

Political Theory – as Risk and Disruption

Anne Phillips

Forthcoming, special issue of *Raisons Politiques*, 2022

Do you consider that your work belongs to the field of “political theory” – and why?

I see myself very much as a political theorist; I sometimes describe myself as a contemporary political theorist (though see more below on that); sometimes as a normative theorist (though disliking the suggestion that I deal only in norms and never in facts); and very often describe myself more specifically as a feminist political theorist. I enjoy the last because it indicates something of my political commitments. It is also important to me in disrupting often taken for granted assumptions about the irrelevance of gender to our pursuits. To put this more generally, I see political theory as playing a key role in disrupting taken-for-granted assumptions: this is a large part of what draws me to the field. What differentiates us from our more self-described ‘scientific’ colleagues is not a lack of interest in what happens in politics, nor even a lack of empirical knowledge (though no doubt we could all do better on this score), but the perception that the concepts typically employed in political discussion, like rights, equality, democracy, representation, are very far from self-evident. They have often disturbing histories; they can operate as ideologies even when contributing to analysis; and each one of them lends itself to competing interpretation. This means that much of what we do is to complicate what might otherwise have appeared simple. This, of course, is what people so often criticise in academics: they see us as delighting in the complications, as seeing things from too many different angles, and in the process as paralysing action. But I think it is through the complications, and the challenges these offer to what is otherwise too readily taken as self-evident, that we can push beyond what is currently hegemonic to clarify the political options and choices.

In 2019, the French professional association published a warning message on the “decline of political theory and the history of ideas”. Would you say that this is a relevant observation for academia in your country?

In the UK, as elsewhere, there are pressures to transform the study of politics into political science. The image of this science is commonly derived from what are thought to be the techniques of the economic sciences, and in its practices it sometimes employs techniques that the economists have already learned to distrust. This is, in my view, a troubling trend. It is troubling because the pressure to establish one's hypotheses, methods, and conclusions as fully 'scientific' seems to encourage a narrowing of the field, by which I mean not just a narrowing of the methods (like a tendency to think that a reliance on quantitative data, or the deployment of algebraic formulae, is by definition more rigorous than any other approach), but a lowering of ambition. It can be easier to establish one's work as rigorous, and defend oneself from methodological challenge, when one sets oneself smaller problems, and this can work against those risking themselves on a larger terrain. I worry that as a result of these pressures towards 'political science', UK politics department may end up producing highly rigorous work that nonetheless fails to tell us much about the key political issues of the day.

I do not, however, see these trends as leading in any marked way to a decline of political theory in the UK. Students still love to study political theory; and there still seems to be an acceptance, even among the most uninterested of non-theory colleagues, that political theory is one component of what politics departments do. My own anxiety is then less about decline and more about ghettoisation. One of the things we have learnt through the writings of political theorists is that toleration has a negative side. It can become a form of privatisation that does not so much include one in the main body of society as permit one to continue one's existence on the margins. So while I do not see the continued existence of political theory as in dispute, toleration is hardly the same as engagement, and being accepted as a necessary part of a discipline need not mean that colleagues will actively engage with one's arguments or ideas.

This can also be an issue *within* political theory, as feminists, amongst others, know from long experience. In UK academia, feminist political theory is now an accepted sub-field: one can describe oneself as such without it significantly diminishing one's career prospects; there is a large and innovative literature to draw on; and many departments now offer courses at either undergraduate or postgraduate level. Feminist theorists engage extensively and rigorously with non-feminist theorists of justice, equality, democracy and so

on - but the compliment is more rarely returned, and one can look in vain through the bibliographies of leading theorists for references to the many feminist works that address precisely their issues. Toleration is not the same as engagement, and I see this as a problem both in the current relationship between political theory and other fields of political study, and within political theory itself.

Some of this may be inevitable: there are degrees of specialisation that make it difficult to dip into fields other than one's own, and none of us has the time to read everything. But the narrowing of focus and expertise in the UK academy has not been helped by institutional developments that have made publication in specific high ranking journals an overly important element in career progression. Here, too, my sense is that the regime has been somewhat less constraining for political theorists than for those seeking to make their way within more empirical political science, partly because the key theory journals have retained a degree of pluralism, and partly because book publication remains central to our practice, and publishers will always be interested in breadth. Political theory *is* being squeezed, as are other aspects of the study of politics, by the pressures to make politics 'scientific', but there is a lot of resilience – and a lot of innovation - in the field.

How would you qualify the relationship between political theory and political philosophy?

Like Hannah Arendt, I have preferred to describe myself as a political theorist rather than philosopher, sharing her distrust of the philosophy label as signaling too large a distance from the political world. On reflection, however, this may not be a particularly fair depiction of the difference. Colleagues who describe themselves as political philosophers seem as much impelled by what they see as the urgent political questions of the day as any of those who describe themselves as political theorists; and indeed have often been just as concerned to address the implications of their arguments for public policy or political action. One could more plausibly say that the philosophers assume too readily that their work must begin with the identification of ideal principles of justice, equality, democracy, and so on, and only then attempt to apply these to the more troubling non-ideal world; and there is, I think, some evidence that self-defined political philosophers have been more inclined to work in this vein than self-defined political theorists. The stumbling block to even this depiction is that much of the critique of 'ideal theory' has come precisely from political

philosophers – people like Charles Mills, for example - so that somewhat undermines the usefulness of this as a distinction.

I hesitate, then, to offer anything definitive about the distinction or relationship, but at the risk of simply revealing my own prejudices, would suggest two things. First, political theory *is* more closely aligned to the wider study of politics, if only because theorists typically work in politics departments, while political philosophers (at least in the UK) are more commonly located in departments of philosophy, hence more closely aligned to other branches of philosophy, like moral philosophy. This can generate a way of theorising about politics that is overly focused on individual action, posing such questions as ‘when am I justified in disobeying the law?’ or ‘under what conditions am I required to treat another as my equal?’ The subject matter is political (the legitimacy of authority, the right to disobey, the scope of equality), but it has been translated into an idiom that makes the questions too much a matter of individual conscience. When practiced in the Anglo-American ‘analytic’ mode, this individualism can obscure more structural elements. The second point is that because political theory *is* more closely aligned to the wider study of politics, this can operate as a useful reality check. I am thinking again especially of the tradition of analytic philosophy, and no doubt generalising from somewhat random observations, but political philosophers often excel in producing complex hypothetical scenarios as a way of testing out their own or opponents’ arguments, and the fact that these scenarios may be highly improbable is rarely considered a fault. The very value attached to rigour and consistency, to following out the logic of an idea wherever that logic may lead you, can here become a disadvantage. For myself, I prefer the more capacious label of political theorist, which allows me to draw (critics might say, too promiscuously) on a variety of argumentative strategies, rather than limiting myself to one.

How would you qualify the relationship between political theory, social sciences, and the humanities?

This brings me to the question of how political theory relates to the wider social sciences on the one side and to the humanities on the other. I think political theorists should read as widely as we can in economics, history, sociology, anthropology, psychology. I don’t do anything like enough of this myself, but when I do, it always opens up new possibilities. Much of the work I have done in relation to multiculturalism, for example, was informed by

material written by sociologists and anthropologists, who turned out to be far more sceptical of notions of 'culture' than many of their counterparts in political theory, and considerably more attuned to the power relations involved in negotiating cultural difference. The work of economists and economic historians has been similarly helpful in relation to work on equality, including through clarifying the exceptional nature of the mid-twentieth century, when it looked for a period as if inequality was on the decline. We can now see more clearly that this was indeed exceptional, more of an aberration than a firm tendency, but it was an aberration that encouraged theorists to be overly optimistic about the trajectory of egalitarian thinking, in ways we are now scrabbling to undo.

That said, one has to be wary of the potential conservatism in social science research. Most of the political theorists I know see themselves, to a greater or lesser extent, as critics of current social and political arrangements, favouring often radical change; and while we can benefit from what I described above as the 'useful reality check' sometimes provided by our colleagues in the investigative social sciences, I would not want us to accept too readily the idea that nothing more can be done. The caricature of the utopian political theorist being reined by the sober social scientist *is* a caricature; but the nugget of truth in it is that theorists very often see themselves as opening new ways of thinking about what is possible and challenging a hegemonic common sense. We need to feel able to continue doing this without being prematurely struck down by an excessive realism.

I see a parallel combination of indebtedness and danger as regards much contemporary humanities scholarship. Political theorists have not always been as alert as those more versed in the humanities to what Foucault saw as the power/knowledge relationship, nor as sensitive to the power relations between the investigator and investigated, and we can learn a great deal from this. The more negative side is that this sensitivity can lead to an association of normativity with either moralism or cultural imperialism, and a resulting withdrawal from judgment. In the field of feminist theory, for example, which is currently more closely aligned with humanities research than with work in the social sciences (at least in the UK), there has been a certain retreat from normativity as almost inevitably tainted with the power of dominant nations or the arrogance of dominant groups, and it has been quite a challenge to find a way through this. Serene Khader's recent book on *Decolonizing Universalism* is one helpful guide through the thicket, and like her, I have tried to move

between an acknowledgment of those power relations and a commitment to making a difference. I see political theory, then, as occupying a distinct position between the wider social sciences on the one side and the humanities on the other, learning from both but also able to resist some of their dangers. In general, however, the more interdisciplinary we are in our reading and engagement, the more chance we have of achieving what we set out to achieve.

How would you qualify the relationship between political theory and the history of ideas?

The other question of positioning relates to the history of ideas, and this has become a particularly interesting question for me. I am not myself a historian of ideas. I have enormous admiration for the scholarship of those who delve deeply into writings from earlier centuries, but I have not been especially interested in the intricacies of what X really meant or who Y was arguing against, and my own work has been very much driven by contemporary concerns. I have the usual general grasp of the canon that anyone teaching political theory for forty years is sure to have; I can claim a more detailed knowledge of some late eighteenth and nineteenth century theorists whose work I have found particularly compelling, Mary Wollstonecraft, for example, or Karl Marx; but none of it would stand up to careful scrutiny by a real historian of ideas. Until relatively recently, that is, I have tended to see history of ideas as a part of political theory, but not the part I spend most time with.

I have changed in this regard, and I suspect the change is not only in me. In recent years, a lot of fascinating material has been published that explores the ways canonical theorists like Kant or de Tocqueville or John Stuart Mill thought about questions of race and empire, and the extent to which their thinking on this reproduced the prejudices of their age. The material raises questions that cut across some of my prior distinctions between political theory and the history of ideas. It becomes ever more clear that understanding what was assumed, included, and – crucially - excluded, from early versions of equality, freedom, democracy or rights, provides important clues to understanding the lacunae in the ways we currently employ these ideas. I had already partly learnt this lesson from feminist theory, in particular from Carole Pateman's *The Sexual Contract*, which was a major influence on my own thinking. I took from her examination of the early social contract theorists the idea that their failure to include women as equal parties to the contract should not be treated as mere historical oversight, nor indulged as something that simply spoke to the limitations of

their age. To the contrary, the exclusions were deeply embedded in their thinking and have had lasting repercussions for the subsequent evolution of liberal ideas. Reading some of the more recent work on race, colonialism and empire, I have come to appreciate more fully that this is not only a matter for feminist theory. In work on equality, I have gone back to some of the early articulations of equality to tease out how it was that people could make their claims about 'all men being born equal' without feeling obliged to justify the exclusion of women, but also without seeming to notice that 'all men' did not include those enslaved or about-to-be-enslaved, those colonised or about-to-be-colonised, those too poor to be regarded as fully human. We have been too ready to accept a benign story about these exclusions that represents them as understandable failures of imagination, historical oversights that can be – or even already have been – corrected. The consequences have been far more damaging than this suggests, and I am increasingly indebted to the work of historians of ideas in identifying the implications.

Do you believe that political theory should illuminate the public debate?

Yes! I find it hard to envisage a practice of political theory that does not involve a commitment to challenging shibboleths or clarifying dilemmas or indicating appropriate forms of public policy or encouraging specific forms of political action: some commitment, that is, to making a difference. Most of us would secretly – or overtly – like to be regarded as public intellectuals as well as esteemed academics. We don't, of course, necessarily manage either, and the institutional pressures – certainly in the UK academy, maybe not everywhere - that get us competing to publish in a small number of high ranking journals are not best designed to promote public illumination. 'High ranking' only rarely means most widely read, and we may find ourselves writing for an ever narrower set of journal referees, rather than for a wider public, and worrying more about whether we have adequately engaged with all the most recent literature than whether we are saying anything that matters. The pressures bear especially heavily on younger colleagues, but to some degree or other on all of us. As I noted before, however, it helps that we have managed to hold on to the role of books as a major way of communicating our ideas, because book publishers still value ambition. It also helps that most theory journals are keen to retain some degree of pluralism in their choice of what to publish. I live with an economist, and have some idea from his experience of the hoops one has to jump through to satisfy referees in economics

journals, and the resulting narrowing down of what is deemed publishable to a highly orthodox set of views. I do not think political theory has come anywhere near that danger zone as yet!