political art. In the words of our Declaration of Independence, "We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness – That to secure these Rights, governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just Powers from the Consent of the Governed."

Time does not permit me to wonder whether one seminar author I have not yet mentioned, Friedrich Nietzsche, also falls into this Thomistic-Hobbesian scheme. Instead, let me close by pointing out some of the implications of the thread I have just followed. First, the difference marked by the ampersand between 'politics' and 'society' does not correspond to the difference between the readings in the segment's seminar and tutorial. We do not have a 'Politics seminar' and a 'Society tutorial,' for example. Instead, the difference between 'politics' and 'society' in each class seems primarily chronological, corresponding roughly to the difference between the ancient and the modern readings, or perhaps more accurately, to that between the polytheistic and the monotheistic ones. Second, we can now see, I think, some of

the wonderful, terrible questions the segment raises. Is the political realm comprehensive and self-sufficient? If so, are the alternative claims whose contest constitutes that realm – claims on behalf of pleasure, or moral virtue, or intellectual virtue – irreducible alternatives? Or is the political partial and derivative, because it is dependent on some higher social principle, like the natural law, or some more fundamental social principle, like the fear of death? If so, is there one such principle, or many? Finally, if the political is comprehensive but plural, or if it is not comprehensive but depends on plural extra-political principles, does this herald nothing for humanity but ceaseless war? And if, on the other hand, the political is dependent on a single social principle, does this dependence promise peace – and how can we distinguish it from universal tyranny?

There will be not one but four Graduate Institute-hosted study groups this term: on Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*, on Rousseau's *Social Contract*, on the short plays of Samuel Beckett, and on Sextus Empiricus' *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*. Schedules and meeting places for all four of these groups will be circulated by email when they become available. Let me also invite you all to take part in the refreshments provided at the back of the Great Hall, before going to class. And new students are reminded to visit the IT department in the basement of Randall Hall between preceptorial and tutorial to set up their email accounts.

The summer 2014 term of the Graduate Institute is now in session. *Convocatum est.*

Jeff J.S. Black
Annapolis, Maryland
16 June 2014

Note

For my citations from Aristotle's *Politics*, I have used the Second Edition of Carnes Lord's translation. Citations from his *Nicomachean Ethics* are from Robert Bartlett and Susan Collins's translation. My citations from Plato's *Republic* are from Allan Bloom's translation, also in its Second Edition. For Aquinas I used the translation found in the Hackett collection titled *On Law, Morality, and Politics*. And for Hobbes's *Leviathan*, I used the Curley edition, also published by Hackett, which modernizes Hobbes's spelling and punctuation.