Dislocated Rhetoric: The Anomaly of Political Theory

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Although the estranged relationship between mainstream political science and much of the subfield of political theory has been properly attributed to developments during the last half of the twentieth century, the roots of this alienation are historically deeper. Many of the conversations of political theory are the progeny of a discursive form that attended the birth of modern social science. This genre was a legitimating rhetoric situated in the interstices of social science, philosophy, and politics. The study of the history of political thought originated as such a rhetoric, and it constitutes a paradigm case for examining the extent to which such a discourse can be transformed into a practice of knowledge. This field has succeeded to a greater extent than certain other elements of political theory which, transferred by the tension between their practical aspirations and academic context, have become anomalous appendages to the social scientific study of politics.

Two recent books have attested to the persistently pluralistic, and ambiguous, character of political theory as an academic enterprise. One volume (White and Moon 2004) was a reprise of a special issue of Political Theory (2002) marking both the 30th anniversary of the journal and the 40th anniversary of Isaiah Berlin’s essay “Does Political Theory Still Exist?” The editors claimed that the initiation of the journal had represented the “revival” of political theory whose demise or decline had, for many, seemed imminent in the 1950s but which Berlin avowed would never expire in a pluralistic society where “ends collided.” The book valorized both the ethic of pluralism and the diversity of political theory, but the essays comprising it tended, as a whole, less to address the question What is Political Theory? than to evoke Gertrude Stein’s assessment of Oakland. Andrew Vincent (2004) also stressed the eclectic, and even fragmented, character of the conversations constituting the field. Although he presented an acute systematic synoptic account and analysis of these elements and emphasized a family resemblance among them with respect to a search for foundations, which he suggested yielded ecumenical possibilities, what he posited as the “The Nature of Political Theory” was, in effect, its plurality and contested identity. Questions about what political theory is or should be (e.g., Nelson 1986) tend, as these volumes prominently stress, to be raised at junctures when its relationship both to the discipline of political science and to politics are matters of concern and contention. This was the case when George Sabine posed the question “What is Political Theory?” in the lead article of the first issue of the Journal of Politics (1939), and it was again the case when, in 1957, from diverging perspectives, Leo Strauss, eschewing the term “theory,” asked “What is Political Philosophy?” and G. E. G. Catlin inquired “Political Theory: What Is It?”

Noting the attribute of plurality is neither a sufficient marker of the identity of political theory nor an automatic justification of its endeavors. Understanding what political theory is requires, in part, illuminating what it has been. When Sabine’s article was published, the study of the history of political theory, that is, the exegesis of, and commentary on, the classic canon, constituted the domain of political theory which, in turn, was still an integral dimension of political science. Today it is an anomalous element of the literature of the discipline, and the same might be said of a number of other areas of academic political theory. Although this situation is in part a consequence of scholarly specialization, there is no other social science in which such a numerically and qualitatively significant professional subfield, and
particularly one that has been so influential in the evolution of the discipline, is so intellectually estranged. There is a disposition to affirm that there should be reciprocity between empirical research and political theory, but these increasingly represent two distinctly different endeavors. There may be notable instances in which the respective conversations converge, particularly in the case of discussions about democracy, but such exceptions do not prove the rule.

The classic articulation of this alienation was Sheldon Wolin’s (1969) image of political theory as a “vocation” which he advocated as an alternative to the “methodism” he ascribed to the behavioral program in political science. Wolin claimed that this calling, paradigmatically represented in the texts comprising the classic canon, was one to which academic theorists should and could aspire even if only by interpreting and teaching this literature. There were, however, several ironies attaching to this manifesto of the autonomy of political theory. The very idea of such a tradition of political thought, from, as Wolin put it, “Plato to Marx,” had been a creation of political science and, for nearly a century, had largely defined what political scientists meant by “political theory.” Despite Wolin’s plea for recapturing the concern for political relevance that, he argued, had animated the great tradition, but had been relinquished by mainstream political science, the subfield of political theory did not extricate itself from professional political science and achieve a more significant relationship to political life but only intellectually disengaged from the conversations that defined the discipline. Although this estrangement became most prominent in the later part of the twentieth century and although there are a variety of contemporary professional and disciplinary factors that contribute to its perpetuation, it is rooted in structural factors which belong to the more remote past of the discipline. To understand the “nature” and condition of much of political theory today, it is necessary to clarify the extent to which it is the residue of a form of discourse that attended the institutionalization of modern social science.

**Political Theory: Genotype and Phenotype**

The emerging social sciences, in the nineteenth century, were primarily the confluence of two intellectual tributaries: elements of academic moral philosophy devoted to purposes such as civic education; and social reform movements such as those represented in the American Social Science Association which had invoked the cognitive authority of science in their pursuit of practical purchase. As these tributaries coalesced and were institutionalized in the context of the modern university and became the basis of increasingly differentiated disciplines and professions of social science, certain fundamental and related problems emerged. There were the problems of demarcation and of establishing the identity of these nascent disciplines, but there was also the problem of their practical relationship to their subject matter. These problems prompted the appearance of a rhetorical discourse which functioned at two levels. It addressed internal issues regarding the identity of these fields, but it was also devoted to justifying the role of social science to the world from which these fields had in part sprung—and about, and to, which they still intended to speak.

A classic example of this basic genre was Max Weber’s essay on “The ‘Objectivity’ of Knowledge in the Social Science and Social Policy” ([1903] 2004) which was a work located in an interstice among social science, philosophy, and politics. Weber pointedly noted the “political” origins of the social sciences, and he was speaking not only to social scientists but addressing political actors and attempting to validate the cognitive authority of social science as a basis for intervention in matters of public policy (Gunnell 1993). Such rhetorical discourses became characteristic features of these emerging fields, but they also increasingly became *distributaries* which were displaced from their original function and purpose. This dislocation was in part a consequence of increased differentiation within the academy, but it was also the result of growing distance between the academy and public life. These discourses did not, however, atrophy and disappear but rather took on new forms which constituted, and have continued to inform, significant dimensions of academic political theory. For example, epistemological arguments about the nature of social scientific explanation, such as that of Weber, were, even through the 1960s, still closely tied to justifying contesting persuasions in social science and to sorting out the relationship between social science and politics, but by the beginning of the twenty-first century, such arguments have, to a large extent, been abstracted and detached from their original context. Although these discussions may occasionally still feature in vestigial disputes about the character and purpose of social science, they have for the most part been relegated to the ancillary province of “scope and method” or parceled out to narrow specialized philosophical venues such as the philosophy of social
science. And the assumption that they speak to an audience outside the academy has all but vanished.

The question inherent in this situation is whether what began as, what may be called, a rhetoric of inquiry can be transformed into a practice of knowledge, that is, an academic practice with relatively well-defined criteria of scholarly judgment. The study of the history of political thought originated as a rhetorical discourse devoted both to vouchsafing the identity of political science and to establishing it as a body of knowledge with practical significance, and, for a century, it functioned as such a discourse. The principal goal of the “revolution” in the theory and practice of the study of the history of political thought initiated, more than a generation ago, by scholars such as Quentin Skinner (e.g., 1969, 1978; see also Tully 1988) and J. G. A. Pocock (e.g., 1962, 1971, 1975) was devoted to transforming this literature into a more credible body of historical research. They rejected what they characterized as philosophical and ideological renditions of past political thought in favor of what they claimed was an authentic historical recovery of the meaning of texts which was to be accomplished in part by a careful reconstruction of their political context. Although there are grounds for suggesting that this program did not fully cast off the imprint of its rhetorical past, it has been considerably more successful in doing so than many other dimensions of political theory. This “success,” however, is not without its problems.

There are many who would deem the more recent scholarly achievements of the social sciences as entailing a relinquishment of the very purpose that gave rise to these fields, that is, to have a practical impact on their subject matter. Similarly, one might reasonably ask if the turn in the study of the history of political theory from a rhetoric of history to a history of rhetoric and ideology has not carried with it a loss of political relevance. The pursuit of a more “historical” study of the history of political thought was, however, in part motivated by the Weberian assumption that only a more “objective” history could carry authority with respect to speaking about and to politics. It might not be surprising that once its scholarly authority was established, the political motif tended to resurface (e.g., Skinner 1998), but at the same time, as in the case of social science as a whole, increased academization often means “being deprived of its political character” (Hampsher-Monk 2001, 159, 168; Hampsher-Monk and Castiglione 2001, 8). My purpose, however, is not to describe, evaluate, and make judgments about the present state of the study of the history of political thought (e.g., Hampsher-Monk 2001) but rather to reflect on certain elements of its pedigree. But neither is the goal to present a detailed account of the evolution of this field of study in the United States (e.g., Ball 2001; Gunnell 1993), let alone in other countries. I only seek to recall, emphasize, and interpret some of the basic contours of what by now is a relatively well-documented development and thereby illuminate certain aspects of contemporary political theory and its relationships to political science and politics.

The Politics of History and the History of Politics

Rendering the history of political theory was originally, and in several respects, more a “politics of history” than a history of politics. One sense of what we might think of as the politics of the history of political theory was reflected in Immanuel Kant’s claim that the principal events of human history are politically caused and manifested. This, as he noted, was an “a priori” assumption that preceded and was meant “to supersede the task of history proper, that of empirical composition.” Kant claimed that the human past was an organic whole which was not only rooted in politics as a form of life but could only be known and authenticated by a “public” that was the emanation of that form (Kant 1970, 52–53). Hegel, and many of those influenced by Hegel’s work, produced variations on this theme which, by the middle of the nineteenth century, found its way into a variety of academic practices. One such practice was the study of the history of political theory which embodied the assumptions that the past has a political essence and that the study of the past is, therefore, inherently politically relevant. A second dimension of the “politics” of this history was the extent to which it reflected and consciously embodied political attitudes and agendas. Third, this body of work was very much part of the “politics of theory” in that it served to affirm the identity and autonomy of political science among the social sciences and, within political science, to underwrite certain forms of scholarship and conceptions of political phenomena. Finally, this literature was involved with justifying political science to society at large and with providing grounds for the discipline’s claim to practical authority.

Stefan Collini has noted that “there is no single enterprise or entity corresponding to what in English-speaking countries has most often been called ‘the history of political thought,’” and that in order to understand this genre, it is necessary to look at particular “intellectual and academic cultures.” More specifically, he suggested that “if one is interested in the
historical development of the ‘history of political thought,’ one is interested in an aspect or episode of the intellectual and institutional history of academic disciplines” (2001, 281, 283). If we think of the study of the history of political thought generically as a “form of discourse” conducted in diverse ways and settings by university scholars, it is difficult not to conceive it as a relatively universal endeavor, but if we think of it as a self-ascribed and institutionally differentiated “academic discipline,” we are talking about a practice that was largely a nineteenth-century American invention. For example, Robert Wokler (2001) has noted that in England, “the birth and rise of the study of political thought as a genuinely academic discipline” was largely a “twentieth century” development. Although it is possible, and common, to identify, in various countries, what might be considered as functional equivalents and prototypes of the academic practice of writing the history of political thought, this practice was largely a creation of American political science.

The works of authors such as Aristotle, Locke, and Rousseaus were already central texts in the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century American college curriculum in moral philosophy. This course of studies was dominated by a Scottish Enlightenment perspective which included practical ethics and which was taught by Protestant ministers. This iconic literature, which became the core of the classic canon, was presented not only as the progenitor of the ideas embodied in American institutions but as containing principles that should be inculcated in citizens and political leaders. Although political science, as a distinct discipline, was, as Bernard Crick (1959) so notoriously put it, the “American science of politics,” this is not to say that its American locus entailed a lack of European influences. The person most reasonably credited as its “founder” was the German émigré Francis Lieber, who grafted German philosophical history onto the political dimension of American moral philosophy and made the concept of the State the subject and domain of political science. From the point of his earliest writing on the study of politics (1835a, 1835b), he also situated the already canonical authors, from Plato onward, as central actors in a Kantian/Hegelian vision of history which was the story of the State and its search for freedom. Lieber designated these luminaries as the predecessors of the field of study that he was attempting to institutionalize, and the history of politics was presented as moving toward culmination in American self-government (1853). The emerging discipline, as a whole, was devoted to justifying American institutions as the realization of popular sovereignty, and the study of the history of political thought served the function of validating that putative body of knowledge by attaching it to an illustrious lineage. The history of political ideas was conceived as, at once, the history of political science and the history of the theory and practice of the State and thus as providing a provenance for both the discipline and its subject matter.

Lieber was deeply involved in the politics of his time with respect to issues ranging from slavery to polygamy, and his story of the evolution of political thought reflected and supported his views. This embryonic account of the history of political theory was very much part of academic struggles involving issues of disciplinary identity and status, but it was also in the service of demonstrating the field’s pedagogic and epistemic authority. By the late nineteenth century, however, it had become increasingly distant, conceptually and practically, from the practice of politics. The elite character of both politics and university education and the ease with which an intellectual entrepreneur such as Lieber moved between the worlds of academe and politics had contributed to the permeability of the membranes separating scholarly and political discourse. The situation changed significantly with the professionalization of social science and with democratizing transformations in the world of politics. Although Lieber’s vision of political science was adopted, adapted, and perpetuated by individuals such as Theodore Woolsey at Yale and Herbert Baxter Adams at Johns Hopkins, the connection to politics became increasingly attenuated. This academic formalization of the American democratic meta-narrative was prompted by a political purpose, but once it had become a specialized property of the academy, there was the problem of maintaining its political significance.

It was Lieber’s successor at Columbia, John W. Burgess, and the latter’s colleagues and students, who most fully institutionalized the discipline of political science, including both the theory of the state and the attending study of the history of political ideas. The goal of influencing politics still deeply informed the positions of Burgess and others, but, as in the case of Weber, the strategy for doing so began to change in a world where political power was becoming diverse and dispersed. Although Burgess claimed moral authority, he sought to ground it in science. For these first- and second-generation political theorists, history was conceived and advertised as a science, and the story they told was once again a democratic meta-narrative which supplemented but transcended that within the world of politics itself. They were avowing
more than the idea of a political interpretation of history. They were subscribing to the notion that writing history was politically and philosophically salient, but they also believed that in a society in which the grounds of social knowledge and authority were changing, it must be perceived as scientific if it were to be politically effective. In this context, the history of political theory was explicitly presented as the history of political science (e.g., Pollock 1890). Despite the ideological shift that characterized much of the next generation, the strategy of seeking practical effect on the basis of a claim to scientific neutrality played a large part in the transformation of political science into a profession in 1903 and to its separation from the field of history and from the increasingly conservative discipline of economics. It is ironic that, in the last quarter of the twentieth century, it would be the ethos of guild history that would attempt to reclaim the study of the history of political theory.

Whatever may have been the actual status of the German professoriate of the nineteenth century, its role and stature were perceived as models by a wide range of ideologically disparate American scholars who went abroad to imbibe the theory of the State and its attending history. These perceptions of the influence of German academicians shaped profoundly the image of what American scholars believed could be the relationship between the academy and public policy in the United States. Despite Burgess's conservative political commitments, the constitution of his School of Political Science, which he claimed was best described as a "School of Political Thought," with its emphasis on combining history and political science, reflected his image of the German academy and his general optimism regarding the possibilities of theory informing practice through the medium of exchange between academic and political elites. Although Burgess himself was an unremitting Hegelian and viewed the course of American history and the history of political thought in these terms, those, such as the philosopher Archibald Alexander and the historian William A. Dunning, to whom Burgess allotted the task of teaching the history of political theory, were more broadly grounded. They drew from English and French as well as German sources as they sought to establish the ancestry and identity of the study of the history of political theory as a yet more distinct intellectual endeavor as well as subfield of political science. But this period also marked the further dislocation of this rhetorical history. Its form, content, and purpose persisted, but its actual relationship to politics, and even, in some degree, to political science, changed as it became a more specific field of study.

More than any other work, it was Dunning's three volumes on A History of Political Theories, written over a period of two decades (1902, 1905, 1920), that established the history of political theory as a consciously recognized academic literature and a defined element of the university curriculum. Dunning continued to emphasize the unity of theory and practice by stressing and elaborating the assumption that political theory was in politics as well as an academic historical discourse about politics, and he continued to press the points that the history of political theory was the past of contemporary political science, that politics was the subject of history, and that political change was a product of a dialectic between political ideas and their social context. Although Dunning deprecated attempts to bring scholarship to bear on political life, or at least was wary of the efficacy and propriety of academic political advocacy, he continued to stress that the history of political theory was, on the whole, a story of the progress of democratic ideas and institutions as well as of the history of political science.

Dunning's work was paralleled, and mildly challenged, by Westel Woodbury Willoughby at Hopkins. Willoughby emphasized the importance of theory in political life and, even more than Dunning, the immanence of political ideas in the context of political fact (1903). He was one of the principal actors in founding the APSA and in designating political theory as a recognized subfield, and he explicitly adopted a position similar to that of Weber. He claimed that the history of political theory was a repository of concepts for scientific political inquiry, and he maintained that only by establishing a scientific professional identity, and detaching the discipline from the kind of overt partisanship that he noted in the work of individuals such as Burgess, could political science become politically effective. A perspective similar to that of Willoughby was embraced, and elaborated, by Charles Merriam who had cut his academic teeth by teaching and writing, from the perspectives of Burgess and Dunning, about the history of political theory, in both Europe and the United States (Merriam 1900, 1903). He, and his student Harold Lasswell, believed that political science and political practice could be bridged by citizen education and by gaining the ear of political elites and that these goals could be accomplished only if political science achieved a scientific status. For Merriam, however, the history of political theory remained both the story of democracy and an account of the evolution of political science, and he held on to the idea that it spoke both to the academy and the public. For the first quarter of the twentieth century, political theory, as a distinct element of
political science, continued, despite the new empiricism, to be dominated by studies of the history of political thought (e.g., Carlyle and Carlyle 1903; Figgis 1907; Gettell 1924; Merriam and Barnes 1924). What had also taken place, however, by the mid-1920s, was an Americanization, and Anglicization, of the literature. This was in part a function of the turn away from German philosophy and political ideas after WWI, and there was also greater intercourse with England and the influence of scholars such as Ernest Barker, Harold Laski, and A. D. Lindsay. But although the more strictly Hegelian elements that had characterized the American adaptation faded away, the essential characteristics of the form, such as the relativity of ideas leavened by an idealist image of progress, persisted.

Although the crisis of democratic theory in political science, during the 1920s, ended with the demise of the theory of the state as an account of popular sovereignty based on the existence of a homogeneous American “people,” the history of political theory continued to flourish as a justification for the new theory of democratic pluralism and the attending image of a science of politics that came to dominate the field by the end of the 1920s. The political polarization of the globe in the 1930s and an inferiority complex about the articulation of democracy, or liberalism, as an ideology provided incentives for moving that history yet further in this direction. The idea of a great tradition, reaching from Plato to the present, became, more than ever, the past of both American politics and political science. Works such as C. H. McIlwain’s *The Growth of Political Thought in the West* (1932) did much to solidify the assumption that the classic works were pivotal elements of an actual historical tradition, but, among the proliferating number of texts, during the 1930s and 1940s, which served to underwrite liberal democracy as well as the discipline devoted to studying it, Sabine’s *A History of Political Theory* (1937) became the most paradigmatic. Although Sabine claimed that political ideas were relative to their context, depreciated the assumption that political theory had anything to do with ultimate “truth,” and stressed the danger of all transcendental perspectives from natural law to Marxism, he sustained the image of progress in both ideas and institutions. He claimed that the logic of the experimental method, which lay at the heart of both science and liberalism, ultimately ensured their survival and doomed the aberrational absolutist lapses of totalitarianism. Sabine’s work could, at that point, hardly have fitted better into the general Weltbild of American political science and its ostensible commitment to the separation of fact and value.

The pluralist image of social reality and the attending democratic theory, although precipitated and anticipated by theorists as diverse as Arthur Bentley and Laski, had been most fully and originally formulated by a now largely forgotten group of scholars including Harry Elmer Barnes, Walter Shepard, Peter Odegard, and John Dickinson (Gunnell 2004). They elaborated a general image of democracy, and the methods of science appropriate for studying it, that pervaded and dominated disciplinary discourse during the 1930s and 1940s. This theory, and the doctrine of scientism associated with it, was more schematically rearticulated in the late 1940s and throughout the 1950s and 1960s by scholars such as Pendleton Herring (1940), David Truman (1951), and Robert Dahl (1956). The theory of pluralist democracy, and the emergence of the behavioral movement in which it was embedded, were in part a response to the growing sentiment that political science had not realized its promise—in either the cognitive or practical sense. This, in turn, was tied to a renewed concern, in the midst of the Cold War, with providing an alternative to alien ideologies and with demonstrating that the theory of democracy was scientifically grounded and indeed inherent in what Daniel Boorstin (1953) claimed was the “genius” of American political practice. It was, however, something more internal to the discipline that most significantly prompted both this reprise of pluralism and a new defense of political science as truly scientific. These were, most directly, a response to an assault on the basic values and practice of mainstream political science, an assault that was particularly unsettling because it was mounted within the very heart of the discipline and its legitimating rhetoric—the study of the history of political theory.

Although it is often assumed that the behavioral revolution involved a rejection of the history of political theory in favor of what it characterized as scientific theory, it was in part a radical change in the literature associated with history of political theory that instigated the behavioral movement. Between the late 1930s and early 1940s, a significant number of émigré scholars arrived in the United States and, for various reasons, gravitated toward the field of political theory in which, by the mid-1950s, they produced a fundamental sea change. This group included, most notably, Leo Strauss, Hannah Arendt, Eric Voegelin, and Herbert Marcuse. They were, in several respects, a philosophically and ideologically diverse group, but despite their differences, they embraced some common principles and assumptions, and to Americans, who had for a generation been relatively insulated from foreign influences, their arguments appeared quite
similar. There were some American partisans such as John Hallowell who aided in the penetration of the genre, and, by the early 1960s, with the publication of what many saw as the principal successors to Sabine’s book—Sheldon Wolin’s Politics and Vision (1960) and Strauss and Cropsey’s History of Political Philosophy (1963)—a basic intellectual shift had occurred. The quite sudden behavioralist depreciation of the study of the history of political theory (Easton 1951), which had taken place during the 1950s, was in large measure a preparation of this literature increasingly becoming a rhetoric which was now devoted to undermining rather than defending mainstream political science as well as the idea of democracy that had now become emblematic of political science as well as of American public philosophy.

Even though the political aspirations of the émigrés in their own country may to some degree have been as utopian as the images that nineteenth-century American scholars carried home from Europe, there was a more pronounced intersection between academic and public discourse in a country such as Germany than in United States. The émigrés had strong political or para-political commitments and were dedicated, in one way or another, to the goals of theoretical intervention in politics and cultural change. Most had confronted politics in its most concrete and ineluctable form, but they were nearly all deeply suspicious of liberal democracy, particularly in its pluralist version, which they tended to view as a potential threshold of totalitarianism. Both because of their experience in the German educational system and because of their political and theoretical assumptions, they depreciated empirical science and perceived it as in opposition to philosophy and history which they believed was the basis of a critical theory of politics. Many were influenced by the work of individuals such as Martin Heidegger, Oswald Spengler, Stefan George, Carl Schmitt, and other antimodernist persuasions which informed their images of the crisis of the West and the decline of political thought. Since they all saw relativism in its various manifestations as a precursor of philosophical and political nihilism, they reacted negatively to American pragmatism and subscribed to some version of transcendental and foundational philosophy. In short, they could not, in most respects, have been more at odds with the substantive content and purpose of the field of political theory in the United States. The form of this intellectual vessel was, however, more congenial and familiar.

The tale of the tradition, as told by political philosophers such as Arendt, Strauss, and Voegelin, became a much more dramatic and structured trope which in many respects mirrored the holistic images of the nineteenth century. Authors such as Machiavelli were cast as romantic or demonic protagonists in a plot containing distinct points of beginning, transformation, and, even, end. Although the émigrés viewed their work as political in both character and purpose, it was actually a triply dislocated rhetoric. The history of political theory, like the discipline’s built-in Whig history of itself, had already become distanced from the particularities of politics. Second, the new rendition of the history of political thought was relevant almost exclusively to an academic audience and hardly intelligible to a more general public. Although the new literature was addressed, at least obliquely, to contemporary society, issues surrounding the Cold War, and the viability of democratic institutions, it was a kind of philosophical politics in which actual events resonated more as exemplars than actual objects of investigation. And, finally, it was increasingly alienated from the very discipline in which it was professionally situated. The new synoptic account of the tradition that took shape after WWII still told the story of political science, but it was now a tragic story of its flaws and irrelevance. At the same time, however, the narrative singled out the enterprise that Wolin would label as the “vocation” of political theory, which survived modernity and stood in opposition to political science, and provided an account of the lost remnant of truth which this vocation might recover. The various senses of the politics of history were still very apparent in the genre, but now more than ever it was a kind of virtual politics that was at issue.

Debates in the 1960s about such matters as whether the whole tradition had been based on a logical mistake and consequently whether political theory was “dead” (e.g., Laslett 1956), debates that in retrospect might seem much like the famous Monty Python parrot skit, were largely secondary effusions of philosophical controversies about positivism, but even this discussion assumed the existence of the tradition as a piece of historical reality. The field had moved from A History of Political Theories to A History of Political Theory to the Straussian History of Political Philosophy and Wolin’s organic image of “continuity and change.” While the “tradition” took on a greater aura of reality and significance within the increasingly self-contained literature of political theory, it was often increasingly foreign to both political science and American politics.

Wolin had hoped to speak to a public world as well as to the discipline of political science, but his claims had, in effect, become compressed into providing an
identity for an emerging professional enclave. His image of the vocation was as mythical as the idea of the scientific explanation conjured up and propagated by behavioral political science, and neither of these hegemonic legitimating myths could ultimately withstand critical scrutiny within the academy let alone reach a wider audience. Wolin’s invocation of the great tradition, now as the past of contemporary academic political theory rather than mainstream political science, but once again as a way of bridging the gap between academic and public discourse, was in many ways the last gasp of the history of political theory as a rhetoric of inquiry. The study of the history of political theory had become simply another element in a highly pluralized world of academic specialization with its own scholarly outlets but supplemented by token appearances in mainstream journals which did not want to offend any element of their professional constituency. For those who invented the paradigm a century earlier and for those who transformed it a half-century later, there was still, despite all the ways in which it was a dislocated rhetoric, something “political” about it. For those who came later, however, and were initiated into these forms as part of a graduate school education, it was much like the situation of those who enter a fraternity and adopt, often with great enthusiasm, arcane rites which they practice without quite ever grasping from whence they came.

The New Historicism

By the early 1970s, the genre was, indeed, anomalous, and it was most vulnerable at the core of its self-ascribed identity—history. It was, at this point, quite thoroughly brought to task on the grounds that it was a discourse about the past that was in various ways inadequately “historical” with respect to both method and substance. Detached from its roots and exposed, it was, simply, recognized for what it was and always had been—a rhetorical medium. Several scholars, although rarely agreeing completely either about alternatives or the criteria of historicity and interpretation, advanced quite extended critiques arguing, in effect, that not all talk about the past is history (Gunnell 1979). They claimed that an analytically and retrospectively constituted canon had, for a century, masqueraded as an actual tradition. As much as this literature had been studied, it had been approached in terms of, and encased in, a framework that often obscured both texts and contexts as well as their actual political character and potential relevance for the present. And the attachment to the idea of “great” tradition had inhibited the capacity to recognize and study a variety of actual historical traditions. The question that was posed was, in effect, whether a displaced rhetoric could be transformed into an autonomous scholarly practice.

One might speculate that if the ideological and philosophical transformation effected by the émigrés had not alienated political theory from mainstream behavioral political science, the study of the history of political theory would have remained a rhetorical adjunct. Isolated from the discipline, however, it became increasingly exposed and susceptible to criticism. There is no need to rehearse the tenets and evolution of the “new historicism,” but it assumed, despite the growing popularity of arguments such as those of H. G. Gadamer and various strains of post-structuralism and postmodernism, that there was something beyond varieties of “presentist” history. This literature, which some would refer to as a scholarly “revolution” precipitated by the “Cambridge school,” was accompanied by its own epistemological agenda and rhetoric of inquiry. It claimed that it was preferable to its rivals because it deployed a method that yielded an objective recovery of the past and an authentic understanding of the texts and their authors. One of the problems of the new historicism, however, was that it was forged in the crucible of the old historicism, whose purpose was, in several senses, political. To suggest, for example, as Skinner did, that “real history” would in the end be relevant for such things as a better theoretical understanding of the connection between thought and action, or that it was not possible to address classic texts philosophically unless they were first understood historically, that is, in terms of their actual context and intention, was eminently reasonable. The very subject matter, however, although much expanded beyond the classic literature, was still largely defined by works that had been selected by the rhetorical genre. The question was why, exactly, this material was being studied apart from the fact that it was there.

There is, as already noted, reason to suggest that the new historicism was not simply the outgrowth of ideological and philosophical abstemiousness but rather in some respects yet another version of the Weberian claim that it is possible to be most effectively political by being apolitical and the assumption that in a time of historical self-consciousness, historical claims that are based on defensible criteria of scholarship are more practically effective than mythical history. It is difficult to read this literature and not sense that its renunciation of philosophical history and its emphasis on a truly historical method was,
much like Weber’s claims about value-freedom, designed to undercut adversaries and accrue its own authority as well as, in at least some attenuated manner, speak to public life. One cannot fail to see, for example, that Skinner’s early work reflected his antipathy for arguments such as that of C. B. Macpherson and Strauss and that his concerns extended beyond methodological issues. Similarly, Pocock’s *The Machiavellian Moment* (1975) represented a “political” agenda even though the politics involved may not have extended much beyond the para-politics associated with issues such as those involved in the seemingly interminable debate about whether the origins of the American founding were republican or liberal. The concern was hardly that those criticized were simply poor historians. Many embraced the new historicism and practiced it paradigmatically, but in a manner colored by various political inclinations. Whatever the commitments of its founders, the new historicism, like the old historicism, was, in the end and in many ways, an ideologically equal opportunity employer.

The program of the Cambridge school (Skinner et al. 2002) is hardly secure from criticism. Many have pointed to problems such as the gap between methodological promise and practice and a tendency to emphasize context over text (e.g., Gunnell 1998; Tully 1988), but there can be little doubt that, if judged on the basis of generally accepted scholarly criteria, the new historicism, broadly construed in terms of the work of both its founders and those who have shared its goals, represents a greater contribution to knowledge than the old historicism. One obvious benchmark might be a comparison of the scholarship on authors such as Machiavelli and Hobbes before and after 1960 (e.g., Skinner 1996; Strauss 1936). It would be difficult to deny that in the last quarter of the twentieth century there was a measurable increase in our understanding of both the contexts and texts of what has been conventionally designated as past political thought. Both the initiators of this persuasion and the second generation of scholars who might reasonably be associated with it have produced significant substantive work as well as methodological sophistication in the study of conceptual development (e.g., Ball, Farr, and Hanson 1989), and the attitude engendered has spilled over into various other aspects of history and historiography. Even many of those committed to furthering the perspective of Strauss have both weakened and expanded the philosophical agenda and taken more literally Strauss’s claim about the necessity of understanding authors as they understood themselves. This is not at all to suggest that there is something inherently invalid about using texts belonging to the classic canon as vehicles of commentary (Baumgold 1981), but only that it is no longer convincing to present instrumental uses as “history.”

As the study of the history of political theory moves into the new century, we are left with the question that Weber posed a hundred years ago; that is, can an activity such as social science, which had its origins in the cauldron of politics, extricate itself and become a practice of knowledge that at the same time is politically significant? But further, can an element of social science such as the study of the history of political theory, which began as a rhetoric of inquiry, detach and transfigure itself and become a functioning dimension of such a practice? Whatever the extent to which its rhetorical origins may still shape, or burden, the study of the history of political theory, the verdict must be that it has established a reasonable claim to scholarly autonomy and therefore to the kind of cognitive authority that Weber had sought. Yet, given its original purpose of speaking to political life, there remains the question of its contemporary relevance in terms of both principle and practice. Social science, as well as the study of the history of political theory, originated in a very different context, and the discursive shadow of that context continues to constrain their evolution.

**What, Indeed, Is Political Theory?**

The career of the study of the history of political theory provides a benchmark for examining the fate of other dimensions of political theory whose contemporary situation is considerably more ambiguous. During the last years of the behavioral era in American political science, that is, the late 1960s, the growing intellectual split between the mainstream discipline and much of political theory resulted in somewhat contrived “official” institutional and professional distinctions among historical, empirical, and normative theory, or, less officially, between traditional and scientific theory. Although this development was often accepted and applauded by both sides of the controversy about behavioralism, the rhetorics attaching to the controversy, regarding such matters as the nature of social scientific explanation and the historical career of political theory, were dislodged as these “vocations” went their separate ways and became respectively internally further differentiated. In a somewhat similar manner, the so-called enterprise of normative political theory became increasingly anomalous, but this development was also prefigured in the past of the social sciences.
For Merriam and Willoughby, as well as for the subsequent generation of political scientists, the goal had not been, any more than in the case of Weber’s distinction between science and politics, to dislodge social science from a position where it could influence politics but rather to provide a new, that is, scientific, basis for such influence. What this in effect entailed was that normativity became sublimated in “scientific” claims, just as it had been previously embedded in historical claims. From its inception, American political science had been devoted to specifying the criteria of democracy and demonstrating the conformance, or lack of conformance, of institutions and political practices to that concept. With the demise of the theory of the state and its account of democracy, the pluralist theory of democracy that emerged in the 1920s was implanted in a descriptive analysis of American political practice. This literature reached its apotheosis in the empirical theory of democracy advanced, during the 1950s, by political scientists such as Truman and Dahl. The mutually agreed upon professional division of labor, which emerged during the last quarter of the twentieth century, created a situation where normativity tended to remain “underground” in empirical political science, while what was officially designated as normative political theory, or sometimes value-theory, had no clearly specifiable parentage. It was in part a category springing from the positivist claim, and from even earlier images in the discipline, that all judgments could be parsed as either factual or evaluative, and it was in part a classification designed to cover modes of discourse that did not fit the behavioral image of theory. Despite its professional connection to political science, what was considered as belonging to normative political theory consisted of a diverse interdisciplinary literature without a concrete home, subject matter, purpose, and audience. Released from the normal professional constraints, which had perpetuated the idea of the unity of political theory, the two already estranged voices began to break into distinct discourses with minimal mutual contact.

By the end of the 1960s, those who found themselves attached, or attached themselves, to the proliferating “vocations” of normative political theory wished to speak about and to the practice of politics, but they rejected the authority of science on which political science had previously predicated its normative judgments. Instead, they sought a variety of philosophical and historical grounds, but they often conveyed a message that was neither directed toward nor comprehensible to a distinct political constituency. Seeking an identity for normative theory in the work of thinkers such as John Rawls, Jürgen Habermas, and Michel Foucault had little resonance beyond the academy. This is not to say that there have not been instances of significant intersection between academic and public discourse, but these are isolated and complicated events and are neither indicative of the general structural relationship between political theory and American politics nor necessarily evidence of why such intersection should occur (Gunnell 1998). The question of exactly why the claims of academic political theorists should be heeded, particularly in a democratic society, is seldom confronted.

Significant elements of the literature of political theory consist today less of distinct scholarly contributions than of varieties of abstract moralism pronounced by individuals who lack the location and status of moralists but seek to function as public ethicists and spokespersons for an increasingly phantom audience. Although claims about matters such as justice and democracy once had a great deal to do with both the agenda of social science and its relationship to political life, they now are largely part of a disjoined self-contained conversation. Those who identify with this field, however, are often possessed of a sense that, abandoned by political science, it represented an activity that had been chosen as the promulgate of political values and that it somehow had accrued the authority to speak, in varying degrees of specificity, about a variety of issues relating to public life.

A generation after its invention, normative political theory, which is largely the descendant of the pre-WWII genre of the history of political theory, is still unclear about how it relates not only to political science but to the other fields such as philosophy whose practitioners often share in this somewhat analytically constructed field. And how it relates, and should relate, to politics is even less clear. Many theorists affect a stance, and speak in an idiom, not unlike that of the clergy who dominated moral philosophy in the American academy during the first half of the nineteenth century, and it is important to recognize the extent to which the contemporary discourse is genealogically anchored in an unreflective perpetuation of motives and motifs of that enterprise. The fundamental difference is that, unlike Lieber or Woolsey, the moralists of the current era are neither appointed by nor seldom speaking to any distinct community and in most instances have never ventured from the academy into the worlds of practice that they profess to advise and admonish. It was, ironically, the very failure of moral philosophy as a public voice in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that prompted the turn to science as a new basis of intel-
lectual authority, while in the last generation, the belief that has dominated political theory is that scientism must be replaced by moralism. Some today suggest, as others have since the 1950s, that the answer to the problem is to overcome these dichotomous commitments and find a way to bring empiricism and normativity into a complementary relationship, but while such analytical solutions may be aesthetically satisfying, they do not take adequate account of either professional and institutional inertia or of the extent to which the problem of theory and practice has no theoretical solution and is ultimately, itself, the practical problem of the relationship between academic and public discourse. The paradox inherent in the study of the history of political thought is that while it may have to some degree escaped its rhetorical origins and achieved an independent scholarly authority based on its contribution to knowledge of the past, that authority has little practical relevance. The paradox of normative political theory is simply that the “knowledge” it professes is not knowledge about anything unless that knowledge is practically manifested or acknowledged.

These remarks are not intended to suggest that political theorists either should or should not speak prescriptively about political issues. The academic voice is as legitimate and credible as many others in the political arena. It is, however, to suggest that the politics about which many do speak is often a philosophical construction and that in many instances scholarship has been replaced by pronouncements grounded in claims to various forms of epistemic privilege which do not fit comfortably with the typical expressions of democratic sentiment.

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