

The Machiavellian as Moralist

BOOK REVIEWED:

Ronald Steel, *Walter Lippmann and the American Century*.
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Ronald Steel's *Walter Lippmann and the American Century* is our best and most complete account of Lippmann's life and writing. Steel admires Lippmann—he calls him “the nation's greatest journalist”—but he sees Lippmann warts and all, and his analysis has a good critical edge.

According to Steel, the tensions in Lippmann's personality allowed him to be involved intellectually in political life, but kept him apart from it emotionally. Since Steel is very much *engagé*, he regrets this, and he rejoices that Vietnam “re-kindled” Lippmann's “sense of outrage,” resulting in what may have been Lippmann's “finest hour.”

If Lippmann was emotionally too distant from politics, however, Steel argues that intellectually he was too close. While Lippmann wanted to observe and speculate, he was interested only in ideas that could affect political practice: “the true use of philosophy is to help us live.” This pragmatic stance, Steel contends, left Lippmann without a “theory,” and that lack more than once prevented him from understanding events.

Steel has a point. Yet Lippmann did have a political teaching of remarkable consistency that ran the gamut of his ideological phases, and it is that doctrine I want to examine. I will not consider Lippmann's notions of foreign policy; Steel spends a good deal of time with them and concludes, rightly, that Lippmann was often shrewd but that his “realism” was vacuous. By contrast, Lippmann's most fundamental principles were far from empty. He saw many of the shortcomings of American liberalism and, implicitly, he turned from Madison to Machiavelli. Lippmann remained, however, a partisan of the modern project for the mastery of nature—common ground for Machiavelli and the liberals—a commitment that limited his comprehension of our political life. The discontents that Lippmann chronicled, and our own disenchantment with the “American Century,” are rooted in the omissions and flaws of that grand design.

Lippmann's childhood shaped his later theorizing. His "dazzling" mother alternately ignored and imposed on him, applying to her son the essentially coquettish style by which she dominated her husband, and Lippmann's needs and feelings were likely to be disregarded or subordinated to some demand of his mother's. Lippmann referred to certain childhoods as governed by shame, fear, and "stale tradition," so that the child learned to surround "instinct" with "terror." He was, as Steel observes, undoubtedly writing about himself. Lippmann's early life taught him that custom, opinion, and tradition are "stale"—hostile or indifferent to human needs and desires. At the same time, emotion was associated in Lippmann's mind with his early sense of weakness and "terror," and dependence seemed inseparable from humiliation.

While in college, Lippmann proclaimed it his political goal to "build a citadel of human joy upon the slum of misery." His imagery suggests a desire for a place in which it would be safe to feel. Equally, it indicates his conviction that life as human beings lived it was a miserable "slum." Lippmann began with Machiavelli's premise that "how we live" is distant from "how we ought to live." He wrote easily of a human "conflict with life," contrasting life's "actual limitations" with humanity's "noble dream." In this basic tenet of Lippmann's, it is life in general—the whole of nature—that is defective; *human* as well as physical nature needs to be overcome. Fact is at odds with value; nature ignores or wars against right. A good political society, in these terms, is contrary to nature, something that can be fashioned only by the art of founders.

All his life, Lippmann admired men of *virtù*, political men with the skill and force necessary to make their visions and instincts prevail over human nature, established opinion, and social institutions. Strength of purpose ranked high on Lippmann's list of excellences. He despised "hesitancy" and "drift"; his most enduring hero was Theodore Roosevelt—"pure act," in Henry Adams's telling description. By contrast, he came to see Woodrow Wilson as "not robust enough to stand the strain of allowing himself to feel too deeply." The great leader, then, is strong enough to feel. His virtue is "robustness," a courage of and in the passions, rather than justice or wisdom.

Lippmann rejected the philosopher king: reason and theory were instruments only, with no claim to rule. He accepted Dewey's idea that thought is a "gesture" toward action, and he argued that a philosopher's work is the record of his own struggle with nature. Reason is the servant of the passions. It also reflects weakness; thought is only a "gesture," a half-step or symbol, decisively inferior unless combined with practical forcefulness.

Political practice, however, has its own shortcomings. Since politics requires dealing with the base materials of real life and "stale tradition," it is an inescapably low activity. Moreover, the detailed demands of politics and governance tend to crowd out any attention to ends, and hence the inertia of opinion and the

“limitations of life” ordinarily prevail over value. Since the human goal is at odds with nature, it demands a vigilant “mastery” asserted against the “drift” of things.

Lippmann acknowledged that one cannot “see the play and be in it too,” but he rejected both alternatives. He intended to direct the play, as a critic prodding the actors if not as a playwright contriving the drama itself. For there was cunning in his admiration of heroes. Correctly, Steel traces Lippmann’s hope for great leaders to a quest for “substitute fathers,” but Lippmann wanted a father strong enough to curb his mother yet not strong enough to possess her. Lippmann dreamed of a father essentially subordinate to himself, and his attitude toward his heroes paralleled Bacon’s stance in relation to nature: he would follow so long as his leader would obey.

In one way, Lippmann was direct in insisting that political rulers be ruled. Fundamentally, he did not see even great leaders as creative. Rather, they discern, by intellect or intuition, the direction of history and necessity. Theodore Roosevelt, Lippmann wrote admiringly, began to move America “in the direction in which it had to go in the Twentieth Century.” The strength of leaders, then, is epiphenomenal. The keys to power are held by those who see the direction of history and the human imperative, and the wise political leader will attend to the foresightful man of affairs. Although Lippmann spoke of the ruler and his adviser as if the two were equal partners, his teaching presumes the superiority of the latter.

This, in turn, helps explain Lippmann’s notion of journalistic “objectivity” and “detachment.” As Steel shows, Lippmann was often entangled with political leaders. In Europe he was virtually a spokesman for JFK’s foreign policy, even suppressing his own disagreements with Kennedy. He promoted Dwight Morrow; he plumped for Al Smith; he succumbed, for a considerable period, to Lyndon Johnson’s celebrated persuasiveness. Evidently, Lippmann did not equate objectivity with lack of involvement. Instead, he meant that the journalistic adviser should retain his moral and emotional autonomy, his sense of a separate, essentially superior, vocation.

That conviction made it easy for Lippmann to justify disloyalty to political leaders and personal friends. The tendency to idealize heroes and then to devalue them ran strong in his personality, but his creed, far from restraining such inclinations, provided a rationalization for betrayal.

Consider, for example, Lippmann’s attack on Dean Acheson at the time when Acheson was a prime target for the McCarthyite right. Acheson, Lippmann argued, failed as a leader because, too inclined to “distrust the instinct of the people,” he had not educated this “instinct” and lacked the public support necessary to govern. The argument is cogent, yet it seemed a severe standard—especially given Lippmann’s critique of mass opinion—to apply to a friend. In fact, Lippmann’s case suggests that politically, there are *only* summer heroes and sun-

shine patriots: any misstep or weakness is grounds for desertion. This is more than surmise: Lippmann wrote that it was a "pity" that Acheson had testified on behalf of Alger Hiss.

Steel is entirely too sympathetic with Lippmann on this point, since he regards the attack on Acheson as "brave" because Lippmann put "public responsibility" above "personal loyalty." It was hardly brave, since Lippmann was going with the McCarthyite current. There are better grounds for saying that he acted out of concern for the public good. Yet both Steel and Lippmann seem blind to the fact that personal loyalty, and the trust of one citizen for another, is an element of the common good. For Plato and Aristotle, *phila* (fraternity or fellowship) is the heart of the good city. Lippmann's theorizing, by contrast, led him to the modern view that mastery is a higher goal than friendship.

In the end Lippmann also deserted John Kennedy, but after Kennedy's death, Lippmann praised his *legend*. The man himself Lippmann found "fumbling," too "cautious," and too eager for popularity. The Kennedy myth, however, exemplified the belief that a "new age has begun and men can become masters of their fate."

But if the mastery is the highest good, the life of a successful tyrant—were it possible—is preferable to that of a citizen, and such a tyrant is worthy of the citizen's admiration. In these terms, dominion is a treasure to be coveted, while it can only be an indignity to be ruled. Democracy can find little to honor in such a teaching. At the very least, any political society informed by the ideal of mastery will have to expend much of its strength in overcoming the sullen resistance of the ruled. On the other hand, since friends share all things, *phila* urges us to share rule; paradoxically, this soft ideal promotes a political society that can devote all its resources to common endeavor. Lippmann's "hard" doctrine, *per contra*, is more vulnerable than he seems to have realized.

Nevertheless, there is a sense in which Lippmann believed that human beings are political animals and that political society exists to elevate rather than to dominate those who are ruled. The "need to be civilized and the capacity" are "inherent in men's natures." By nature, we need to be educated for life in civil society, and this civilizing presumes the existence of government and politics. Political regimes, consequently, are educational. Democracy, Lippmann wrote in 1912, is "not so much a way of expressing the wisdom the people have, as it is a way of enabling them to get wisdom."

There is not much to object to in this formulation, but classical democratic theory suggests that one form of expression, citizenship, is invaluable in "getting" wisdom. Lippmann worried from time to time about political indifference among Americans, but he did not regard citizenship or political participation as essential

to human excellence. H. L. Mencken wrote that although Theodore Roosevelt deluded himself, "he didn't believe in democracy; he believed simply in government." Like his hero, Lippmann insisted that human beings need to be governed; he was not persuaded that they need to govern themselves.

Democratic theory, Lippmann contended in *Public Opinion*, has been too preoccupied with the "origin" of government and too little concerned with its conduct. The people, he conceded, are the right "source" of political power, but the "crucial interest" is the exercise of power. "What determines the quality of civilization is the use made of power. And that cannot be controlled at the source."

Ancient democratic theory, however, does not fit Lippmann's argument, since ancient political philosophy was not particularly concerned with the origin of politics nor did it agree that the "will of the people" legitimates power. Democracy, to its Greek interpreters, was defined by citizenship—the exercise, not the origin of power—and it was justice, not consent, that made government rightful. Lippmann's modern view reflects the belief that, since politics is not natural, the primary concern is to induce human beings to quit the "state of nature" and set up governments. As Steet observes, in this essentially contractarian view, the first concern "is not justice, but tranquility."

Consent is the proper source of government for Lippmann, as it was for the founders of liberal political philosophy, because it is the price of social peace. Popular will is not justified by its goodness—in *Public Opinion*, Lippmann described democracy as "hypnotized" by this belief—but by its power. Civilized society, he wrote in *The Phantom Public*, must find a place for "the force which resides in the weight of numbers"; this "sheer necessity" is the justification for majority rule. The case for majoritarianism, then, is that naturally apolitical individuals will not agree to be governed except by their own consent or by *force majeure*, and majority rule is a "sublimated and denatured civil war."

In equating majority rule with force he was only following John Locke's principle that "it is necessary that the body move that way whither the greater force carries it, which is the consent of the majority; or else it is impossible it should act or continue one body, one community . . ." But Locke limited his remarks to the "state of nature" because he understood that in civil society, force and numbers are not easily equated. Lippmann, by contrast, imports the argument *into* civil society. In Lippmann's own time, however, it had become anachronistic to identify "the many" with "the stronger." Up to the time when Marx wrote the *Manifesto*, there was a rough similarity between numbers and force; in industrial society, numbers count for a good deal less. As Belloc remarked, what matters is who has the Maxim gun. Since democracy, as Lippmann understood it, rested on its superior forcefulness—and hence its effectiveness in producing order—he was bound to regard the foundation of democratic politics as increasingly uncertain.

Lippmann also departed from the liberal tradition in another way. He is willing to give temporal priority to the "origin" of government, but morally he holds that the conduct of government is supreme. Maintaining that government defines the "quality" of civil life, Lippmann turns from Locke to Machiavelli: government does not exist merely to protect private life, but must concern itself with the polity as a whole. Liberalism hoped to make "civilization" control, and ultimately displace, politics, subordinating state to society. Lippmann, by contrast, asserts the supremacy of the political.

But since government must be founded on—and follow—majority opinion, Lippmann's own argument disturbed him. Whatever faith he had in popular judgment was undermined by his growing recognition—stimulated by World War I—that the public was hopelessly dependent on and manipulated by the mass media. Further reflection led him to the conclusion that the public was fundamentally irrational and inept. Democratic theory, as Lippmann interpreted it, had "assumed that the people understood crucial issues and could make rational judgments about them," but the "omnicompetent citizen" was mythic. Stereotypes—our habits, emotions, and prejudices—define and shape what we regard as fact and distort our perception of events.

Lippmann's observations helped demolish traditional empiricism, with its image of the mind as a more or less passive receiver of "facts." Yet he retained the rationalistic presumption that habits and feelings invariably *distort* opinion, and his hope to "master" the "mechanisms of unreason" often seemed to assume that if "unreason" were conquered, reason would regain its rightful place as the guide of conduct.

This stance, however, fatally weakened Lippmann's understanding of democracy and democratic theory. The rational, "omnicompetent" citizen may have been a "centerpiece" of nineteenth-century liberal doctrines that interpreted politics in terms of market economics. The great interpreters of democracy—theorists as diverse as Aristotle, Jefferson, and Rousseau—had no illusions about the public's ability to reason. They argued that prescription, "right opinion," or "moral sentiment" was the foundation of democracy, and praise for democratic life turned on the stability of feeling as opposed to the mutability of reason and on moral as opposed to intellectual virtue.

It was for that reason that classical democratic theory insisted on small states in which public life was within the reach of the senses, as opposed to large political orders that we can understand only as abstractions. Indeed, Lippmann conceded that in small communities, citizens can make adequate judgments. The modern world, however, had grown beyond the reach of the senses, "out of reach, out of sight, out of mind." Modern life requires large and complicated states, and opinion is too slow and too parochial to keep pace with events. Yet Lippmann rejected the central argument of *The Federalist*. "Public opinion," he observed,

“becomes less realistic as the mass to whom information must be conveyed . . . grows larger and more heterogenous.”

To a democrat, this historical vision might suggest the need to resist or even turn back modernity. At the very least, it would call for the comment that history is at odds with what is politically best. Lippmann, however, made no such remarks. He did not lament the pace of change or the passing of the *polis*, and he was scornful of suggestions that we return to “feudalism, folk-dancing and handicrafts.” He did not want to adapt history to democracy; democracy must suit itself to the times. The domination of nature, raising humanity from the “misery and confusion and strife” of the human past, was always for Lippmann the ruling principle of politics and political art.

Of course, Lippmann recognized the troubled state of modern society. He noted the decline of family and community and the corresponding weakening of authority. In 1932 he remarked that the isolated individual becomes “demoralized,” and he continued to warn of the danger of an “escape from freedom.” But he did not propose to protect “ancient habits,” nor did he seriously question the value of progress. Change made institutions outdated and unreliable. Hence, in *A Preface to Morals*, he contended that the individual would have to learn to rely on his own resources, becoming “disinterested” and living with neither “doubt nor ambition . . . frustration nor fear.” Steel is right to call Lippmann’s teaching “less a high religion than an intellectual justification for rolling with the punches.”

Many things might be said about Lippmann’s privatistic “humanism.” Later, he himself expressed doubts about it, treating his argument as merely an “adjustment” to personal problems. On its own terms, however, few human beings could live up to Lippmann’s doctrine, especially—as Santayana wrote—because Lippmann insisted on making demands that only a “high religion” could sustain on the basis of “pure science.” It was not a doctrine for the masses, and Lippmann became convinced that nothing less was required.

Lippmann reserved a high form of happiness for political founders because all “creating . . . enhancing . . . inventing . . . exploring . . . making” came down, finally, to “drawing together the broken, suspicious, frightened, bewildered and huddling masses of men,” the pathetic humanity of Machiavelli’s *Prince*. It seems unlikely, then, that Lippmann ever hoped for much from “government by experts,” although he often spoke of the need for such rule and, in his early writings, hoped that such technocrats would be free from prejudices and stereotypes. Like Weber, Lippmann regarded bureaucrats as soulless, needing the inspiration of charisma. His esteem for bureaucracy fell, in part, because it became clear that the experts had their own stereotypes, and that these resisted high visions. Experts, he discovered, are the enemies of founders, not the allies he once hoped they would be.

As time went on, Lippmann's fears of bureaucratic despotism and his distaste for the tropism of experts increased, and he saw terrible dangers in the growth of governmental power. *The Good Society*, for example, is in part a strident attack on the "collectivism" of the New Deal. But Lippmann continued to argue that economic planning was at least inevitable—"world-wide, cumulative and irresistible." Similarly, he maintained that property was not a right but a means "subordinate to the grand ends of civil society," and he contended that economic well-being had become a "fundamental duty of the state."

Before the Depression, Lippmann advanced the pluralistic thesis that government should "harmonize" rather than "direct" the community. Lippmann knew, however, that harmony can take many forms, and that "harmonizing" a polity does not merely reflect, but *chooses* its direction. This was especially important to him since he loathed "the party bosses, the agents of pressure groups and the magnates of the new media of mass communication." Lippmann preferred art to force, but he insisted that the polity be ruled.

Bureaucracy disturbed Lippmann most because it was so often content to follow public opinion. Lippmann was attracted by Keynesianism because it taught the need to "counteract the mass errors of the individualist crowd"; he judged, correctly, that Keynes's theories presumed officials who were relatively independent of public opinion and willing to oppose it. He rejected democratized planning, but not planning itself.

Modern politics posed a terrible dilemma to Lippmann. Government with mass support could become totalitarian, but government without strong mass support was too weak to survive. Lippmann admired the "rule of law" when it channelled and limited public opinion (he opposed FDR on the Court). He rejected it when it interfered with governing: to his shame, he supported the Japanese internment. Lippmann always fell back on the hope for a Pericles, a great prince able to win the masses but restrained by his vision of the public good.

With the possible exception of Charles de Gaulle, however, leaders continued to disappoint Lippmann. Lippmann's reflections on the "disordered" relation between leaders and followers made him, I think, more inclined to see rulers and ruled as parts of a whole and more disposed to worry about "public philosophy," the common understandings and modes of speech that shape the relations between leaders and led.

He turned to natural law, in *The Public Philosophy*, because he hoped that it would provide a restraint on mass opinion, making the ruled more inclined to limit themselves and the rulers more willing to disregard public sentiment. Natural law served Lippmann for a political myth, a secular symbol with religious associations invoked to support his personal version of *virtù*.

Certainly, Lippmann valued natural law for its practical results rather than its truth. He spoke of the public philosophy as "the assumptions which have to

be accepted in order to live in the historical . . . political order to which we belong." Similarly, he remarked that "words like liberty, equality, fraternity, justice have various meanings which reflect the variability of the flux of things . . . none good for all times." This relativistic historicism, as Steel observes, is at odds with both the tradition of natural law and the more modern idea of natural right. Describing "Jacobin theory," the primary heresy against natural law in his teaching, Lippmann attacked Pestalozzi's theory of education. "In no way that is relevant to the problems of politics and education is a man similar, as Pestalozzi says he is, to a tree planted near fertilizing water." That argument, however, rejects Aristotle as well as Pestalozzi. Education, Lippmann went on, must distinguish between our "first nature" and the "second, civilized nature" it aims to produce. He identified our first nature with Hobbes's grimly apolitical state of nature. Our second nature is "made" in order to "rule over the natural man" and reflects what man "is living for and should become," an "image" that can be seen in "the mirror of history." Lippmann was not concerned to defend human nature or its laws. Rather, he insisted on our ability to master and control that nature through institutions and ideas.

Ideas are "efficacious," he wrote, because we treat them as if they were reality, and hence, they can "organize human behavior." In just this sense, doctrines of natural law can be said to have a "superior validity" when they are "workable" and have a "consensus of support." Lippmann concluded that this sort of natural law prescribed human behavior as it should be rather than attempting to describe what it is. If so, good ends are equivalent, fundamentally, to what works, since consensus is valuable without respect to its content because it avoids disorder and opposition. In the quest for consensus, Lippmann spoke gently to adherents of natural law and was willing to try to satisfy our "need to believe." For Lippmann, however, the highest law was sheer efficacy, Machiavelli's *verità effettuale*, because the first law of human life is the quest for mastery.

Lippmann's thought reflects, as it helped shape, the great weakness of the "American century." Democracy needs citizens, not masters, and is badly taught if it is not instructed in the older wisdom that those who would command need first learn to obey.