

# Polish Journal of Political Science



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# **Polish Journal of Political Science**

## **Volume 1 Issue 2**

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## The Political Theory of Political Thinking<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> From editor: Seminar was held in Warsaw (University of Warsaw, Faculty of Journalism and Political Science) on 23 April 2015.

The climate surrounding the study of political thought has been changing rapidly over the past twenty years. It incorporates what I would call the political turn, to rephrase a much-used recent descriptor. Some of it goes under the banner of post-structural, critical discourse and agonistic approaches, approaches that nonetheless have a clear particular take on what good politics should look like. Some of its marches under the different banner of political realism, and most of that is, disappointingly, insufficiently realist. All of those are attempts to reconfigure politics at the centre-stage of what political theory would be concerned with. In trying to illustrate what I am talking about today, you might perhaps indulge me for a couple of minutes for telling a personal story that may have wider implications. When I first arrived at Oxford over 35 years ago I brought with me a strong schooling in what was, and still is, termed the history of political thought. I entered a new world of analytical and ethical political philosophy, one in which John Rawls—himself a modest man—was just becoming almost monopolistically powerful. In trying to carve out a path for myself in that rich and somewhat overbearing world, populated mainly by philosophers, I took a number of paths that only now, in retrospection, seem to have a modicum of consistency.

My early work was devoted to two detailed studies of British liberal thought in what I saw as an underexplored gap between Mill and, say, the Beveridge report, with the odd nod to T.H. Green and L.T. Hobhouse. But it took me a while to realize how absurd what is known as the history of political thought was, based as it was on fifty or so individuals. Would any social historian ground their work on fifty individuals, often only one per generation or even century? Would a student of comparative politics investigating regime change in the Middle East do the same? It became evident that the history of political thought was a cultural invention of philosophers, who were used to a close and meticulous study of the free-floating arguments of geniuses or near-geniuses without much thought for context, broader discourse, scope or mutation. It was indeed a forceful and highly influential self-perpetuating

tradition but it was not a history of the practice of political thought at its various levels of social articulation. And it then occurred to me that in studying 19<sup>th</sup> century British liberalism we should temporarily forget about Mill if we wish to get acquainted with how a particular society thinks about politics. Mill was an abnormal liberal – far too good, too clever, too reflective, to permit us to explore the wide range of liberalism – the typical as well as the atypical; the good, the bad, and the awful. There were other crucial sources; pamphlets, newspapers, parliamentary debates, manifestos, popular books, literary works, minutes of meetings, and not least vernacular expressions, as well as the great minds of the age.

In stage two I turned to what I consider as the way in which actual political thought has always manifested itself—as particular and fluid conceptual combinations that, while contested, present themselves as uncontested or decontested, and that aim at competing over the control of public political language. That was my expansive understanding of ideologies, readings of the political and social world, both deliberate and unintentional. One central research question was: In which permutations did individuals and groups think about politics with a view to assisting or retarding change, approving or criticizing political arrangements? Even then, philosopher colleagues asked me: how can anyone produce good research based on inferior forms of political thinking? The best minds had always to engage with the best minds for high quality results to ensue.

A few years ago I moved to stage three, the product of which is my recent book *The Political Theory of Political Thinking: the Anatomy of a Practice*. It addresses a simple question: what patterns of thinking have to occur in a person's mind for us—as observers, students, and analysts—to contend that she or he is thinking politically, not artistically, sexually, or historically? I was now accused—at least by philosophers at Princeton—of being an ethnographer when I gave a talk there on the difference between political obligation, loyalty, allegiance and trust. My book, nonetheless, singles out a lacuna to which it wishes to draw attention in much of what goes under the



designation of political theory, let alone political philosophy. Political theory is not only a discipline involving the critical examination of human ends in society, or accommodating the abundance of challenging reflections on the human condition over the ages, or prescribing better ethical worlds, or even investigating the ideological patterns through which competitions occur over the control of political language. It is also—and from the perspective of scholarship should also be—about the analysis and interpretation of the rich and layered human practice referred to as political thinking, and engaged in by members of societies and partakers in cultures. By practice I mean ‘the habitual doing or carrying on of something’; ‘a habitual pattern of behaviour’, and I see no reason why not to attach the term to thinking as well. I understand ‘habitual’ not in the sense of conformity but of recurrence.

And that is not all. I feel dissatisfaction with the drifting apart of political theory from the social sciences and the actual study of political language. Political science, or political studies, is a social science – a branch of knowledge, a *Wissenschaft*, concerned with certain happenings in and across societies. It is a fact that people, at all levels of articulation, think politically and it ought to be the object of our professional curiosity. Without understanding the ubiquitous thought patterns that obtain in any society it is impossible to comprehend that society and to make sense of it. That is not an optional extra but part and parcel of obtaining social knowledge, and one of our many tasks as political theorists is to offer an account of the raw material of thinking politically: both because it reveals a lot about the practices of a society, and for other scholars such as philosophers and historians to use in their own ways so that they may understand what can, and what cannot, be extracted from that raw material.

Here is a difference between thinking about politics and thinking politically. Thinking about politics involves the formation of ideological frameworks—at different levels of sophistication—that operate within a world of essential contestability, competing over the shaping of political language through various decontesting devices that attempt to fix meaning. They

frequently appear clustered together in fluctuating family resemblance modes to which are given names such as liberalism, conservatism, or anarchism. That thinking takes place within contextualized semantic fields through which standard political concepts such as liberty, justice, or equality accrue meaning and directive force. Thinking about politics also contains strong moral and ethical elements—the desire for realizing a good or better society is a mainstay of human collective aspirations.

My current work, however, moves the object of interest on to a more elemental dimension: the practice of thinking politically itself. What are the thought-patterns to which the adjective ‘political’ can be allocated in a unique manner? Thinking politically is usually celebrated, analysed, and echoed in its general, stipulative, and occasionally bombastic registers such as ‘justice is the first virtue of political institutions’, ‘man was born free, and he is everywhere in chains’, ‘we shall fight on the beaches . . . we shall never surrender’, or ‘the only thing we have to fear is fear itself’. These too are crucial expressions of political thinking—the first two voiced by eminent philosophers, the second two by eminent statesmen—but they tend to attract too much scholarly attention and respect at the expense of the multiverse of political discourse.

None of what I am about to say is a critique of political philosophy, which performs vital roles of ethical investigation and experimentation, analytical and logical fine-tuning, and the promotion of values thought by many to be crucially desirable, such as justice, democracy and legitimacy. But some variants of political philosophy have colonized the far broader field of political thinking and they have monopolized a different take on legitimacy. They seek to determine which aspects of such thinking are considered to be legitimate and valid in the study of political thought and which should be marginalized or ignored. The space left to other genres and approaches has been constricted because a different discipline, philosophy, has crowded out other significant ways of theorizing about political thinking, often in a manner ill-suited to the study of politics and the political. I am minded of a talk I gave many years ago in North Carolina, at the end of which two senior faculty

members got up and asked me: 'Which values do you teach your students? We teach them the values of the American constitution.' I retorted apologetically that I try not to teach them any values, though I conceded that some of mine might sneak out in unguarded moments. Rather, I wanted the students to understand the range of values that are at the disposal of their society, and of other societies, to realize what work those values can do and what they fail to do, and then to make their own choices. This is to my mind part of a larger story of what I see as pressures, particularly on US academics, to produce research and teaching designed to argue the case for democracy and improve the quality of democratic practices available to their societies. They see it as their professional mission to improve the quality of democracy available to their societies. A worthy mission, to be sure, but we live on a planet with an extraordinary range of political thinking and we need to theorize about its multiple manifestations. That theorizing requires that we understand, map and decode a fuller range of political practices long before we seek to reform them: the Weberian task of *Verstehen*.

What then does thinking politically entail? I have proposed six fundamental features of the political to which correspond six features of thinking politically.

- A. Appropriating the locus of ultimate decision making in space and time, including determining, parcelling out and regulating domains and boundaries of competence among social spheres.
- B. The distribution of material and symbolic goods in and across societies.
- C. The mobilization or withholding of public support in a community.
- D. The organization of the social complexities through which social stability or conflict and disruption are manufactured.
- E. Policy-making and option-selection for collectivities.
- F. The wielding of power (which cuts across the above five categories)

To those six features correspond six forms of thinking and discourse pertaining to collectivities, and it is those forms only that can be labelled political thinking. Political thinking occurs whenever we find thinking that

- a. Affirms the exercise of ultimate control and jurisdiction in social affairs and overrides and limits the competences of other social spheres and agents by constructing a symbolic sovereign collective identity.
- b. Distributes significance by ranking social aims, demands, processes and structures in order of importance or urgency.
- c. Accepts, justifies, criticizes, or rejects collective entities, and their procedures and activities.
- d. Articulates co-operative, dissenting, competitive or conflictual conceptual and argumentative arrangements for groups.
- e. Determines policy, constructs and directs collective plans and, more ambitiously, projects collective visions
- f. Is expressed and conveyed through intensities and skills of persuasion, rhetoric, emotion or menace that pervade speech and writing and—in part—non-verbal communication; as well as being expressed through deliberate silence.

The archetypal thought-practice cutting across those features is the decision: a practice intended to secure finality in collective affairs, whether for the short or long term. Indeed, the quest for finality in social affairs is at the heart of the political, though it is always an elusive one. It invariably slips through our grasp but we reach out for such illusory finalities time and again.

When I use a word', Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, 'it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.' 'The question is', said Alice, 'whether you can make words mean so many different things.' 'The question is', said Humpty Dumpty, 'which is to be master—that's all.'

That need for semantic control, sometimes arrogant, sometimes desperate, is at the heart of the political. Humpty Dumpty sought to trump the many meanings words carry by the conferral of his meaning, indicating that

human beings—and anthropomorphized eggs— like to exercise the choice to render further choice superfluous. That is one of the most prominent features of the political. Though doomed to fail, it perpetually rises from the ashes of its unattainability.

Politics, like ideology, is a word with a reputational problem, but it is nevertheless central to our lives. When people talk about anti-politics this makes as much sense as talking about anti-economics or anti-psychology. Almost every social situation has a political element, though its relative weight may be heavier or lighter from instance to instance. The Russian attempt to control parts of the Ukraine is patently political; giving a university talk such as this may be less obviously so, but it ticks many boxes of a political thought-practice: it attempts to persuade, though rarely to threaten – and it may fail to do so; it involves order and a stable situation; it establishes a temporary pecking order of whose voice should be heard. For some, politics is a technique for governing or the deeds of governors; for others the fluid activity of governance. In the past it often referred to a principled, ethical enterprise, or to what happened under the aegis of the state and in particular in the competition among political parties, or to politicking and dirty hands. French social philosophers such as Rancière distinguish between *la politique*— the policing tendencies of institutionalized government—and ‘*le politique*’, a permanent egalitarian struggle against the machinations of ‘*la politique*’. For Rancière, only disruption gains the accolade of a true, radical politics, damning any form of conciliation as apolitical. To the contrary Bernard Crick, in his famous 1962 book, *In Defence of Politics*, wrote: ‘Politics is the way in which free societies are governed. Politics is politics and other forms of rule are something else.’ For Crick politics was about ‘the activity by which government is made possible when differing interests in an area to be governed grow powerful enough to need to be conciliated ... politics is simply when they are conciliated—that solution to the problem of order which chooses conciliation rather than violence and coercion’. Both offer a very narrow and

stipulative view of the political, one that a political theory of political thinking needs to correct.

I have only time to illustrate the approach I advocate by referring to one of the six features of thinking politically, the arrogance of politics. This refers not only to the hubris associated with the political but to the second meaning of arrogance: To appropriate, assume or claim without justification. Self-assuming, self-anointing, self-privileging, self-reflexivity are fundamental characteristics of the political and they bypass rather than challenge ethical considerations. I have illustrated that with the aborted sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham because it is obedience to a command that requires no justification. That command is a pure political act that brooks no dissent or reason and it has no appeal to a higher order. Recall Napoleon grabbing the crown from the Pope and crowning himself. Or note the Islamic scholar Abul A'ala Mawdudi: 'God is the absolute sovereign and has absolute authority to issue whatever command He might will.' Crucially, it is not the wise contents of God's ordinances that demand obedience; a believer obeys 'simply because they are the ordinances of his Lord'. The analogy with the ultimate, desired logic of the political is the search for the absolute, not because of the content of any message imparted, not because of its ethical vision, but because of the indisputable finality carried in that kind of utterance. It is the 'last resort' feature of the political.

The arrogation feature of the political marks the beginning of political time, the site where the construction of the political commences. The political is that facet of human discourse that is expressed in 'fons et origo' or 'ex nihilo' terms, at least with regard to human conduct and social affairs. It is the 'big bang' of social life—not where the buck stops, as President Truman's famous sign would have it, but where the buck actually starts. It is the moment of freedom as the generalized political property of instigation. All utterances relating to collectivities of the 'because I say so' or 'because I am entitled to say so' type are fundamentally political. There is need for a fulcrum that can arrange human affairs decisively and finally – it is a myth that

requires constant renewal as a feature of the political, the temporal locus of the finality drive, the practice of instituting a temporal boundary. It is a social and architectural necessity, a pure morphological requirement, without which human beings cannot live an organized or meaningful life. If God does not exist, the very notion of finality that anchors the political would have been undermined from the earliest days of civilization. Sovereignty is part of that idea but it is a temporal sovereignty that precedes a spatial one: A 'first-subsequent' dimension, where temporality is logically prior to spatiality. Hobbes and Bossuet refer to the sovereign's quality of making the law while being free from it, and that is just another expression of temporal primacy: the absence of being bound to a preceding will. There has to be, structurally, an agency whose decisions and competence allocations are ipso fact final.

Here then are some questions that a theory of political thinking should consider. How do we navigate among different approaches to the nature of the political, in particular its quest for finality, always present and always frustrated?

How can we return to an empirically grounded investigation of political thought, including its normative manifestations as actually occurring types of such thinking and as a form of realism in politics? How can we cement the distinction between prescription and interpretation, and advocate methodologically the pursuit of decoding and Verstehen?

How can we bypass single feature, or dichotomous, characterizations of the political and political thinking: friend/enemy, justice, power, authority, antagonism, interests, patriarchy, global/local, East/West etc.? Politics is too often depicted as being about one thing. We need to move from macro to micro analysis and to investigate intermeshed arguments and conceptual arrangements.

How can we resist the near-monopolization of political theory by Anglo American political philosophers?

How can we embrace the multiple languages of politics, elitist and vernacular, in our purview?

How can we navigate among the universalist/particularist divide, eschewing essentialism yet maintaining that there are general patterns of political thinking that cash out in myriad different ways? Practice as theory-rich.

How can we convey that all human activity and communication has a political dimension, whether dense or sparse, and that all practice is theory-rich?

How can we account for the relationship between the fluidity of political thought and its containment and patterning, a task that requires us to take into account decontestation and the control over political and public language?

All this is not about the replacement of established approaches to political thought but of complementing them, allowing the kind of questions that have been muted as a result of the dominance of ethical and analytical political philosophy and that seek to recover the political as an field where crucial kinds of human thought and action occur, and which we as students of society and as political theorists must take very seriously indeed. I have only been able to scratch the surface in my talk, but much of the rest is in my book, and in the work of other scholars who are beginning to take that path.