

Eros: Personal or Political?

by Thomas Storck

Sometime in the late 1960s or early 70s there was a popular love song which contained the line, "We'll build a world of our own which no one else can share..." Aside from what may be the implication here of a lack of openness to that new life which is both the natural physical result of human erotic love and in a sense its natural psychological result as well, aside from this, I say, there seems to be another deliberate closing off by our loving pair. This closing off is from connection with other people, with the community and also with the *political* order. Now one might wonder, what does love have to do with politics, or what fellowship can romance have with the banality of our politicians? But if we consider another sense of the word *political*, we will see that there is a necessary connection between these, a connection which is beneficial both to erotic love and to the community itself.

We are apt to understand politics and the political as that endless and restless process by which people vie for governmental office, and once in office, attempt to maintain their position at all costs (or almost all costs). But this is not what I mean by this term. If we consider the following words of Aristotle, we may glimpse a different conception of the political, a conception that ultimately might provide links to the loving pair we saw above.

Out of these...relationships between man and woman...the first thing to arise is the family.... The family is the association established by nature for the supply of men's everyday wants.... But when several families are united, and the association aims at something more than the supply of daily needs, the first society to be formed is the village.

Then he goes on to say,

When several villages are united in a single complete community, large enough to be nearly or quite self-sufficing, the state comes into existence, originating in the bare needs of life, and continuing in existence for the sake of a good life. And therefore, if the earlier forms of society are natural, so is the state, for it is the end of them, and the nature of a thing is its end. For what each thing is when fully developed, we call its nature, whether we are speaking of a man, a horse, or a family. Besides, the final cause and end of a thing is the best, and to be self-sufficing is the end and the best.

Hence it is evident that the state is a creation of nature, and that man is by nature a political animal. And he who by nature and not by mere accident is without a state, is either a bad man or above humanity; he is like the

Tribeless, lawless, hearthless one,

whom Homer denounces - the natural outcast is forthwith a lover of war; he may be compared to an isolated piece at draughts. (*Politics*, I, 2)

Most of us would admit that some kind of community is natural for mankind. But why does Aristotle call man "by nature a political animal"? Is he saying we have a natural aptitude for the logrolling and deal making of politicians? Aristotle is hardly referring to that at all. By politics he means more than the business of governing, necessary though that is.

If then, there is some end of the things we do, which we desire for its own sake (everything else being desired for the sake of this), and if we do not choose everything for the sake of something else (for at that rate the process would go on to infinity, so that our desire would be empty and vain), clearly this must be the good and the chief good.... If so, we must try, in outline at least, to determine what it is, and of which of the sciences or capacities it is the object. It would seem to belong to the most authoritative art and that which is most truly the master art. And politics appears to be of this nature; for it is this that ordains which of the sciences should be studied in a state, and which each class of citizens should learn and up to what point they should learn them; and we see even the most highly esteemed of capacities to fall under this, e.g., strategy, economics, rhetoric; now, since politics uses the rest of the sciences, and since, again, it legislates as to what we are to do and what we are to abstain from, the end of this science must include those of the others, so that this end must be the good for man. (*Ethics*, I, 2)

Aristotle here means simply that the pursuit of the common good, which is what any community is supposed to aim at, rightfully subordinates the other arts and sciences to that end. He is not suggesting a totalitarian regime, but rather one in which money-making, say, is not allowed to assume forms which harm the overall good of the society.

Politics, then, in this conception, is a deliberation about the common good of a community and not primarily the jockeying for power and position that we mean by it today. And obviously for any community, politics in the sense of a concern for the common good is necessary for its healthy functioning.

But what has this got to do with love? Let us turn to another pair of lovers in order to understand this point better. For the link that the erotic and the political have is exemplified very well in the story of Troilus and Criseyde. The story of Troilus and Criseyde (or Cressida) was told by Boccaccio, Chaucer, Shakespeare and other writers, but let us consider Chaucer's version here. Briefly, then, during the Trojan war, Troilus, son of King Priam of Troy, falls in love with the beautiful young widow, Criseyde. With the help of Criseyde's uncle, Pandarus, the two begin a secret love affair. Criseyde's father, Calkas, however, knowing that Troy will eventually fall, has defected to the Greeks, and wishing to have his daughter returned to him, asks the Greek leaders to include Criseyde in a prisoner exchange that is being arranged. When the Greek ambassadors request of King Priam and his council that Criseyde be exchanged for Antenor, a warrior who had lately been captured, Troilus is present, but in accordance with the norms of medieval courtly love, he is unable to reveal their relationship.

This Troilus was present in the place,
Whan axed was for Antenor Criseyde;
For which ful soone chaungen gan his face,

As he that with the wordes wel neigh deyde.
But natheles he no word to it seyde,
Lest men sholde his affeccoun espye;
With mannes herte he gan his sorwes drye.
(Book IV, lines 148-154)

The Trojans agree to exchange her, and though the two lovers promise undying affection for each other before they part, Criseyde soon proves false to Troilus and takes up with a Greek soldier, Diomedes.

Certainly Criseyde's own character flaws contribute largely toward her faithlessness, but nevertheless at the root of the instability of Troilus' and Criseyde's love is the merely private nature of their relationship. Medieval courtly love, of course, was not concerned with marriage, but one immediately sees that had Troilus been married to Criseyde she would never have been exchanged, for her father would no longer have been her natural protector; and that even if, by some chance, she and Troilus had been separated, her status as a married woman, if known, would have provided at least a small amount of protection from another man, even if only because of fear of what others might think or say. But the purely private nature of their love left it with no defenses when it was impinged upon by the public and political world. Thus by ignoring the community and its political order, the couple actually hurt their own relationship. Not knowing of Criseyde's and Troilus' love, the Trojans make a quite reasonable decision to send her to her father. Though Hector objects that she is not a prisoner and that "We usen here no wommen for to selle" (Bk. IV, line 182), the majority are quite happy to exchange a noncombatant for a much needed fighter.

Everyone thinks of the love of a man and a woman as a natural and spontaneous thing, and generally lovers do not wish to have their private world regulated by anything but its own norms. However, if what Aristotle said above is true, that the state is as natural as the family, then it follows that the political (in Aristotle's sense) is as natural as the erotic, and therefore some coexistence must be established between the two. But Troilus and Criseyde, by keeping their love a secret and not sharing it with the political community, proclaimed their lack of connection with that community, and therefore by implication placed themselves "above humanity," as Aristotle put it.

But because human society is founded on the family, brought into being by human sexual attraction, human love has implications far beyond the immediate pair of lovers. We see this in the contemporary epidemic of divorce, out of wedlock children, and deliberately childless marriages. All of these injure the community, harm the *political* state of mankind, all in the name of personal fulfillment and immediate gratification. All represent the refusal to acknowledge that eros, like all other human relations, must be subordinate to the common good. For both society and the marital couple are natural communities. Although the latter is prior both temporally and essentially, and the former cannot go beyond certain limits in regulating it, nevertheless the marital pair cannot ignore or flaunt the needs and prerogatives of the political order. "A world of our own, that no one else can share" is a prescription for disaster, disaster for society, disaster very often for the couple itself. For the same notion of eros that demands the right to initiate relationships with no regard for the public good also demands the right to end them with no

regard for the public good. Sensible people, however, have lately come to see that divorce not only hurts children and society, but is usually no real benefit even to the earthly happiness of the spouses.

True human love must respect the order and hierarchy of human goods. It cannot set itself up as bound by no rules except those imposed by the lovers themselves. It is too fragile. It needs the political, in Aristotle's sense, just as the political community needs it. Otherwise, as we may see in the example of Troilus and Criseyde, both are doomed.