Polish Journal of Political Science

Volume 1 Issue 2 (2015)

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Polish Journal of Political Science

Volume 1 Issue 2

eISSN 2391-3991
Original version: e-book
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Speeches from seminar *'Thinking politically' – in the debate on the deep politics*

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Reply to 'The Political Theory of Political Thinking'

Let me start by saying that, unlike many books by Oxford political philosophers, *The Political Theory of Political Thinking* is not a book one can read on the train. I suppose that even native English speakers are not able to follow all the arguments easily. Professor Michael Freeden proposes a revisionist approach to political theory against some of our deep convictions, both academic and popular, what politics is about and what it is not. He claims that political thinking, the central human thought-practices, is all over the place, while many people hope to God that it is not. Let us leave politics to politicians. After all, we pay them for making politics, don't we? Professor Freeden seems to suggest that politics is what makes the world go round, while many people tend to think it is money, rather. But now to the point, or to a couple of points I would like to make. Rather than comments, or – even less so – criticisms, they are pleas for further explanation.

First, a short note on the method. I understand that professor Freeden's intention was to do the same to political theory that the Cambridge School historians have done to studies of the history of political theory, that is to extend its scope and cover the diverse forms of expressions of political thinking by academic study. For decades, Oxford political philosophy used to focus on linguistic analysis. One couldn't study philosophy of any kind without the Oxford English Dictionary on one's desk, and political philosophers have their classics and their perennial issues, from Plato to NATO (this is actually the title of one of political theory textbooks). J.G.A Pocock and Quentin Skinner launched their revolution at the time when social sciences were obsessed with the question of the Method and introduced highly sophisticated text interpretation procedures.

The methodologies proposed by them were in my opinion of very limited assistance to historians of ideas. They simply don't need such meticulous tools of text analysis (actually Pocock and Skinner themselves discreetly rejected most of the methodological devices they had adopted from contemporary philosophy). Yet they left a legacy: the historian of ideas must study texts of secondary importance, and even those of no relevance to the philosopher, such as leaflets, booklets, newspapers etc. to find the proper context for studying political theory, which, from their perspective, was tantamount to acting by words.

Yet thinking (or thought-practices, as professor Freeden calls them) is even more elementary, less palpable and more shapeless than behaviour. It need not be written, it need not be worded, either. And professor Freeden goes so far as to include significant silence as an act of meaningful political action. Additionally, he urges the student of political thinking to pay attention to the intensity of that thinking and the emotions associated with it. But how can it be done? How can all appearances, and there are a myriad of them, professor Freeden claims, be academically approached? If we adopt the traditional methodology of political theory and confine ourselves to studying texts, we will cut the household off the domain of political thinking, because thought-practices at home are in no way recorded. (In fact, in the book political thinking has only been shown in the public sphere.) If we expand the field of study, we will end up with some sort of methodological eclecticism, such as was once adopted for the history of ideas proposed by Arthur Lovejoy. From that perspective, however, the six categories of political thinking enlisted in the book are simply six separate elementary unit-ideas which should be studied, each one separately, using a series of different methods. Thus by adopting methodological eclecticism we run a risk of disintegrating the subject. And for professor Freeden political thinking is a cluster unit.

And now let us turn to the subject itself. In the Introduction the reader is instructed to distinguish between political thinking and thinking on politics, and yet the author makes a meaningful reservation: 'It is frequently necessary to approach it through direct instances of thinking about politics, even if most forms of thinking politically are extracted through the interpretation of something less overt.' (p. 4) But can we also say that, the other way round, thinking politically is modelled on something *more* overt, modelled on thinking *on* politics, and *in* politics?

According to professor Freeden the categories of political thinking are universal or nigh-universal. Yet they are not innate. We are not born with them, we acquire them in society, indeed, we acquire them in a political system, too. Of course, a child learns what power is by obedience to his mother or father, and he can even learn the idea of division of labour by watching relations between his parents. But can he learn the notion of power limited by law except by watching institutional power? And in what language can he think of it? Is there any language except the language of institutional politics in which to express the principles of constitutional limits of power?

Once it was an ambition of Oxford political philosophy to find a language which could be a yardstick against which to measure the language of politics. From a radical perspective, ordinary language provides the political vocabulary with the correct and only meaning, in a less radical perspective it only serves to mark the ideological surplus or bias of the political language. That is why analytical philosophers regarded the Oxford English Dictionary as their Bible, the source of the true meanings, unspoiled by political strife. Yet professor Freeden looks up entries in this dictionary only to check the popular usage, not the proper one. And looking up 'politics', he finds, to his surprise, I guess, how obsolete this dictionary can be; the word 'politics' still has clear Aristotelian connotations in it.

And this is significant, I think. Ordinary language, or the vernacular, is not free from purely ideological meanings. In every vernacular we will find quite a number of evidently evaluative, judgmental concepts, and even more seemingly neutral or pseudo-neutral terms. Of course, we can say many things on politics and express our political thoughts, that is to think aloud politically, without using those words, and Professor Freeden gives a couple of telling examples, such as 'the imprisonment of the Russian Pussy Riot women is disgraceful', yet I would say that it would be more natural for the protester to say 'the imprisonment of the Russian Pussy Riot women is undemocratic or is a violation of human rights'.

The said study of political thinking is supposed to encompass all forms of articulating political thought-practices, institutionalised and spontaneous, motivated by self-interest and by moral indignation. But due to the fact that vernacular and ideological languages are interwoven – the other examples given by Professor Freeden could be quoted here – all political utterances have rather rarely unambiguous meanings. They seem to be contestable, and if they are part of political argument, they are contestable by their very nature. Can we study them in the same way as we study the ordinary language? The question, I think, is all the more justified by the assumption made by the author that political thinking always involves a risk of failure. Even more. 'Failure is the default position of prescriptive political theorizing' (p. 255). But who is to judge that? Is then inquiry into political thinking evaluative by nature and, by the same token, contestable? No less contestable than the thought-practices themselves? Or even essentially contestable, like the interpretation of thinking *about* politics?

Following up on this topic, I would like to touch upon the question of the sphere of political thinking vis-à-vis the sphere of social activity. Professor Freeden stresses: 'Politics (...) does not occupy a separate sphere of social activity. But it is a separate *form* of social activity. What applies to politics, applies ipso facto to political thinking.' (p. 28-9) One can easily understand that there is no room in the social sphere where people do not act politically, at least occasionally. The pope reforming the curia has to act politically, and when he wants to change the doctrine of the Catholic faith he has to act politically, too, negotiating his proposals with the cardinals. A father who is going to share toys between his children will be acting politically, as he will in fact be distributing both material and symbolic goods. One can thus say that political thinking, or the need for political thinking will appear whenever a situation requires a political solution. We think politically as *animal politicum et sociale*, as Aquinas would say, rather than as *zoon politikon*, in Aristotle's words.

In this sense political thinking is indeed all over the place. Yet it can be more or less common, it may be encouraged or repressed by custom. And by the political system itself. A number of studies may be referred to as examples. The most influential ones are, of course, by de Tocqueville, the one on democracy in America and the one on the post-revolutionary regime in his native France. Living in an established democratic republic, Americans made everyday use of political reasoning, whereas Frenchmen were accustomed to a state official to think politically on their behalf. Totalitarianism is a peculiar case. As a model of social organization, it is a completely politicised society but thinking politically is reserved for a narrow power elite.

From these examples, I think, we can learn that political thinking is both an individual ability and a form of social capital. And as a form of social capital it promotes a liberal form of political system. When society can think

politically, it can afford to build self-government. *On the Representative Government* by J. S. Mill develops this idea nicely. But Mill, who strongly believed in social progress, was no less convinced that when society is not skilled in political thinking, the government's role is to enlighten the population. Should we then agree with his argument and assume that political thinking will flourish only in liberal democracy and in other forms of political regime it will only exist to a limited extent? Can all of those six features be accomplished in undemocratic and illiberal regimes?

The last point I would like to make is the question, in what way studying political thinking is, as the title of the book says, political theory. What is its ideological dimension, or ideological flavour? Professor Freeden's idea is to build a bridge between empirical and normative theories. He says that 'Good political theory is thus an act of creativity in at least two senses, reflecting our dual duty to the discipline and to the world." (p. 13) Normative political theories differ in respect of what is political and what should be left untouched by politics. The mainstream theories of the 21st century tend to expand the sphere of the political, and we can all see how the sphere which has been traditionally enshrined as private, or intimate, is being reduced step by step. Professor Freeden's theory doesn't give any precept as to the limits of the political system. But saying that political thinking doesn't stop at the threshold of the house and penetrates the domestic sphere; doesn't it presuppose any ideological stance?

An old argument against democratisation stressed the inability of the masses, and of women in particular, to make public choices, since they spend their lives in the private sphere and do not use public reason. And now we are told that reasoning at home and reasoning in the public sphere are of the same nature as long as they concern distribution of goods, wielding of power, policy-making and the like. The only difference is that of scale. A woman with

numerous offspring who runs the household may be a teacher of political thinking to her husband, who follows the instructions of his authoritative boss at work and comes home too late to have any say in domestic affairs. Does, then, the concept of political thinking support indirectly the idea of direct or deliberative democracy, or other forms of active citizenship?

And let me conclude by telling you, Professor Freeden, and remind my fellow countrymen that in old Polish political – *polityczny* – meant reasonable, smart, tactful, polite. And nowadays Polish politicians take a pleasure in accusing one another of making politics!