

The satirists and the experts

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The Satirists and the Experts

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On 3 June 2016 the Secretary of State for Justice, Michael Gove, made a declaration on live television that became a theme in the campaign for Britain to leave the EU: ‘The people in this country have had enough of experts’, he told Faisal Islam during an interview on Sky News.¹ Gove was referring to the list of expert ‘organizations with acronyms’ (the IFS, IMF, CBI, and NHS) that had failed to predict the stock market crash of 2007, but that were now warning against the financial consequences of Brexit, for which Gove was a leading campaigner. With quick journalistic instinct Islam ignored Gove’s qualifications and pressed him on the sound-bite: ‘you’ve had enough of experts?’ he asked incredulously. Here was an idea likely to offend any professional, anyone with a university degree: that it is good for ordinary citizens to follow their political instinct, and positively to distrust the evidence-based caution of political specialists.

In fact Gove’s statement was not as surprising as Islam pretended. Donald Trump had been attacking claims to privileged expertise from the university-educated ‘liberal elite’ throughout his campaigns for the Republican nomination and US Presidency that summer, a refrain that was being taken up by economic nationalists around the world. The extension of a specific criticism of international high finance to a general criticism of the cosmopolitan, professional, ‘expert’ classes was one that people on both sides of the argument over populist politics were willing to make, including the political scientists. In July 2016 the economist and former US Treasury Secretary

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GGgiGtJk7MA>, accessed 23 May 2017.

Larry Summers noted drily that ‘the willingness of people to be intimidated by experts into supporting cosmopolitan outcomes appears for the moment to have been exhausted’.² Looking at the wider role of the expert professional classes in civil society, Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels quoted approvingly in their book *Democracy for Realists* (2016) the nineteenth-century crowd psychologist Gustave le Bon, who saw no necessary connection between learned expertise and political competence:

It does not follow because an individual knows Greek or mathematics, is an architect, a veterinary surgeon, a doctor, or a barrister, that he is endowed with a special intelligence of social questions... Were the electorate solely composed of persons stuffed with sciences their votes would be not better than those emitted at present.³

For Achen and Bartels, doctors and lawyers share with ordinary ‘inattentive people’ the same conceptual limitations and personal biases in their political thinking. It just happens that their rationalizations are better rehearsed. ‘Even among unusually well-informed and politically engaged people,’ they wrote, ‘the political preferences and judgments that look and feel like the bases of partisanship and voting behaviour are, in reality, often consequences of party and group loyalties’.⁴ What political experts really need is the advice of meta-experts who could train them in the elimination of their own biases.

There is plenty of scope for irony and paradox in these arguments. British satirists had spotted their potential decades before Brexit. In an episode of the 1980s political comedy *Yes, Minister*, Jim Hacker finds himself at loggerheads with Sir Wally McFarlane, a senior scientist whose plan for a new chemical plant on Merseyside has met with local opposition. When McFarlane promises ‘as a chemist myself’ that the plant is safe, Hacker asks him why ‘you experts always think you are right’? Met with a familiar incredulity, Hacker soon finds himself defending his own lack of specialism as a politician: ‘Ministers are not experts’, he insists. ‘Ministers are put in charge

² Lawrence Summers, ‘Voters Deserve Responsible Nationalism’, *Financial Times*, 10 July 2016, quoted by David Goodhart, *The Road to Somewhere: The Populist Revolt and the Future of Politics* (London: Hurst, 2017), 91.

³ Christopher H. Achen and Larry M. Bartels, *Democracy for Realists: Why Elections Do Not Produce Responsive Government* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 311, quoting Le Bon, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (Mineola: Dover, 2002), 122.

⁴ Achen and Bartels, *Democracy for Realists*, 310, 268.

precisely because they know nothing'.⁵ Gove would probably sympathize. Surely the proper objects of satire are the experts, the Sir Wallys, with their prickly pomposity and fragile predictions? Why is it always the honest, inattentive everyman who gets ridiculed?

The expert's role in government has long been a point of difficulty for political theorists. A basic problem for anyone trying to trace the history of that difficulty is that our modern denominative use of the word 'expert' to indicate a specialist person dates only to the nineteenth century. Before that the word was invariably adjectival, and closer in meaning to the etymological roots that it shares with 'experience'.⁶ 'Expert' persons were associated with practice and habituation, and not with theoretical science or university training as they are in common usage today. The word has performed a small somersault in signification since the seventeenth century. In his essay 'Of Studies' Francis Bacon presents the relation of 'Expert Men' to learned persons as one of opposition, not identification:

For Expert Men can Execute, and perhaps Iudge of particulars, one by one;
But the generall Counsels, and the Plots, and Marshalling of Affaires, come
best from those that are *Learned*... Crafty Men Contemne *Studies*; Simple
Men Admire them; and Wise Men Use them: For they teach not their owne
Use; But that is a Wisdome without them, and aboue them, won by
Obseruation.⁷

'Expert Men' and crafty men correspond with one another, says Bacon, but it is only expertise modified by observation that has the potential to transform general studies into practical wisdom. The republican James Harrington changed Bacon's emphasis slightly when he quoted these two sentences (reversing their order as he did so, placing more emphasis on the word 'Crafty') in *The Commonwealth of Oceana* (1656). Trainee statesmen should certainly drink at the fountains of science, Harrington commented, even if they learn nothing of substance at university: 'But what though the water [i.e. academic knowledge] a man drinks be not nourishment? It

⁵ Jonathan Lynn and Antony Jay, 'The Greasy Pole', *The Complete Yes Minister: The Diaries of a Cabinet Minister* (London: BBC Books, 1984), 247-270, at 265.

⁶ OED

⁷ Francis Bacon, *The Essayes or Counsels, Ciuill and Morall* (1625), 292-3; for Bacon's revisions of this passage since the 1597 *Essaies* emphasizing 'experience' see B.H.G. Wormald, *Francis Bacon: History, Politics and Science, 1561-1626* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 207.

is the *vehiculum* without which he cannot be nourished'.⁸ This is a creative misreading of Bacon's point, which is that learned sciences provide the contents of wisdom, but happen to 'teach not their own use'. The experience that does teach practice is for Bacon a mere vehicle of political science. Harrington, using the same terms, assumes that only observation or experience of state councils can provide substantial knowledge for government.

Something that Bacon and Harrington share, however, is a sense that the broad categories of learning and experience, when focused on the question of political expertise, ought really to be triangulated against a third category of political doing, which they call 'craft'. Learning sits above experience in Bacon's tricolonic rhetoric, and political craft lies somewhere below it, perhaps providing it with practical foundations, or perhaps subverting it. Harrington's figurative language inclines more often to the former possibility. Introducing a legislative 'model' for Oceana's constitution, for example, he describes its authors approvingly as master craftsmen, 'workmen that squar'd every stone to this structure in the quarrys of antient prudence'.⁹ This is a triangle of categories – the scholar, the expert (or person of experience), the craftsman – by which everything that seems solid and foundational in politics and everything that is most provisional and personal can be gathered together.

During the first half of the eighteenth century something surprising happened to this cluster of political keywords. Arguments about statecraft, expertise and the professionalization of politics – arguments that were useful but not important to earlier writers – briefly became central to the public discussion of politics. The most conspicuous indication of this trend was the title of *The Craftsman*, the political journal founded by Henry St. John, Viscount Bolingbroke and William Pulteney in December 1726, at the start of their determined campaign of opposition to the administration of Sir Robert Walpole. Its chief contributor and editor was the satirical journalist Nicholas Amhurst, until his masters sought accommodation with the government in 1737. *The Craftsman* became the longest-running and most famous opposition periodical of the period.¹⁰ In the first number 'Caleb D'Anvers' (the

⁸ James Harrington, *The Commonwealth of Oceana*, ed. J.G.A. Pocock (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 199.

⁹ Harrington, *Oceana*, 72.

¹⁰ For the continuity of *The Craftsman* after the period of Amhurst's editorship see Simon Varey, 'The Publication of the Late *Craftsman*', *The Library* 5th ser., 33 (1978), 230-33.

journal's fictional editor) tells how *The Craftsman* was chosen as a general title under which to

lay open the Frauds, Abuses, and secret Iniquities of all Professions, not excepting my own [i.e. the law]; which is at present notoriously adulterated with pernicious mixtures of *Craft*, and several scandalous Prostitutions.¹¹

Caleb's 'chief business', however, is 'to unravel the dark Secrets of *Political Craft*, and trace it through all its various Windings and intricate Recesses'. To the first readers of *The Craftsman* this sort of concern with political deceit, and with the corruption it was assumed to conceal, would have been familiar. It had been the common coin of partisan polemic since the Restoration. Relatively new, however, was the idea that abuses of government were best explained by analogy with a wider scene of corruption among expert members of the learned professions. It is not immediately clear why *The Craftsman*'s founders thought this comparison would be a powerful one. Similarly curious was their decision to describe corrupt professions (and corrupt statesmanship) in terms of their degeneration into 'craft'. Artisans were objects of denigration in classical and humanist culture because their expertise was perceived to be illiberal, their understanding too narrow for the far-reaching affairs of state. It was on this basis, for example, that Jonathan Swift attacked lawyers as the professionals who 'of all others seem least to understand the Nature of Government in general; like under-workmen, who are expert enough at making a single Wheel in a Clock, but are utterly ignorant how to adjust the several Parts, or regulate the Movement'.¹² Craftsmen were also expected to be crafty, that is, distinguished by a shallow cunning or a tendency to deceit. In politics this sort of cunning corresponds with the 'craft' that Thomas Hobbes (borrowing another phrase from Francis Bacon) called 'crooked wisdom', a wisdom that prefers pusillanimous short-term fixes to the long views taken by more magnanimous statesmen.¹³ But again, it is not obvious why Bolingbroke and Pulteney chose these involved distinctions as the basis for a concerted campaign of popular satire.

¹¹ *The Craftsman*. By Caleb D'Anvers, of Gray's-Inn, Esq. 14 vols. (1731-37), vol. 1, 6.

¹² *Sentiments of a Church of England Man* (1711), in *The Prose Writings of Jonathan Swift*, ed. Herbert Davis *et al.*, 16 vols., (Oxford: Blackwell, 1939-74), vol. 2, 23; cf. *Gullivers Travels* (1726), in *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Jonathan Swift*, gen. ed. Ian Gadd *et al.*, 17 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008-), vol. 16, 371.

¹³ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 54; quoting Bacon, 'Of Cunning', *Essayes*, 127-134, at 127.

Bolingbroke and Pulteney's abiding concern with craft and expertise in politics was a widespread, even dominant one among political writers at the start of the eighteenth century. Michael Gove's attack on the experts, in other words, echoes some old themes in British political thinking. *The Craftsman's* readers would have understood these themes in terms of their relation to a broader anti-technical programme of statesmanship, one that also advocated 'common sense' as a positive model for political deliberation and 'wit' as a model for discourse.¹⁴ Satire was a common medium for articulating this programme, often in terms that were themselves doubled and ironized. It is significant that Bolingbroke himself refused Bacon's categorical distinction between political craft and wisdom, arguing that 'crooked wisdom' was merely a corruption of true prudence: 'Wisdom is neither left-handed, nor crooked,' he commented in 1738, 'but the heads of some men contain little, and the hearts of others employ it wrong'.¹⁵ This perceived continuity between craft and wisdom opened up ambiguities. Satirists loudly deplored secrecy and innuendo in political life and, at the same time, appropriated them as modes for oppositional satire. They attacked technical writing for dullness and, at the same time, reframed it as 'mock-art', a witty specification of expert practices that have no artistic content. The interrelations between these satirical themes and political topoi gave them a special power and significance at the start of the eighteenth century. But those interrelations now require some reconstruction.

* * *

When satirists wrote during the third and fourth decades of the eighteenth century about craft and expertise in politics they invariably had a particular expert in mind: Sir Robert Walpole, the First Lord of the Treasury from 1715 to 1717 and from 1721 to 1742. Walpole enjoyed the reputation of a supreme political technician. Lord Chesterfield, one of his most effective critics after 1737, stated that 'he was both the best parliament-man, and the ablest manager of parliament, that I believe ever lived... So clear in stating the most intricate matters, especially in the finances, that, whilst he

¹⁴ See Sophia Rosenfeld, *Common Sense: A Political History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011), 35-54.

¹⁵ Henry St. John, Viscount Bolingbroke, *Political Writings*, ed. David Armitage (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 255.

was speaking the most ignorant thought that they understood what they really did not'.¹⁶ This corresponds with J.H. Plumb's summary assessment two centuries later, which emphasizes (without direct reference to Chesterfield) 'the same technical competence, the same clarity, the same simplicity... Walpole's abilities were most clearly recognized in his political *expertise*; in the dexterity with which he managed the House of Commons'.¹⁷ 'Dexterity' is a characteristically Swiftian word for describing political ability, and Plumb could almost be recasting Swift's own character of Walpole, sketched in an unpublished essay called 'An Account of the Court and Empire of Japan' (1728): Walpole 'was perfectly skilled, by long practice,' wrote Swift, 'in the senatorial forms; and dexterous in the purchasing of votes, from those who could find their accounts better in complying with his measures, than they could probably lose by any tax that might be charged on the kingdom'.¹⁸ Walpole was a difficult target for literary satirists like Swift because he made no pretense of covering up what they took to be his moral failings. As Swift complained, 'it is as hard to satirize well a Man of distinguished Vices, as to praise well a Man of distinguished Virtues. It is easy to do either to People of moderate Characters'.¹⁹ Walpole controlled the maxim. His reliance on bribery and corruption was the charge repeated most insistently in the pages of *The Craftsman* and other opposition papers, but it is fascinating to see the effrontery with which he admitted the charges in, for example, his bullish parliamentary speech on the repeal of the Septennial Act in 1734: bribery was only practicable if no strong passions divided the electorate, he said, at which times it was politically irrelevant.²⁰ This was the case, he argued, in 1734, and as such the principal complaint of opponents to his ministry was a trivial one. Indeed, Walpole's bluff dismissal of the humanistic moral codes rehearsed so noisily by the Patriot opposition often gave a powerful negative energy to his politics. The challenge for his adversaries was to find a way of re-describing as shortcomings what were, in the terms of a political realist, substantial strengths. Walpole's authority rested on his understanding of the public finances, and on his effectiveness as a public

¹⁶ Stanhope, Philip Dormer, fourth Earl of Chesterfield, *Characters of Eminent Personages* (1777) 18-19.

¹⁷ J.H. Plumb, *Sir Robert Walpole: The King's Minister*, 2 vols., London: The Cresset Press, 1960, vol. 2, 234, 2, Plumb's emphasis.

¹⁸ Swift, 'An Account of the Court of the Empire of Japan', *Prose Writings*, vol. 5, 101; Samuel Johnson quoted Swift's *Letter Concerning the Sacramental Text* (1709) in *A Dictionary of the English Language* (1755), 5U2^v, on 'Dexterity', which he defined as 'skill, expertness' and as 'quickness of expedience, skill of management'; see Swift, *Prose Writings*, vol. 2, 141.

¹⁹ Swift, 'Thoughts on Various Subjects', *Prose Writings*, vol. 4, 243.

²⁰ Richard Chandler, *The History and Proceedings of the House of Commons from the Restoration to the Present Time*, 14 vols. (1722-4), vol. 8, 207-8; cf. Plumb, *Walpole*, vol. 2, 306-7.

administrator. So *The Craftsman* set out to present Walpole's technical ability as fraudulent, shallow, corrupt – as an unstable and unpredictable form of expertise.

The satirical strategy indicated by *The Craftsman*'s title took on some of this conceptual instability itself. The metaphors and allegories used by the journal's authors tend to blur the boundaries between straightforward artisanal expertise and despicable Daedalian cunning. In the first number 'Caleb D'Anvers' predicts that he will never run out of material because 'the Mystery of *State-Craft* abounds with such innumerable Frauds, Prostitutions, and Enormities in all Shapes, and under all Disguises, that it is an inexhaustible Fund, and eternal resource for Satire'.²¹ Nevertheless, it was a resource that *The Craftsman*'s authors drew on fairly regularly. The great difference between '*State Craftsmen*' and common artificers, writes 'Jack Hinter' in *Craftsman* no. 8, is that ordinary workmen expect to be rewarded in proportion to their talents, 'and if they do not excel in their Professions, they do not thrive in them. But the Case is very often not the same amongst Those, who govern the great Affairs of the World'.²² A positive model of Renaissance statecraft follows in *Craftsman* no. 9, which contains extracts from a letter of Polonius-style advice from Bacon to the Duke of Buckingham, concerning the promotion of appropriately talented people to offices of state. 'The Character of a *great Man* was not to be acquired, in those [Elizabethan] times,' comments *The Craftsman*,

by understanding the paltry Business of a *Money-Scrivener*, or a *Stock-jobber*; by a Skill in Usury, Brokage, and the Tricks of *Exchange-Alley*; or by colloquing with certain *great Bodies* of Men, in order to defraud, bubble, and beggar the rest of the Nation.²³

Instead of possessing these Walpolean attainments, a statesman need only prove himself to be 'a Man of great Knowledge, Depth, and Penetration in publick Affairs'. These positive qualities at first seem almost meaningless in their generality, but they are oriented significantly towards comprehensiveness of understanding. They are at odds categorically with the facility of the political technician, who prides himself instead on '*ability*'. 'What are commonly called *great Abilities*, in this Age,' according to *Craftsman* no. 99, 'will appear, upon Enquiry, to be nothing but a little, sordid Genius for *Tricks* and *Cunning*, which founds all its Success on *Corruption*,

²¹ *Craftsman*, vol. 1, 6.

²² *Craftsman*, vol. 1, 44.

²³ *Craftsman*, vol. 1, 50.

Stock-jobbing, and other iniquitous Arts'.²⁴ The positive qualities associated with good statesmanship take a pastoral turn, in line with the anti-metropolitan tendency that often accompanies attacks on experts: 'if you want a Man to employ in any particular *Manufacture* or *mechanic Art*, you will certainly chuse one, who is expert in that Particular; *but in a Shepherd or a Steward, you desire nothing more than Frugality, Labour and Vigilance*'.²⁵ Such, on the authority of Cicero, were the qualities that Rome expected in her magistrates, and such are the qualities that the British state now requires of its 'stewards'.²⁶ Once again, the generic attainments that we are told to demand of politicians are defined by contrast with the 'expert' specificity of the craftsman's mechanic art.

What are the sources of this awkward, persistent analogy between politicians and artisans? Its origins certainly predate the rise of Walpole. The most prominent seventeenth-century elaboration of the '*State Craftsman*' metaphor appears in the very first paragraph of Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan*, in a rather different form to the one found in *The Craftsman*. Hobbes sets up an elaborate comparison between the artificial life of '*Automata* (Engines that move themselves by springs and wheeles as doth a watch)', and the artificial constitution of 'that great LEVIATHAN called a COMMON-WEALTH, or STATE (in latine CIVITAS) which is but an Artificiall Man'.²⁷ At the risk of making the figure still more involved, Hobbes insists that both 'the *Matter* thereof, and the *Artificer*... is *Man*' – meaning natural man on this occasion.²⁸ '*State Craftsmen*' are they who make the 'Artificiall Man', the state. Hobbes sets up his metaphor to illustrate a materialistic theory of government, so the work of his state artificers is upon the very fabric (that is, the fundamental human materials) of the republic. As such they are different from the '*State Craftsmen*' of the eighteenth-century satirists, whose expertise lies in stockjobbing, brokerage and other activities peripheral to government itself.

As Hobbes's contemporaries take up the figure of the craftsman they tend to shift its focus from political making to political doing. In *The Commonwealth of Oceana* Harrington transformed the idea of the statesman-as-artisan into a complex image of the state's machinery gripping and turning its various parts against one another,

²⁴ *Craftsman*, vol. 3, 92.

²⁵ *Craftsman*, vol. 3, 93.

²⁶ See Cicero, *Pro Cnaeo Plancio*, 62, used as the epigram for *Craftsman*, no. 99.

²⁷ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 9.

²⁸ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 10.

always maintaining the ‘rotation’ that was essential to his vision of the commonwealth:

The councils of this commonwealth, both in regard of their elections, and, as will be shewn, of their affairs, are uniform with the senate in their revolutions; not as whirlpits to swallow, but to bite, and with the scrues of their rotation to hold and turn a business (like the vice of a smith) to the hand of the workman. Without engines of which nature it is not possible for the senate, much less for the people, to be perfect artificers in a political capacity...²⁹

Harrington’s use of the craft metaphor for political expertise shows a commonwealthsman’s optimism about the operability of what are to Hobbes always recalcitrant human materials. Admittedly, the figure was adaptable by those on the opposite side of the political spectrum: the royalist Sir Robert Filmer, defending the monarch’s right to conceal *arcana imperii* from his people, made an analogy with artisanal mysteries: ‘an implicit faith is given to the meanest artificer in his own craft. How much more is it, then, due to a prince in the profoundest secrets of government [?]’.³⁰ More straightforwardly satirical is Samuel Butler’s portrait of the Presbyterian politician Anthony Ashley Cooper (later first Earl of Shaftesbury, and Dryden’s Achitophel) in part three (1678) of *Hudibras*. This is a breathless tale of low cunning, side-switching and luck dressed up as expertise:

By all these Arts, and many more
H’ had practic’d long and much before,
Our *State-Artificer* foresaw,
Which way the World began to draw...
He therefore wisely cast about,
All ways he could, t’*insure his Throat*.³¹

The difference here is that Butler’s Ashley Cooper is someone who operates from the outside on political institutions built up by other hands, almost at arm’s length. He is distinct from the Hobbesian artificer, whose actions seem positively to constitute the commonwealth, and from the Harringtonian workman, who holds his materials within

²⁹ James Harrington, *The Commonwealth of Oceana*, ed. J.G.A. Pocock (Cambridge: University Press, 1992), 123.

³⁰ Robert Filmer, *Patriarcha and other Writings*, ed. Johann P. Sommerville (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 3-4.

³¹ Samuel Butler, *Hudibras*, ed. John Wilders (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), 245.

an anxious grip. The craft of Butler's '*State-Artificer*' is an ephemeral cunning, narrowly political and operative mainly on the material of his own career. It is a diversion from the serious business of state, but it has the potential to cause considerable political damage.

* * *

The writer who transforms the statesman-as-artisan metaphor into a grand satirical theme is Jonathan Swift. Hobbesian and Harringtonian metaphors of political workmanship are mixed together at the very start of the 'Preface' to *A Tale of Tub* (1704), Swift's first major satire, and one for which politics are a marginal but significant concern. The empty tub of the title is a decoy thrown out by sailors on the ship of state to divert a restive popular whale:

The *Whale* was interpreted to be *Hobs's Leviathan*, which tosses and plays with all other Schemes of Religion and Government, whereof a great many are hollow, and dry, and empty, and noisy, and wooden, and given to Rotation. This is the *Leviathan* from when the terrible Wits of our Age are said to borrow their Weapons... And it was decreed, that in order to prevent these *Leviathans* [i.e. the wits] from tossing and sporting with the *Commonwealth*, (which of itself is too apt to *fluctuate*) they should be diverted from that Game by a *Tale of a Tub*.³²

What Swift finds irresistible is the blend of ordinariness and extravagance in the language that Hobbes, Harrington and their contemporaries use to describe political processes. The tenor of that language is witty and rather eccentric, he notices, and yet its vehicle moves irresistibly downwards into a world of artificers and workmen, mariners and coopers. Of course Swift exaggerates both of these tendencies. He seizes on 'mechanic' images of empty barrels, rotating lathes and foundering ships, and turns them into a series of divagating rhetorical automata, each with its own artificial life. They generate in turn streams of images and interpretations, possessed of an unpredictable logic, which is harnessed self-reflexively by Swift in his writing. In

³² *CWJS*, vol. 1, 25.

‘The Introduction’ to the *Tale* we are presented with three ‘Oratorical Machines’ for the use of ‘Orators who desire to talk much without Interruption’, namely the pulpit (or ‘tub’), the scaffold ladder and the fairground stage. It seems that the most reliable ‘machines’ for distracting modern wits away from politics, as the *Tale of a Tub* itself proposes to do, are books, some of which have an animal life of their own in the passage above (as they have in the *Tub*’s first appendix, ‘The Battel of the Books’). At the end of the ‘Introduction’ the *Tale*’s narrator lists the ‘prime Productions’ of the society of Grub Street authors to which he belongs. First and foremost in the list is a manual of statecraft, published under the suspiciously familiar chapbook title, ‘the History of *Reynard the Fox*’. The narrator doubts that ‘any of the Learned will dispute, that famous Treatise to be a compleat Body of Civil Knowledge, and the *Revelation*, or rather the *Apocalyps* of all State-Arcana’.³³ The abstract tells us enough: this is a practical handbook of *arcana imperii*, laid out in the alchemist’s empyric style, finished off with a not-so-practical flourish of millennialism. This pushes the combination of imaginative eccentricity and artisanal practicality in political writing as far as it will go – in theory, at least.

There is an assumption lying behind Swift’s satire here, one that he wants to normalize, but does not think to make explicit: that politics is a vocation for which no expert knowledge (as opposed to general learning) is required, and with which narrow technical training is categorically incompatible. The authors of *Cato’s Letters* stated the case straightforwardly in 1721: ‘Of all the sciences that I know in the world’, wrote Thomas Gordon,

...that of government concerns us most, and is the easiest to be known, and yet is the least understood. Most of those who manage it would make the lower world believe that there is I know not what difficulty and mystery in it, far above vulgar understandings; which proceeding of theirs is direct craft and imposture: Every ploughman knows a good government from a bad one, from the effects of it.³⁴

The three components of Gordon’s argument – the idea that the knowledge of politics is easy and open, that it contrasts with closed mysteries of the craftsman, and, implicitly, that it corresponds with the georgic knowledge of the farmer – sit together

³³ *CWJS*, vol. 1, 42-3.

³⁴ John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon, *Cato’s Letters*, ed. Ronald Hamowy, 2 vols. (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1995), vol. 1, 267 [no. 38, 22 July 1721].

in way that is familiar from classical and humanist tradition. They are configured similarly, for example, by Xenophon in the *Oeconomicus*: farming prepares men for military and political leadership by making them hardy and generous of spirit, where handicrafts make them soft and selfish; husbandry, moreover, is ‘easily learn’d, by observing the Workmen now and then, and by consulting those who understand it... Artificers, will always keep some Secret of their Business to themselves, but the Husbandmen are open and free in their Discoveries’.³⁵ Perhaps the figure of the virtuous farmer-patriot did not have the same positive impact on the English political imagination as it did on the commonwealthsmen of the American colonies.³⁶ The negative side of Xenophon’s configuration, however – the denigration of closed craft knowledge, the analogy with civic life – resonated widely, and gives a context for Swift’s otherwise obscure satire on mechanics in the *Tale*.

Where the network of values that constructs statesmanship as easy and open (with husbandry as its analogue, and craftsmanship as its opposite) remains largely implicit in the *Tale*, it is fully articulated in *Gulliver’s Travels*. Swift returns to the anti-expert theme at several points across Gulliver’s four journeys, and we see it elaborated differently in various moral contexts. In each of the four journeys that Gulliver undertakes there is technical excellence to be wondered at, since he has the utopianist’s good fortune only to be shipwrecked in advanced civilizations. Lilliput is remarkable for its (relatively) enormous ‘machines fixed on wheels’ and its sophisticated systems of civil bureaucracy; Brobdingnag has its (relatively) fine-fingered carpenters, seamstresses and locksmiths; Laputa, of course, is itself an artificial flying island, although its pilots do not seem to know quite how it works; and the land of the Houyhnhnms has a domestic architecture remarkable in its way for convenience and stoic simplicity.³⁷ Moreover, in each of the four journeys the connection between expert regime and political system is made explicit. In Brobdingnag, the wise king is astonished to hear that Europe has produced thousands of technical books ‘written upon the *Art of Government*’: foolish Gulliver is surprised in turn when the king confines ‘Knowledge of governing within very *Narrow Bounds*; to common Sense and Reason, to Justice and Lenity’, and when he argues in terms

³⁵ *The Science of Good Husbandry: or, the Oeconomics of Xenophon*, tr. Richard Bradley (1727), 38, 95, translating Xenophon, *Oeconomicus*, 15.10-11, 18.9-10.

³⁶ See Maurie D. McInnes, ‘George Washington: Cincinnatus or Marcus Aurelius?’, in *Thomas Jefferson, the Classical World, and Early America*, ed. Peter S. Onuf and Nicholas P. Cole (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011) 128-68, at 151-153.

³⁷ See Paddy Bullard, ‘Gulliver, Medium, Technique’, *ELH*, 83 (2016), 517-541.

familiar from Xenophon that the farmer who ‘could make two ears of corn... grow upon a Spot of Ground where only one grew before; would deserve better of Mankind, and do more essential Service to his Country, than the whole Race of Politicians put together’.³⁸ In Balnibarbi, the retired statesman Lord Munodi tells Gulliver how expert ‘Professors’ have imposed ‘new Rules and Methods of Agriculture and Building, and new Instruments and Tools for all Trades and Manufactures’ on the populace, with famine and impoverishment the results of their untried technologies.³⁹ The consequences of this meddling are social, but Gulliver also explores their governmental analogue in his account of a disastrous ‘School for political Projectors’.⁴⁰ In the land of the Houyhnhnms, the central criticism levelled by Gulliver’s master at European society – that we have been ‘very successful in multiplying our original Wants, and seemed to spend our whole Lives in vain Endeavours to supply them by our own Inventions’ – is expressed both in disdain for the material overproduction of modern manufacturers, and contempt for the overproduction of civil discourse that Swift identifies particularly with lawyers.⁴¹ Swift’s expressions and opinions on this topic are drawn from those attributed to the Utopians described by the traveller Raphael Hythloday in More’s *Utopia*. They too think it an ‘unreasonable thing to oblige men to obey a body of laws that are both of such a bulk, and so dark as not to be read and understood by every one of the subjects.’ More establishes the positive utopian model for a minimalist legislature based on a clearly expressed and compassable body of legal precepts. By contrast Gulliver’s wisest interlocutors are concerned negatively with how social degeneration and political corruption go together with the tendency of learned experts to impose themselves on others.

The clearest statement of this idea, delivered in terms similar to those used a few years before by Gordon in *Cato’s Letters*, is made when Gulliver describes the foundations of the Lilliputian constitution in Part I of the *Travels*. There is a surprising shift of tone here, from the earlier satirical depiction of the Lilliputians as treacherous petty-Machiavellians, to a utopian discourse on their political ideas. As Gulliver reports,

³⁸ *CWJS*, vol. 16, 194.

³⁹ *CWJS*, vol. 16, 256.

⁴⁰ *CWJS*, vol. 16, 275-284.

⁴¹ *CWJS*, vol. 16, 371, 376, 389.

In chusing Persons for all Employments, [the Lilliputians] have more Regard to good Morals than to great Abilities; For, since Government is necessary to Mankind, they believe, that the common Size of human Understandings, is fitted to some Station or other; and that Providence never intended to make the Management of publick Affairs a Mystery, to be comprehended only by a few Persons of sublime Genius, of which there seldom are three born in an Age: But, they suppose Truth, Justice, Temperance, and the like, to be in every Man's Power; the Practice of which Virtues, assisted by Experience and a good Intention, would qualify any Man for the Service of his Country...⁴²

Indeed, it is positively dangerous to entrust public affairs to people distinguished by 'superior endowments of the Mind', because their abilities are likely to be employed in managing and defending their corruptions. The difference between these utopian principles and the prescriptions for an expert-free civil society made by Gordon in *Cato's Letters* is that Gulliver stamps the former with a providential, universal authority. As Swift wrote in an earlier, unpublished pamphlet, *Some Free Thoughts Upon the Present State of Affairs* (1714), 'God has given the Bulk of Mankind a Capacity to understand Reason when it is fairly offered; and by Reason they would easily be governed, if it were left to their Choice'.⁴³ All that is needed to support this natural reason are the virtues of equity, good intentions and a certain amount of 'Experience' – the last requirement placing the 'Management of publick Affairs' rather more in the realm of Bacon's common 'Expert Men' than the republican and elitist *Cato's Letters* would have allowed. The providential frame for Swift's description of a politics without professionalized mysteries indicates its service to a vision of the common good.

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What can the satire that Swift wrote against technocrats tell us about the crisis of public trust in which the expert classes find themselves today? The long historical perspective foregrounds one particularly striking point of contrast. Swift and his

⁴² *CWJS*, vol. 16, 86.

⁴³ Swift, *Prose Writings*, vol. 8, 77.

contemporaries were writing about a new order of state artificers. Their resentment was exacerbated by the undeniable ascendancy of these experts: they hated their modernity, and the effectiveness with which they had captured the public narrative of what a prosperous and stable future might look like. In other words, Swift knew that he was writing at the beginning of something. He recognized the Whiggish dawn, however indistinctly it illuminated the coming order of a progressive, rights-based universalist liberalism. His own humanistic vision of simple civil societies underpinned by ancient virtue belonged either in the past, or in no place at all – in utopia, which is why satire and irony were the appropriate modes in which to articulate it. By contrast, the contemporary assault on our professional and expert classes is based precisely on the failure of these classes to capture the future. The experts could not predict the fall of financial systems, or anticipate the unraveling of globalized economic networks by maverick, inexperienced nationalist politicians. Neither could they foresee their own marginalization in the world that they created. At the same time, satire finds it harder to articulate itself fully in the context of these changes, because we are at the end of something, not yet at a beginning. There is a meaningful hesitation in Swift's writing between, on the one hand, the pleasure he takes in solid, ingenious workmanship and, on the other, his distaste for the translation of that ingenuity into the world of politics. His sympathetic hesitations have their analogues in modern political discourse as well, especially on the communitarian left. In 1944 the political economist Karl Polanyi used the term 'statecraft' to describe the raft of enlightened measures by which Tudor statesman made the social upheavals caused by rapid economic improvement bearable.⁴⁴ The Labour thinker Maurice Glasman has adopted Polanyi's term to label his own call for moralized state intervention in national skill formation ('virtue and vocation'), while his parliamentary ally Jon Cruddas has long been elaborating his vision of a 'one-national statecraft'.⁴⁵ If the tropes used by Swift and *The Craftsman* to attack Walpole's new order of experts have not retained their polemical charge, the paradoxes and ambiguities may have some use for communitarian thinkers yet.

⁴⁴ Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001), 40.

⁴⁵ Maurice Glasman, *Unnecessary Suffering: Managing Market Utopia* (London: Verso, 1996), 28, 29-55; Jon Cruddas, 'One-Nation Statecraft', *New Statesman*, 10 June 2013, <http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/2013/06/jon-cruddas-speech-one-nation-statecraft>, accessed 6 July 2017.