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On the Abolition of All Political Parties

SIMONE WEIL



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TRANSLATOR'S FOREWORD

Simon Leys

Once in a blue moon, on strictly non-political issues, dealing purely with questions of ethics, members of Parliament are allowed to make a 'conscience vote.' A conscience vote – what an extraordinary notion! It should be a pleonasm: don't we all assume that *every* vote – by definition – is being made by MPs *who listen to their consciences*, instead of following some diktat from a political party?

The first quality of a politician is integrity. Integrity requires independence of judgment. Independence of judgment rejects partisan edicts, for partisan edicts stifle in a man's conscience all sense of justice and the very taste of truth.

When such basic truths are ignored, Parliament turns into an unseemly circus, provoking dismay and contempt in the general public across all party lines.

Translator's Foreword

When voters distrust and despise their representatives, democracy itself is imperilled.

While I feel privileged to live in a Western democracy, now and then shocking aspects of partisan politics inspire me to read again Simone Weil's comments on this particular evil. Though her essay was written nearly seventy years ago, in very different circumstances, it seems to me greatly relevant for us here today. I therefore undertook to translate it into English, in the hope that it might provide the starting point for a healthy debate.

Though I have no particular competence that would enable me to adjudicate dissenting views, there is one objection which, I think, should be refuted from the start: some may object that Weil is hopelessly utopian, unrealistic and impractical. Such an objection entirely misses the point, which was well illustrated by Chesterton in a famous parable:

Suppose that a great commotion arises in the street about something, let us say a lamp-post, which many influential persons desire to pull down. A grey-clad monk, who is the spirit of the Middle Ages, is approached upon the matter and begins to say, in the arid manner of the Schoolmen,

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'Let us first of all consider, my brethren, the value of Light. If Light be in itself good—' At this point, he is somewhat excusably knocked down. All the people make a rush for the lamp-post, the lamp-post is down in ten minutes, and they go about congratulating each other on their unmediaeval practicality. But as things go on they do not work out so easily. Some people have pulled the lamp-post down because they wanted the electric light; some because they wanted old iron; some because they wanted darkness, because their deeds were evil. Some thought it not enough of a lamp-post, some too much; some acted because they wanted to smash municipal machinery; some because they wanted to smash anything. And there is war in the night, no man knowing whom he strikes. So, gradually and inevitably, today, tomorrow or the next day, there comes back the conviction that the monk was right after all, and that all depends on what is the philosophy of Light. Only what we might have discussed under the gas-lamp, we now must discuss in the dark.'

¹ G.K. Chesterton, *Heretics* (1905), end of chapter I, 'Introductory Remarks on the Importance of Orthodoxy.'

Translator's Foreword

Let us now discuss the philosophy of political parties under the light of Simone Weil: going back to first principles.

S.L.

Canberra, August 2012

NOTE ON THE TEXT

Note sur la suppression générale des partis politiques was written in 1943, at the very end of Weil's tragically short life. She was in London, where she had rallied the Free French around Général de Gaulle; she was deeply dismayed by various attempts of French politicians in exile to revive the old and destructive practices of party politics – rivalries and factionalism. Finally, as a matter of principle, she resigned from all her duties with the Free French on 26 July. She was already in hospital, where she died shortly afterwards, on 24 August, aged thirty-four.

This essay was published for the first time seven years later, in the monthly journal *La Table ronde* (No. 26, February 1950). The publication was immediately hailed both by André Breton and by Alain (the pen-name of Emile Chartier, a former philosophy teacher of Simone Weil and himself a distinguished philosopher and writer).

Note on the Text

It was subsequently reissued in book form by Gallimard (1953), and more recently (2008) by Climats-Flammarion, in an edition that includes both Breton's and Alain's earlier articles. It will also form part of the final volume of the monumental *Oeuvres complètes de Simone Weil*, edited by Florence de Lussy (Gallimard).

I have also included a short yet masterly essay by Czesław Miłosz, written in 1960, presenting the life and thought of Simone Weil. I have added a note on Miłosz himself and his discovery of Weil, thanks to his friendship with Camus.

ON THE ABOLITION
of
ALL POLITICAL PARTIES

Simone Weil

The word 'party' is taken here in the meaning it has in Continental Europe. In Anglo-Saxon countries, this same word designates an altogether different reality, which has its roots in English tradition and is therefore not easily transposable elsewhere. The experience of a century and a half shows this clearly enough.¹ In the Anglo-Saxon world, political parties have an element of game, of sport, which is only conceivable in an institution of aristocratic origin, whereas in institutions that were plebeian from the start, everything must always be serious.

At the time of the 1789 Revolution, the very notion of 'party' did not enter into French political thinking – except as an evil that ought to be prevented. There was, however, a *Club des Jacobins*; at first it merely provided an arena for free debate. Its subsequent transformation was by no means inevitable; it was only under the double pressure of war and the guillotine that it eventually turned into a totalitarian party.

¹ Written in 1943. [Translator's note]

Factional infighting during the Terror is best summed up by Tomskey's memorable saying: 'One party in power and all the others in jail.' Thus, in Continental Europe, totalitarianism was the original sin of all political parties.

Political parties were established in European public life partly as an inheritance from the Terror, and partly under the influence of British practice. The mere fact that they exist today is not in itself a sufficient reason for us to preserve them. The only legitimate reason for preserving anything is its goodness. The evils of political parties are all too evident; therefore, the problem that should be examined is this: do they contain enough good to compensate for their evils and make their preservation desirable?

It would be far more relevant, however, to ask: do they do the slightest bit of good? Are they not pure, or nearly pure, evil? If they are evil, it is clear that, in fact and in practice, they can only generate further evil. This is an article of faith: 'A good tree can never bear bad fruit, nor a rotten tree beautiful fruit.'

First, we must ascertain what is the criterion of goodness.

It can only be truth and justice; and, then, the public interest.

Democracy, majority rule, are not good in themselves. They are merely means towards goodness, and their effectiveness is uncertain. For instance, if, instead of Hitler, it had been the Weimar Republic that decided, through a most rigorous democratic and legal process, to put the Jews in concentration camps, and cruelly torture them to death, such measures would not have been one atom more legitimate than the present Nazi policies (and such a possibility is by no means far-fetched). Only what is just can be legitimate. In no circumstances can crime and mendacity ever be legitimate.

Our republican ideal was entirely developed from a notion originally expressed by Rousseau: the notion of the 'general will.' However, the true meaning of this notion was lost almost from the start, because it is complex and demands a high level of attention.

Few books are as beautiful, strong, clear-sighted and articulate as *Le Contrat social* (with the exception of some of its chapters). It is also said that few books have exerted such an influence – and yet everything has happened, and still happens today, as if no-one ever read it.

Rousseau took as his starting point two premises. First, reason perceives and chooses what is just and innocently useful, whereas every crime is motivated by passion. Second, reason is identical in all men, whereas

their passions most often differ. From this it follows that if, on a common issue, everyone thinks alone and then expresses his opinion, and if, afterwards, all these opinions are collected and compared, most probably they will coincide inasmuch as they are just and reasonable, whereas they will differ inasmuch as they are unjust or mistaken.

It is only this type of reasoning that allows one to conclude that a universal consensus may point at the truth.

Truth is one. Justice is one. There is an infinite variety of errors and injustices. Thus all men converge on what is just and true, whereas mendacity and crime make them diverge without end. Since union generates strength, one may hope to find in it a material support whereby truth and justice will prevail over crime and error.

This, in turn, will require an appropriate mechanism. If democracy can provide such a mechanism, it is good. Otherwise, it is not.

In the eyes of Rousseau (and he was right), the unjust will of an entire nation is by no means superior to the unjust will of a single individual.

However, Rousseau also thought that, most of the time, the general will of a whole nation might in fact

conform to justice, for the simple reason that individual passions will neutralise one another and act as mutual counterweights. For him, this was the only reason why the popular will should be preferred to the individual will.

Similarly, a certain mass of water, even though it is made of particles in constant movement and endlessly colliding, achieves perfect balance and stillness. It reflects the images of objects with unfailing accuracy; it appears perfectly flat; it reveals the exact density of any immersed object.

If individuals who are pushed to crime and mendacity by their passions can still form, in similar fashion, a people that is truthful and just, then it is appropriate for such a people to be sovereign. A democratic constitution is good if, first of all, it enables the people to achieve this state of equilibrium; only then can the people's will be executed.

The true spirit of 1789 consists in thinking, not that a thing is just because such is the people's will, but that, in certain conditions, the will of the people is more likely than any other will to conform to justice.

In order to apply the notion of the general will, several conditions must first be met. Two of these are particularly important.

First, at the time when the people become aware of their own intention and express it, there must not exist any form of collective passion.

It is completely obvious that Rousseau's reasoning ceases to apply once collective passion comes into play. Rousseau himself knew this well. Collective passion is an infinitely more powerful compulsion to crime and mendacity than any individual passion. In this case, evil impulses, far from cancelling one another out, multiply their force a thousandfold. Their pressure becomes overwhelming – no-one could withstand it, except perhaps a true saint.

When water is set in motion by a violent, impetuous current, it ceases to reflect images. Its surface is no longer level; it can no more measure densities. Whether it is moved by a single current or by several conflicting ones, the disturbance is the same.

When a country is in the grip of a collective passion, it becomes unanimous in crime. If it becomes prey to two, or four, or five, or ten collective passions, it is divided among several criminal gangs. Divergent passions do not neutralise one another, as would be the case with a cluster of individual passions. There are too few of them, and each is too strong for any neutralisation to take place. Competition exasperates them; they

clash with infernal noise, and amid such din the fragile voices of justice and truth are drowned.

When a country is moved by a collective passion, the likelihood is that any individual will be closer to justice and reason than is the general will – or rather, the caricature of the general will.

The second condition is that the people should express their will regarding the problems of public life – and not merely choose among various individuals; or, worse, among various irresponsible organisations (for the general will does not have the slightest connection with such choices).

If, in 1789, there was to a certain degree a genuine expression of the general will – even though a system of people's representation had been adopted, for want of ability to invent any alternative – it was only because they had something far more important than elections. All the living energies of the country – and the country was then overflowing with life – sought expression through means of the *cahiers de revendications* (statements of grievances). Most of those who were to become the people's representatives first became known through their participation in this process, and they retained the warmth of the experience. They could feel that the people were listening to their words, watching to see if

their aspirations would be correctly interpreted. For a while – all too briefly – these representatives truly were simple channels for the expression of public opinion.

Such a thing was never to happen again.

Merely to state the two conditions required for the expression of the general will shows that we have never known anything that resembles, however faintly, a democracy. We pretend that our present system is democratic, yet the people never have the chance nor the means to express their views on any problem of public life. Any issue that does not pertain to particular interests is abandoned to collective passions, which are systematically and officially inflamed.

The very way in which words such as ‘democracy’ and ‘republic’ are being used obliges us to examine with extreme attention two problems:

1. How to give the men who form the French nation the opportunity to express from time to time their judgment on the main problems of public life?

2. How, when questions are being put to the people, can one prevent their being infected by collective passions?

If one neglects to consider these two points, it is useless to speak of republican legitimacy.

Solutions will not easily be found. Yet, after careful

examination, it appears obvious that any solution will necessarily involve, as the very first step, the abolition of all political parties.

*

To assess political parties according to the criteria of truth, justice and the public interest, let us first identify their essential characteristics.

There are three of these:

1. A political party is a machine to generate collective passions.

2. A political party is an organisation designed to exert collective pressure upon the minds of all its individual members.

3. The first objective and also the ultimate goal of any political party is its own growth, without limit.

Because of these three characteristics, every party is totalitarian – potentially, and by aspiration. If one party is not actually totalitarian, it is simply because those parties that surround it are no less so. These three characteristics are factual truths – evident to anyone who has ever had anything to do with the everyday activities of political parties.

As to the third: it is a particular instance of the phenomenon which always occurs whenever thinking

individuals are dominated by a collective structure – a reversal of the relation between ends and means.

Everywhere, without exception, all the things that are generally considered ends are in fact, by nature, by essence, and in a most obvious way, mere means. One could cite countless examples of this from every area of life: money, power, the state, national pride, economic production, universities, etc., etc.

Goodness alone is an end. Whatever belongs to the domain of facts pertains to the category of means. Collective thinking, however, cannot rise above the factual realm. It is an animal form of thinking. Its dim perception of goodness merely enables it to mistake this or that means for an absolute good.

The same applies to political parties. In principle, a party is an instrument to serve a certain conception of the public interest. This is true even for parties which represent the interests of one particular social group, for there is always a certain conception of the public interest according to which the public interest and these particular interests should coincide. Yet this conception is extremely vague. This is true without exception and quite uniformly. Parties that are loosely structured and parties that are strictly organised are equally vague as regards doctrine. No man, even if he

had conducted advanced research in political studies, would ever be able to provide a clear and precise description of the doctrine of any party, including (should he himself belong to one) of his own.

People are generally reluctant to acknowledge such a thing. If they were to confess it, they would naively be inclined to attribute their incapacity to their own intellectual limitations, whereas, in fact, the very phrase ‘a political party’s doctrine’ cannot have any meaning.

An individual, even if he spends his entire life writing and pondering problems of ideas, only rarely elaborates a doctrine. A group of people can never do so. A doctrine cannot be a collective product.

One can speak, it is true, of Christian doctrine, Hindu doctrine, Pythagorean doctrine, etc. – but then what is meant by this word is neither individual nor collective; it refers to something that is infinitely higher than these two realms. It is purely and simply the truth.

The goal of a political party is something vague and unreal. If it were real, it would demand a great effort of attention, for the mind does not easily encompass the concept of the public interest. Conversely, the existence of the party is something concrete and obvious; it is perceived without any effort. Therefore, unavoidably, the party becomes in fact its own end.

This then amounts to idolatry, for God alone is legitimately his own end.

The transition is easily achieved. First, an axiom is set: for the party to serve effectively the concept of the public interest that justifies its existence, there is one necessary and sufficient condition: it should secure a vast amount of power.

Yet, once obtained, no finite amount of power will ever be deemed sufficient. The absence of thought creates for the party a permanent state of impotence, which, in turn, is attributed to the insufficient amount of power already obtained. Should the party ever become the absolute ruler of its own country, international contingencies will soon impose new limitations.

Therefore the essential tendency of all political parties is towards totalitarianism, first on the national scale and then on the global scale. And it is precisely because the notion of the public interest which each party invokes is itself a fiction, an empty shell devoid of all reality, that the quest for total power becomes an absolute need. Every reality necessarily implies a limit – but what is utterly devoid of existence cannot possibly encounter any form of limitation. It is for this reason that there is a natural affinity between totalitarianism and mendacity.

Many people, it is true, never contemplate the possibility of total power; the very thought of it scares them. The notion is vertiginous and it takes a sort of greatness to face it. When these people become involved with a political party, they merely wish it to grow – but to grow as a thing that knows no limit. If this year there are three more members than last year, or if the party has collected one hundred francs more, they are pleased. They wish things might endlessly continue in the same direction. In no circumstance could they ever believe that their party might have too many members, too many votes, too much money.

The revolutionary temperament tends to envision a totality. The petit-bourgeois temperament prefers the cosy picture of a slow, uninterrupted and endless progress. In both cases, the material growth of the party becomes the sole criterion by which to measure the good and the bad of all things. It is exactly as if the party were a head of cattle to be fattened, and as if the universe was created for its fattening.

One cannot serve both God and Mammon. If one's criterion of goodness is not goodness itself, one loses the very notion of what is good.

Once the growth of the party becomes a criterion of goodness, it follows inevitably that the party will

exert a collective pressure upon people's minds. This pressure is very real; it is openly displayed; it is professed and proclaimed. It should horrify us, but we are already too much accustomed to it.

Political parties are organisations that are publicly and officially designed for the purpose of killing in all souls the sense of truth and of justice. Collective pressure is exerted upon a wide public by the means of propaganda. The avowed purpose of propaganda is not to impart light, but to persuade. Hitler saw very clearly that the aim of propaganda must always be to enslave minds. All political parties make propaganda. A party that would not do so would disappear, since all its competitors practise it. All parties confess that they make propaganda. However mendacious they may be, none is bold enough to pretend that in doing so, it is merely educating the public and informing people's judgment.

Political parties do profess, it is true, to educate those who come to them: supporters, young people, new members. But this is a lie: it is not an education, it is a conditioning, a preparation for the far more rigorous ideological control imposed by the party upon its members.

Just imagine: if a member of the party (elected member of parliament, candidate or simple activist)

were to make a public commitment, 'Whenever I shall have to examine any political or social issue, I swear I will absolutely forget that I am the member of a certain political group; my sole concern will be to ascertain what should be done in order to best serve the public interest and justice.'

Such words would not be welcome. His comrades and even many other people would accuse him of betrayal. Even the least hostile would say, 'Why then did he join a political party?' – thus naively confessing that, when joining a political party, one gives up the idea of serving nothing but the public interest and justice. This man would be expelled from his party, or at least denied pre-selection; he would certainly never be elected.

Furthermore, it seems inconceivable that anyone would dare to utter such words. In fact, if I am not mistaken, such a thing has never happened. If such language has ever been used, it was only by politicians who needed to govern with the support of other parties. And even then, the words had a somewhat dishonourable ring to them. Conversely, everybody feels that it is completely natural, sensible and honourable for someone to say, 'As a conservative ...' or 'As a Socialist, I do think that ...'

Actually, this sort of speech is not limited to partisan politics; people are not ashamed to say, 'As a Frenchman, I think that ...' or 'As a Catholic, I think that ...'

Some little girls, who declared they were committed to Gaullism as the French equivalent of Hitlerism, added: 'Truth is relative, even in geometry.' Indeed, this is the heart of the matter.

If there were no truth, it would be right to think in such or such a way, when one happens to be in such or such a position. Just as one's hair is black, brown, red or blond because one happened to be born that way, one may also express such or such a thought. Thought, like hair, is then the product of a physical process of elimination.

If, however, one acknowledges that there is one truth, one cannot think anything but the truth. One thinks what one thinks, not because one happens to be French or Catholic or Socialist, but simply because the irresistible light of evidence forces one to think this and not that.

If there is no evidence, if there is doubt, then it is evident that, given the available knowledge, the matter is uncertain. If there is a small probability on one side, it is *evident* that there is a small probability – and so on. In any case, inner light always affords whoever

seeks it an evident answer. The content of the answer may be more or less affirmative – never mind. It is always susceptible to revision, yet no correction can be effected unless it is through an increase of inner light.

If a man, member of a party, is absolutely determined to follow, in all his thinking, nothing but the inner light, to the exclusion of everything else, he cannot make known to the party such a resolution. To that extent, he is deceiving the party. He thus finds himself in a state of mendacity; the only reason why he tolerates such a situation is that he needs to join a party in order to play an effective part in public affairs. But then this need is evil, and one must put an end to it by abolishing political parties.

A man who has not taken the decision to remain exclusively faithful to the inner light establishes mendacity at the very centre of his soul. For this, his punishment is inner darkness.

It would be useless to attempt an escape by establishing a distinction between inner freedom and external discipline, for this would entail lying to the public, towards whom every candidate, every elected representative, has a special duty of truthfulness. If I am going to say, in the name of my party, things which

I know are the opposite of truth and justice, should I first issue a warning to that effect? If I don't, I lie.

Of these three sorts of lies – lying to the party, lying to the public, lying to oneself – the first is by far the least evil. Yet if belonging to a party compels one to lie all the time, in every instance, then the very existence of political parties is absolutely and unconditionally an evil.

In advertisements for public meetings, one frequently reads things like this: 'Mr X will present the Communist point of view (on the issue which the meeting shall address). Mr Y will present the Socialist point of view. Mr Z will present the Liberal point of view.'

How do these wretches manage to know the various points of view they are supposed to present? Who can have instructed them? Which oracle? A collectivity has no tongue and no pen. All the organs of expression are individual. The Socialist collectivity is not embodied in any person, and neither is the Liberal one. Stalin embodies the Communist collectivity, but he lives far away and it is not possible to reach him by telephone before the meeting.

No, Mr X, Mr Y, Mr Z each consulted themselves. Yet, if they were honest, they would first have put themselves in a special psychological state – a state similar to

the one which is usually attained in the atmosphere of Communist, Socialist or Liberal gatherings.

If, having put oneself in such a state, one were to abandon oneself to automatic reactions, one would quite naturally speak a language in full conformity with the Communist, Socialist or Liberal 'point of view.' To achieve this result, there is but one condition: one must absolutely resist the contemplation of truth and justice. If such contemplation were to take place, one would run a horrible risk: one might express a 'personal point of view.'

When Pontius Pilate asked Jesus, 'What is the truth?', Jesus did not reply. He had already answered when he said, 'I came to bear witness to the truth.'

There is only one answer. Truth is all the thoughts that surge in the mind of a thinking creature whose unique, total, exclusive desire is for the truth.

Mendacity, error (the two words are synonymous), are the thoughts of those who do not desire truth, or those who desire truth plus something else. For instance, they desire truth, but they also desire conformity with such or such received ideas.

Yet how can we desire truth if we have no prior knowledge of it? This is the mystery of all mysteries. Words that express a perfection which no mind can

conceive of – God, truth, justice – silently evoked with desire, but without any preconception, have the power to lift up the soul and flood it with light.

It is when we desire truth with an empty soul and without attempting to guess its content that we receive the light. Therein resides the entire mechanism of attention.

It is impossible to examine the frightfully complex problems of public life while attending to, on the one hand, truth, justice and the public interest, and, on the other, maintaining the attitude that is expected of members of a political movement. The human attention span is limited – it does not allow for simultaneous consideration of these two concerns. In fact, whoever would care for the one is bound to neglect the other.

Yet no suffering befalls whoever relinquishes justice and truth, whereas the party system has painful penalties to chastise insubordination. These penalties extend into all areas of life: career, affections, friendship, reputation, the external aspect of honour, sometimes even family life. The Communist Party developed this system to perfection.

Even for those who do not compromise their inner integrity, the existence of such penalties unavoidably distorts their judgment. If they try to react against party

control, this very impulse to react is itself unrelated to the truth, and as such should be suspect; and so, in turn, should be this suspicion ... True attention is a state so difficult for any human creature, so violent, that any emotional disturbance can derail it. Therefore, one must always endeavour strenuously to protect one's inner faculty of judgment against the turmoil of personal hopes and fears.

If a man undertakes extremely complex numerical calculations knowing that he will be flogged every time he obtains an even number as the final result, he finds himself in an acute predicament. Something in the sensual part of his soul will induce him each time to give a slight twist to the calculations, in order to obtain an odd number at the end. His wish to react may indeed lead him to find even numbers where there are none. Caught in this oscillation, his attention is no longer pure. If the complexity of the calculations demands his total attention, inevitably he will make many mistakes – even if he happens to be very intelligent, very brave and deeply attached to the truth.

What should he do? It is simple. If he can escape from the grip of the people who wield the whip, he must run away. If he could have evaded his tormentors in the first place, he should have.

It is exactly the same when it comes to political parties.

When a country has political parties, sooner or later it becomes impossible to intervene effectively in public affairs without joining a party and playing the game. Whoever is concerned for public affairs will wish his concern to bear fruit. Those who care about the public interest must either forget their concern and turn to other things, or submit to the grind of the parties. In the latter case, they shall experience worries that will soon supersede their original concern for the public interest.

Political parties are a marvellous mechanism which, on the national scale, ensures that not a single mind can attend to the effort of perceiving, in public affairs, what is good, what is just, what is true. As a result – except for a very small number of fortuitous coincidences – nothing is decided, nothing is executed, but measures that run contrary to the public interest, to justice and to truth.

If one were to entrust the organisation of public life to the devil, he could not invent a more clever device.

If the present reality appears slightly less dark, it is only because political parties have not yet swallowed everything. But, in fact, is it truly less dark? Have recent

events not shown that the situation is every bit as awful as I have just painted it?

We must acknowledge that the mechanism of spiritual and intellectual oppression which characterises political parties was historically introduced by the Catholic Church in its fight against heresy.

A convert who joins the Church, or a faithful believer who, after inner deliberation, decides to remain in the Church, perceives what is true and good in Catholic dogma. However, as he crosses the threshold, he automatically registers his implicit acceptance of countless specific articles of faith which he cannot possibly have considered – to examine them all a lifetime of study would not be sufficient, even for a person of superior intelligence and culture.

How can anyone subscribe to statements the existence of which he is not even aware? By simply and unconditionally submitting to the authority which issued them!

This is why Saint Thomas Aquinas wished to have his affirmations supported only by the authority of the Church, to the exclusion of any other argumentation. Nothing more is needed for those who accept this authority, he said, and no other argument will persuade those who reject it.

Thus the inner light of evidence, this capacity of perception given from above to the human soul in answer to its desire for truth, is discarded or reduced to discharging menial chores, instead of guiding the spiritual destiny of human creatures. The force that impels thought is no longer the open, unconditional desire for truth, but merely a desire to conform with pre-established teachings.

That the Church established by Christ could thus, to such a large extent, stifle the spirit of truth (in spite of the Inquisition, it failed to stifle it entirely – because mysticism always afforded a safe shelter) is a tragic irony. Many people remarked on it, though another tragic irony was less noticed: the stifling of the spirit by the Inquisitorial regime provoked a revolt – and this very revolt took an orientation that, in turn, fostered further stifling of the spirit.

The Reformation and Renaissance humanism – twin products of this revolt – after three centuries of maturation, inspired in large part the spirit of 1789. This, after some delay, resulted in our democracy, based on the interplay of political parties, each of which is a small secular church that wields its own menace of excommunication. The influence of these parties has contaminated the entire mentality of our age.

When someone joins a party, it is usually because he has perceived, in the activities and propaganda of this party, a number of things that appeared to him just and good. Still, he has probably never studied the position of the party on all the problems of public life. When joining the party, he therefore also endorses a number of positions which he does not know. In fact, he submits his thinking to the authority of the party. As, later on, little by little, he begins to learn these positions, he will accept them without further examination. This replicates exactly the situation of whoever joins the Catholic orthodoxy along the lines of Saint Thomas.

If a man were to say, as he applied for his party membership card, 'I agree with the party on this and that question; I have not yet studied its other positions and thus I entirely reserve my opinion, pending further information,' he would probably be advised to come back at a later date.

In fact – and with very few exceptions – when a man joins a party, he submissively adopts a mental attitude which he will express later on with words such as, 'As a monarchist, as a Socialist, I think that ...' It is so comfortable! It amounts to having no thoughts at all. Nothing is more comfortable than not having to think.

As regards the third characteristic of political parties – that they are machines to generate collective passions – this is so spectacularly evident that it scarcely needs further demonstration. Collective passion is the only source of energy at the disposal of parties with which to make propaganda and to exert pressure upon the soul of every member.

One recognises that the partisan spirit makes people blind, makes them deaf to justice, pushes even decent men cruelly to persecute innocent targets. One recognises it, and yet nobody suggests getting rid of the organisations that generate such evils.

Intoxicating drugs are prohibited. Some people are nevertheless addicted to them. But there would be many more addicts if the state were to organise the sale of opium and cocaine in all tobacconists, accompanied by advertising posters to encourage consumption.

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In conclusion: the institution of political parties appears to be an almost unmixed evil. They are bad in principle, and in practice their impact is noxious. The abolition of parties would prove almost wholly beneficial. It would be a highly legitimate initiative in principle, and in practice could only have a good effect.

At elections, candidates would tell voters not, 'I wear such and such a label' – which tells the public nearly nothing as regards their actual position on actual issues – but rather, 'My views are such and such on such and such important problems.'

Elected politicians would associate and disassociate following the natural and changing flow of affinities. I may very well agree with Mr A on the question of colonialism, yet disagree with him on the issue of agrarian ownership, and my relations with Mr B may be the exact reverse.

The artificial crystallisation into political parties coincides so little with genuine affinities that a member of parliament will often find himself disagreeing with a colleague from within his own party, and in complete agreement with a politician from another party. How many times, in Germany in 1932, might a Communist and a Nazi conversing in the street have been struck by a sort of mental vertigo on discovering that they were in complete agreement on all issues!

Outside parliament, intellectual circles would naturally form around journals of political ideas. These circles should remain fluid. This fluidity is the hallmark of a circle based on natural affinities; it distinguishes a circle from a party and prevents it from

exerting a noxious influence. When one cultivates friendly relations with the director of a certain journal and with its regular contributors, when one occasionally writes for it, one can say that one is *in touch* with this journal and its circle, but one is not aware of *being part* of it; there is no clear boundary between inside and outside. Further away, there are those who read the journal and happen to know one or two of its contributors. Further again, there are regular readers who derive inspiration from the journal. Further still, there are occasional readers. Yet none would ever think or say, 'As a person related to such journal, I do think that ...'

At election time, if contributors to a journal are political candidates, it should be forbidden for them to invoke their connection with the journal, and it should be forbidden for the journal to endorse their candidacy, to support it directly or indirectly, or even to mention it. Any 'Association of the friends' of this sort of journal should be forbidden. If any journal were ever to prevent its contributors from writing for other publications, it should be forced to close.

All this would require a complete set of press regulations, making it impossible for dishonourable publications to carry on with their activity, since none would wish to be associated with them.

Whenever a circle of ideas and debate would be tempted to crystallise and create a formal membership, the attempt should be repressed by law and punished.

Naturally, clandestine parties might appear. It would not be honourable to join them. The members of these underground parties would no longer be able to turn the enslavement of their minds into a public show. They would not be allowed to make any propaganda for their party. The party would have no chance of keeping them prisoner of a tight web of interests, passions and obligations.

Whenever a law is impartial and fair, and is based upon a clear view of the public interest, easily grasped by everyone, it always succeeds in weakening what it forbids. The penalties that are attached to infringements scarcely need be applied: the mere existence of the law is itself enough to neutralise its target. This intrinsic prestige of the law is a reality of public life which has been too long forgotten and ought to be revived and made good use of. The existence of clandestine parties should not cause significant harm – especially compared with the disastrous effects of the activities of legal parties.

Generally speaking, a careful examination reveals no inconveniences that would result from the abolition

of political parties. Strange paradox: measures like this, which present no inconvenience, are also the least likely to be adopted. People think, if it is so simple, why was it not done long ago?

And yet, most often, great things are easy and simple.

This particular measure would exert a healthy, cleansing influence well beyond the domain of public affairs, for the party spirit has infected everything.

The institutions that regulate the public life of a country always influence the general mentality – such is the prestige of power. People have progressively developed the habit of thinking, in all domains, only in terms of being ‘in favour of’ or ‘against’ any opinion, and afterwards they seek arguments to support one of these two options. This is an exact transposition of the party spirit.

Just as within political parties, there are some democratically minded people who accept a plurality of parties, similarly, in the realm of opinion, there are broad-minded people willing to acknowledge the value of opinions with which they disagree. They have completely lost the concept of true and false.

Others, having taken a position in favour of a certain opinion, refuse to examine any dissenting view. This is a transposition of the totalitarian spirit.

When Einstein visited France, all the people who more or less belonged to the intellectual circles, including other scientists, divided themselves into two camps: for Einstein or against him. Any new scientific idea finds in the scientific world supporters and enemies – both sides inflamed to a deplorable degree with the partisan spirit. The intellectual world is permanently full of trends and factions, in various stages of crystallisation.

In art and literature, this phenomenon is even more prevalent. Cubism and Surrealism were each a sort of party. Some people were Gidian and some Maurrassian. To achieve celebrity, it is useful to be surrounded by a gang of admirers, all possessed by the partisan spirit.

In the same fashion, there was no great difference between being devoted to a party or being devoted to a church – or being devoted to anti-religion. One was in favour of, or against, belief in God, for or against Christianity, and so on. When talking about religion, the point was even reached where one spoke of ‘militants.’

Even in school, one can think of no better way to stimulate the minds of children than to invite them to take sides – for or against. They are presented with a sentence from a great author and asked, ‘Do you agree, yes or no? Develop your arguments.’ At examination

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time, the poor wretches, having only three hours to write their dissertations, cannot, at the start, spare more than five minutes to decide whether they agree or not. And yet it would have been so easy to tell them, 'Meditate on this text, and then express the ideas that come to your mind.'

Nearly everywhere – often even when dealing with purely technical problems – instead of thinking, one merely takes sides: for or against. Such a choice replaces the activity of the mind. This is an intellectual leprosy; it originated in the political world and then spread through the land, contaminating all forms of thinking.

This leprosy is killing us; it is doubtful whether it can be cured without first starting with the abolition of all political parties.

THE IMPORTANCE
of
SIMONE WEIL

Czeslaw Milosz