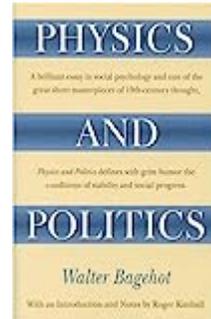




Walter Bagehot. *Physics and Politics*. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee Publisher, 1999. xi + 211 pp. \$14.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-56663-221-8.



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Bagehot and the Age of Discussion

Walter Bagehot is today best known for his study of *The English Constitution* (1867), a self-conscious debunking of the myths that surrounded the workings of British government in the era preceding the Second Reform Act. By contrast, his major work of political theory, *Physics and Politics* (1872), has been eclipsed since the publication of Jacques Barzun's edition over fifty years ago. We can be grateful to Roger Kimball for rescuing the text from this prolonged neglect, for there was a time when it ranked as one of the outstanding monuments of Victorian social thought. Sir Ernest Barker, writing on the eve of the First World War, considered it "a fine imaginative recapture of prehistory by the use of psychological analogy," and as late as the 1950s, John Bowle judged Bagehot "the most brilliant of the English writers who applied the new historical ideas to political speculation," and thought *Physics and Politics* "a remarkable book." Furthermore, though Bagehot is generally considered a quintessentially English writer, in his day he enjoyed international repute. *Physics and Politics* was translated into seven languages, and it had already reached its fifth French edition by 1885. French pioneers of social psychology such as Gabriel Tarde and Gustave Le Bon were clearly indebted

to Bagehot, even though they were reluctant to admit the debt.

The text was subtitled "Thoughts on the Application of the Principles of "Natural Selection" and "Inheritance" to Political Society," and it is generally read as an application of Darwinian ideas to politics. But Bagehot's account of social evolution was more Lamarckian than Darwinian, and in some ways the book needs to be read alongside Sir Henry Maine's *Ancient Law*, another classic of Victorian social theory of an historical cast. Bagehot's central problematic was broadly the same as Maine's: to explain why European nations alone had displayed the progressive genius that allowed them to free themselves from the "cake of custom." Bagehot recognized that this cake had been vital to the process of "nation-making," or the formation of national character. This process itself occupied a central place in his book, and was elevated to a dominant position by Bagehot's translators, who gave their translations titles such as *Lois scientifiques du développement des nations*, *Der Ursprung der Nationen*, and so on. Bagehot anticipated Tarde in underlining the importance of imitation in generating custom and hence cohe-

sive societies. But the later chapters shifted their focus away from the sources of cohesion and towards the origins of progress, which Bagehot thought depended crucially upon diversity. In many civilizations, he argued, the discipline necessary for nation-making had been asserted so strongly as to kill of “the propensities to variation which are the principle of progress”(p. 53). It was this emphasis on diversity which brought Bagehot closest to Darwin, whose account of the mechanism of evolution depended crucially on the occurrence of random mutations, but an essentially similar account of the sources of progress could be found in pre-Darwinian writers such as Guizot, and it may be that what Bagehot did was to recast a rather familiar nineteenth-century argument in scientific terms.

Bagehot has never been easy to classify politically. The editor of his collected works, the former Conservative cabinet minister Norman St John-Stevás, sees his hero as a Conservative. The historian John Burrow identifies him as a Whig. In this edition, Roger Kimball describes him as a ‘conservative Liberal’. Perhaps he was simply too much of a sceptic to be easily defined by a party label. He shared with Whigs a sense that plurality was to be prized as the soil most conducive to progress, rather than despised for its irrationality. But he also loved to puncture Whig constitutional pieties. His emphasis on “discussion” as the defining characteristic of modernity places him in the company of Liberals such as Mill, Guizot, and even Gladstone. He identified with liberalism in the sense in which he defined it in a review of Mill: “the faith in the possibility, nay the duty, of constant political expansion—of drawing a larger and larger portion of the population into the circle of political duties which connect them with the government, give them a control over it, and interest them in what it does.”

Polemically his argument in *Physics and Politics* seems to have been directed chiefly against Comteans, Arnoldians, and others who thought that an age of discussion was necessarily an age of transition, destined to be supplanted by the reconstruction of authority, which alone could underpin social order. The idea of “discussion” provides the link between *Physics and Politics* and Bagehot’s constitutional thought, as articulated both in his political journalism and in *The English Constitution*. In *Physics and Politics*, discussion is the defining quality of modernity and the condition of progress. But it was also, for Bagehot, the characteristic quality of parliamentary government. “A Parliamentary Government,” he argued, “is essentially a Government by discussion; by constant speaking and writing a public opinion is formed which decides on all action and all policy.” This was not true of either consultative or parliamentary government. He joined his constitutional argument to his broader thesis about progress by pointing out that the parliamentary system had the crucial virtue of adaptability: it was “delicate and serviceable,” and could “shift its power whenever it has to change its work.”

Roger Kimball’s new edition does not aspire to scholarly completeness: the editor has not, for example, chased up all of Bagehot’s unreferenced quotations. But he is to be applauded for making this archetypal Victorian text available to today’s readers. It will be a great asset to anyone teaching courses on nineteenth-century intellectual history.

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