THE PRINCIPLE OF FEDERATION

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1. Political Dualism—Authority and Liberty: Opposition and Interconnection of the Two Ideas

Before saying what is meant by federation, it is as well to devote a few pages to the origin and context of the idea. The theory of the federal system is quite new; I think I may even say that no one has ever presented it before. But it is intimately bound up with the theory of government in general—to speak more precisely, it is its necessary conclusion.

Among the many constitutions proposed by philosophy and put to the test by history, one alone reconciles the demands of justice, order, liberty, and stability, without which neither society nor the individual can live. Truth, like nature, is one. It would be strange if it were otherwise for the mind and for its grandest work, society. All writers have recognized the unity of human legislation; and, without denying the diversity in application dictated by time and place and the special character of each nation, or neglecting the scope of discretion in every political system, all have been obliged to accommodate their doctrines to it. I shall undertake to show that this one constitution, which it will be the greatest triumph of human reason to have grasped, is nothing other than the federal system. Every form of government which departs from it must be considered an empirical creation, a preliminary sketch, more or less useful, under which society finds shelter for a moment, and which, like the Arab’s tent, is folded up the morning after it has been erected. Rigorous analysis is therefore essential here, and the first truth which this account should impress upon the reader is that politics, though infinitely flexible as an applied art, is an exact science in its regulative principles, no more or less so than geometry or algebra.

Political order rests fundamentally on two contrary principles; authority and liberty. The one initiates, the other concludes; the one goes hand-in-hand with obedient faith, the other with free reason.

I doubt that a single voice will be raised against this first proposition. Authority and liberty are as old as the human race; they are born with us, and live on in each of us. Let us note but one thing, which few readers would
notice otherwise: these two principles form a couple, so to speak, whose two terms, though indissolubly linked together, are nevertheless irreducible one to the other, and remain, despite all our efforts, perpetually at odds. Authority necessarily presupposes a liberty which recognizes or denies it; in turn liberty, in its political sense, likewise presupposes an authority which confronts it, repressing or tolerating it. Suppress one of the two, and the other has no sense: authority, without a Liberty to examine it, to resist or submit to it, is an empty word; liberty, without an authority as counterweight, is meaningless.

The principle of authority, familial, patriarchal, magisterial, monarchical, theocratic, tending to hierarchy, centralization, absorption, is given by nature, and is thus essentially predestined, divine, as you will. Its scope, resisted and impeded by the opposing principle, may expand or contract indefinitely, but can never be extinguished.

The principle of liberty, personal, individualist, critical, the instrument of dividing, choosing, arranging, is supplied by the mind. Essentially a principle of judgment, then, it is superior to the nature which it makes use of, and to the necessity which it masters. Its aspirations are unbounded; it is, like its contrary, subject to extension or restriction, but it likewise cannot be exhausted as it grows, nor can it be nullified by constraint.

It follows that in every society, even the most authoritarian, liberty necessarily plays some part; likewise in every society, even the most liberal, some portion is reserved for authority. This requirement is absolute; no political arrangement is exempt. Despite the efforts of the understanding to resolve diversity into unity, the two principles persist, always in opposition to each other. Political development arises from their inescapable logic and their mutual interaction.

All this, I confess, may contain little that is really new, and some readers will ask me if that is all I have to offer them. No one denies nature or mind, whatever the obscurity that may surround them; not one writer rejects either authority or liberty, even though their reconciliation, separation, or elimination seem equally impossible. What, then, is my purpose in reciting this commonplace?

What I have to say is this: that all political constitutions, all systems of government, including federations, fall within the scope of one formula, the balancing of authority by liberty, and vice versa; that in consequence the categories adopted by the great majority of writers, since Aristotle’s time, in order to classify governments, differentiate states, and distinguish among the nations, monarchy, aristocracy, democracy, etc.—the federation excepted here—are reduced to hypothetical, empirical constructs, in which reason and justice find only imperfect satisfaction; that all established orders, founded upon these incomplete ideas, differ only from the standpoint of interest, prejudice, and habit, and are at bottom similar and equivalent; that were it not for the harm done by these false systems, in which ruffled passions, affronted interests, and vain self-deceptions are at odds with one another, we would be very close to agreement on fundamentals; that, finally, all those partisan