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Political Theory – The state of the Art

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For much of the last 2500 years political theory has been political science and not merely a sub-discipline or field of the study of politics. Admittedly, we now like to dignify what the Classical thinkers from Plato to Hegel did with the grand title of philosophy in order to distinguish it from what Brian Barry, Quentin Skinner, Isaiah Berlin do. But despite the best efforts of generations of political philosophers, there is no uncontroversial distinction between political philosophy and political theory. Indeed it is best to see the distinction as an institutional one: political philosophers are political theorists employed by Philosophy departments and political theorists are political philosophers employed within Government or Political Science departments. Any other attempt to identify the difference in terms of first and second order levels of inquiry begs the question concerning the nature of the activity itself. If we go back to the greats of the past, they are surprisingly laid back about the issue – with the possible exception of Plato who thought being a philosopher was the only relevant qualification for political rule. Instead we find a complex of levels of inquiry, causal explanations, historical interpretations and moral recommendations. It is this plurality and complexity that make the greats from Plato the Hegel, Marx and Mill still so rewarding. What it does not help with is identifying what political theory is about and what it is for once we have a more sophisticated disciplinary identity. As the subject emerged in Britain in the last 150 years the role and nature of political theory - as distinct from a coherent and incrementally accumulating body of knowledge such as political science aspires to be - becomes both more confusing and more central to the preoccupations of political theorists. Unlike political scientists who argue about method but are still primarily concerned with data

collection, analysis and hypothesis testing, political theorists seem to be consumed with the nature of their activity and how it connects to political science. This nervousness of purpose is partly because many of the dominant paradigms of U.S. political science, which cast their long shadow over the political studies community in Britain throughout the last sixty years, have been profoundly sceptical about the role and value of political theory especially where it makes normative claims. But normativity is not the only problem. As other areas of political science develop they identify a clear object of enquiry such as a country specialism, or else elections, party competition, executive and legislative politics or public policy analysis. At best political theorists can specialise in a thinker or a period – such as Bentham and utilitarianism (my own modest claim to fame). This of course makes us look remarkably like historians: scholars who are concerned with the thinkers or the politics of the past. Many political theorists have embraced the historian's challenge (associated with the late nineteenth century Cambridge legal scholar F.W. Maitland that political science is history 'or it is humbug') and identify themselves as historians. This, in my view regrettable development, has been exacerbated by the Cambridge Trinity of John Pocock, John Dunn and Quentin Skinner. The so-called Cambridge school has had a hugely negative impact on the study of political thinkers from the past by rendering it either of merely antiquarian interest or frivolous. Although they would reject this characterisation of their impact, at least two of the Cambridge trinity (Skinner and Dunn) acknowledge the main thrust of the charge and do make subtle uses of past thinkers for thinking about politics more generally in a less antiquarian fashion.¹ Their attempt to disconnect reflection on past political thinkers from reflection on politics and its languages, styles and limitations has left political theory with a greater sense of disconnection from the wider activity of political science. Some have sought to rescue themselves from this lack of purpose by turning to a new normative agenda focused on issues of social or distributive justice. Certainly under the huge influence of

John Rawls a whole generation of normative ‘political philosophers’ has arisen who are interested in the real philosophical issues of fairness, justice and rights, and who pride themselves on their ignorance of past political thought, an ignorance that is definitely not shared by some of their heroes such as Rawls himself or Brian Barry in the UK. I am inclined to endorse this change of direction, but as will become clear later, I would like to argue that it is the approach and methods and not the substantive questions that are primarily important if political theory is not to find a new redundancy in the continual spinning of ever more similar theories of distributive justice. Before turning to this manifesto for a viable future for political theory, I want to make one critical swipe at an unfortunate tendency in much contemporary British political theory.

Breaking the spell of the ‘giants’

It is not uncommon to find British scholars who lament the dominance of Rawls and American rights-based conceptions of politics on British political thought and theory.² Yet British political thoughts seems to be equally dominated by the long shadows of Michael Oakeshott and Isaiah Berlin. Both modern gurus had a huge impact on the shaping of a generation of British political theorists and they still exercise that influence on a current generation from beyond the grave. Indeed many of those who lament the baleful influence of Rawls are only too happy to rely on the authority of Oakeshott or Berlin, as if where a guru comes from is the only issue, and being influenced by Rawls is showing a distinct lack of patriotism.

Oakeshott and Berlin are important thinkers, but they are also the source of some unfortunate and damaging trends in contemporary political thought. Both were writing at a time of rapid professionalisation in the study of politics in the United Kingdom as new

departments were established and as those departments began to carve a distinctive conception of what the study of politics should be. They also wrote in the shadow of logical positivism and the rise of ordinary language philosophy³ from the 1930s until the late 1960s and derived from that a scepticism about the prospects and authority of political theory as an activity. Both saw the role of philosophy as a diminishing one and by turning the insights of ordinary language philosophy back against the great tradition of political theory they inadvertently cleared the ground for a more positivistic conception of political science. This was certainly not their overt intention, as their defenders will be only too quick to argue, but their impact, despite the veneration in which they are held by many, has been hugely detrimental to the subsequent development of political theory. Oakeshott bequeathed to his successors the concept of 'the rationalist' which they are determined to apply to anyone who attempts to engage in normative theorising or who supported the Labour party pre Tony Blair. To be a 'rationalist' is to be a 'system crazed' planner, but it appears that everyone from Auguste Comte to contemporary theorists of justice are 'rationalists'. Rationalists confuse the contingencies of the present for some timeless philosophical insight into reality and end up causing chaos. There is obviously a kernel of truth in Oakeshott's characterisation and a salutary warning, but the concept is so broad it allows for no subtle distinctions nor for philosophical insights into how good normative theorising is distinguished from bad. All normative theorising is dismissed as a category mistake, but one that depends on a stipulative and controversial account of philosophy and politics. Of course Oakeshottian anti-rationalism is itself a kind of rationalism, and as it was used by many of his followers it became a rationalism of the right. But from our perspective, its real danger was that it served as a smokescreen for closing down argument and debates. Many of the next generation of theorists inspired by Oakeshott have attempted to bring his ideas to bear on contemporary debates by

focusing on his theory of civil association, but that delivers little that can engage with the concerns of political scientists.⁴

Berlin has less of an overt theory than Oakeshott: his turn to political theory or philosophy resulted in a series of loose historical reflections on the great thinkers of the past. Perhaps his greatest essay 'Two Concepts of Liberty' (1958), is an account of two historical traditions masquerading as conceptual analysis, or *vice versa*! Whatever, personal integrity and warmth Berlin brought to his teaching, in terms of a viable continuing research project there is precious little. This has not stopped a whole industry growing up around Berlin as one of the most profound theorists of liberalism in a world of plural values. A quick trawl through the journal literature will demonstrate just how pervasive is Berlin's influence. Yet apart from an assertion of the 'plurality of values' it is hard to find much by way of a theory or even an indication of the direction in which we might search for a theory. Once we start to interrogate the idea of value pluralism, incommensurability and negative liberty we soon find that Berlin is left well behind.

Whereas Oakeshott encourages a supercilious rejection of the aspirations of political science and theory, Berlin embodies a kind of quaint dilettantism, which suggests that serious intellectual inquiry and something called 'research' is actually rather vulgar. Of course, I am caricaturing both thinkers, but only to bring out the negative impact both have had on the character of political theory in Britain.

A contemporary of Oakeshott and Berlin, who casts a much shorter shadow, but whose real importance deserves greater attention is H.L.A. Hart. Although a Professor of jurisprudence, his impact on the development of analytical and normative political theory is considerable and hugely overlooked. I have no doubt that when proper historical

perspective can be achieved, scholars of the future will acknowledge Hart as one of the giant figures of political philosophy in Britain, someone whose made possible the reception of such path-breaking books as Brian Barry's Political Argument (1965) and prepared the way for Rawls A Theory of Justice in 1972. This is not merely to paint Hart as a John the Baptist to Rawls, but to acknowledge that Hart is one of the very few modern philosophers that Rawls deferred to in the way in which he does to greats such as Hume, Kant, Rousseau and Sidgwick. Hart's rigorous argumentation and analytical subtlety is a model for later political philosophy. Also important is he preparedness to draw on law, sociology and other disciplines to make progress in political philosophy. What defines the subject of political philosophy is not some narrow concept of the political but a conception of analytical rigour and intellectual broadmindedness. He also recognised that good political theory cannot be wholly divorced from a sense of the past or the insights and resources that past thinkers provide us for making sense of the problems of the present. His work on Bentham is a model of how to read a past political thinker seriously, critically and insightfully.

Against normalisation

Many of those who would describe themselves as modern political philosophers will find much in Hart that resonates with their own concerns. What they might fail to recognise the extent to which they have narrowed the scope of political theory to speculation centred on the concept of justice. This is the so-called baleful influence of Rawls: the creation of a generation of scholars who think that the problem of justice exhausts the scope of political theory.⁵ The predicament of modern political theory is not uncommon in a world in which normalisation is seen as a mark of disciplinary authority.

Normalisation involves the establishment of paradigmatic problems that give a central

coherence to any discipline. Much science operates within the paradigm of the normal, and involves small incremental gains in knowledge. Political theory seems to be preoccupied with distributive justice and ‘problems from Rawls’ and has used these as the basis for its claim to have an unfolding research agenda. To an extent, it is perfectly true that the problem of justice does open up a research agenda as we can see from the recent proliferation of hyphenated conceptions of justice; environmental justice, global justice, intergenerational justice, multicultural justice and so on, as well as continuing debates between feminists, libertarians, Marxists, and multiculturalists about the foundations of justice.

Normalisation is certainly appropriate in other areas of political science, and it is perhaps the recognition of this that creates the desire for normalisation in political theory. But this tendency remains, for all that, inappropriate in the case of political theory. Political theory does not have a single determinate focus in the way that electoral systems, EU politics or international political economy does. This may be a weakness in the eyes of those who want political science to become more like a natural science, but it remains the case that political theory derives much of its interest and excitement from the fact that it does not have a single paradigmatic problem and stable set of normal problems to be subject to technical solution.

So whilst the turn to social justice has been enormously fruitful in forcing political theorists to reflect on the nature and possibilities of their activity as much as on questions of ‘who gets what, where, when and how’, much of that achievement is easily dissipated if theorists try to close down the scope of political theory by confining to a single set of questions. Indeed, focusing on one set of questions also arbitrarily separates concepts, so we see the discussion of justice divorced from questions of democracy,

power, the state and violence, as well as each of these additional concepts divorced from each other.

In the end what makes political theory interesting to many of those who practice it, is precisely the absence of a single determinate object of enquiry. Political theory and political theorists like to see themselves as the conscience of the discipline of political science by asking tough questions of the narrow scope of the concept of the political that the normal procedures of academic enquiry impose. The nature and site of politics is always ambiguous – this is not to deny that some sites like the state are more important than others – and it is the task of political theory to continually challenge attempts to delimit the scope of political enquiry and reflection.

Against gibberish

The conception of political theory outlined above suggests a form of enquiry that is constantly challenging attempts to fix its attention on a particular set of issues, problems or methods. Although I want to caution political theory from focusing too narrowly on issues of social justice, I do not, at the same time want to dismiss the importance of those questions, nor, more importantly do I want to collapse political theory into a form of perpetual and self-undermining critique. A prevalent, though not particularly profitable tendency among political theorists has been to ransack recent continental philosophy and French post-structuralism and post-Marxism for the theories, concepts and distinctions necessary to sustain political theory as a form of perpetual critique. My concern here is not to poke fun at the ‘funny foreigners’ and their strange ways. That is a prevalent and mistaken view in contemporary political science. Instead my concern is that this turn to the esoteric teaching of continental philosophers can become an excuse

for meaningless word games or gibberish, or more importantly and equally destructively, it can become an intellectual cul-de-sac or a new kind of scholasticism. Too much of the attention of those who turn to continental discourses and idioms, is focused on defending the terms of critique and fostering the permanence of critique as if that were an end in itself. The critique of ideological forms and discourses of power is too often divorced from any more positive conception of the role and task of political theory. As such it is of ever diminishing interest to those who want to reflect on politics, much in the way that ever more technical discussions of egalitarianism have a diminishing marginal utility. Too much political theory written in this form is clever, obscure and self-serving: it is a viable way of passing the time in the face of the meaninglessness of the universe, but to be honest good novels, poetry and art (and perhaps football) are more edifying.

Reengaging with political science

In conclusion I want to sum up my agenda for political theory and suggest how it might proceed. Firstly, it must avoid the tendency to lapse into antiquarianism as much of the contemporary history of political thought has done. Political theory must retain a vibrant sense of its own past, but use that past as a resource. Secondly, British political thought must break out from the long shadow of the guru's of the 1950s, Michael Oakeshott and Isaiah Berlin. Instead, if we must have gurus why not look at the case of H.L.A. Hart, who in the long view will be seen to have had a highly beneficial effect of the development of political theory. Thirdly, that influence should not be distorted into a normalised discourse of social justice as if that is the only interesting or possible topic of political thought. Fourthly, in breaking free from a tendency to normalisation, political theory must also avoid the cul-de-sac of permanent critique as an end in itself, and the

increasing esotericism of the post-Structuralist and post-Marxist discourses that shape much political theory. My final point is to suggest that political theory can continue to command interest and respect within the sub-discipline if it does more to re-engage with political science. It can do this by challenging the terms of much that goes on in political science. In so doing it continues as a kind of underlabourer supporting what political scientists do by conceptual clarification and theory construction, analysis and appraisal. It can also do much to clarify the normative dimension of theory construction and challenge the kinds of questions asked by political scientists. This much is pretty familiar and uncontroversial. However, there is more that political theory can do by challenging and framing the development of other aspects of political science to open new positive and normative questions. A good example of what I have in mind is some recent work by the political philosophers Philip Pettit and Christian List⁶ who have used traditional social choice theory to defend a conception of group agency. Admittedly their work is highly controversial and still developing, but it suggests how asking unfamiliar questions of a familiar discourse can open both new avenues of enquiry and reopen others that conventional history of political thought would suggest had been confined to the 'dustbin' of history. If groups can be shown to exhibit some of the characteristics of agency this opens up interesting questions about responsibility and accountability that tend to be dismissed or distorted by a simplistic methodological individualism. I have no doubt that there are many other instances in which the political theorist and the political scientist can continue interact in a way which expands the opportunities for both. By reconnecting with political science (as explanation, interpretation and prediction) and abandoning the idea of categorical separation, the task of the political scientist and the political theorist can be brought together in ways that are both appropriate to the modern self-understanding, but which are also more true to the classical vision that we inherit from the great thinkers of the past.

Notes

1. See J. Dunn, The Cunning of Unreason, London, Harper Collins, 2000 and Setting the People Free, London, Atlantic Books 2005, and Quentin Skinner, Liberty before Liberalism, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998.
2. J. Gray, Two Faces of Liberalism, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2000.
3. Oakeshott's primary intellectual debt is to British Hegelianism and the philosophy of F.H. Bradley, that said he was not untouched by the ordinary language philosophy and its scepticism about substantive ethical enquiry.
4. I won't 'name names' but Oakeshott's influence extended through the dominance of disciples in departments such as Durham, Hull and Swansea. His influence also crops up in the most surprising of places, not least of these is Lord Parekh's theory of multiculturalism.
5. A good example is Adam Swift's otherwise excellent to political philosophy, which certainly conveys the impression that theories of justice exhaust the terrain of political theory, see A. Swift, Political Philosophy: A Beginners guide for Students and Politicians, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2001.
6. Pettit and List 'On The Many As One' Philosophy and Public Affairs, (forthcoming) 2005.