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A rethink in political philosophy

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It has been suggested that there are new problems in politics and that modern political philosophy has thus far failed to address them. Such a view may, at first glance, appear to be somewhat presumptuous. Politics is so much a part of daily life and so many great thinkers have exercised themselves with its problems, how can there really be anything radically new to say about it?

In the first place such an objection overlooks the history of political theory. If one takes the philosophical career of any important concept, such as sovereignty, it becomes obvious that philosophical changes have either anticipated or followed change in political practice. There is very little resemblance between the Persian notion of sovereignty and that of the United States. The very notion of kingship has undergone radical transformations. The social conditions — and I am using the term to include all human interaction, economic, educational, religious — of human life are seldom static.

In addition to the above point it is important to add that change in political practice can be misunderstood and that such misunderstanding can literally be fatal to a society:

At every time and place, man is faced with the need to order his social existence in a way that allows him to survive in the world. But organic survival is not enough. In the construction of political order, man does not seek merely to erect a shelter against the pressures of a potentially threatening environment. He seeks to attune his existence to what he understands to be the true order of his being (Levy 1987:173).

Thus the political theorist must not merely consider material needs but must reflect on the nature of man, what the meaning of life is, in short, study philosophical anthropology.

What real changes have occurred in this century that may or should force a philosophical rethink about politics? I think that any diligent newspaper reader — who has some knowledge of history as well — will be able to present a frightening list of changes in our physical relations with our planet.

I think few people would quarrel with my first choice, the arrival of the nuclear age. Do classical approaches to such matters as warfare and economics have the intellectual resources to give advice on the use of nuclear weapons, nuclear power-stations, the disposal of nuclear waste? I rather think not. Nuclear waste leads naturally to another problem, or set of interrelated problems: the issue of the ecology.

Can the prescriptions of certain religions that one should have as many children as possible still be regarded as responsible? Overpopulation has brought in its trail pollution, the greenhouse effect, deforestation, desertification, growing imbalances of wealth, education and medical care, and corruption on a massive scale.

I am perfectly aware of the fact that there have always been wars, hunger and miseries of all kinds, but the scale and possible consequences have changed. Human agency alone, and not a stray asteroid, now possesses the power to wipe out almost every living being on earth. In these circumstances traditional philosophical theories of power simply begin to lose their significance.

To each of the qualitatively new or different problems mentioned above several more could easily be added. These problems are ones at the material level, but they have their effects on the conceptual level, the level of reflection. What I would now like to do is to take a few

modern philosophers — almost at random — who have begun to show an awareness of the philosophical vacuum which seems to exist in dealing with these issues. I shall pick up some of their concerns and try to indicate in which direction they appear to be moving.

In his book *Rethinking modern political theory* (1985) John Dunn launches a multi-pronged attack on political theory in general. He spares neither the Western tradition — although he finds considerable merit in John Locke's work — nor the Marxist.

A few strands in his objections:

- He objects to what he calls the absurd overemphasis in political philosophy, ever since the constitution of political economy and the formation in reaction to it of socialist theories, upon distributive justice. He regards this as a serious misjudgment of political reality and dangers. Of more importance is productive ability and arranging for the curbing of the power of politicians to do mischief to the people they rule. 'It is not merely life chances but also death chances with which political theory must finally make its reckoning' (Dunn 1985:186–187).
- People quite rightly recoil from the sacralization of political power and authority but a naive eudaemonism is not the way to achieve politically satisfactory arrangements. Modern state powers have not diminished; the causal factors that set them in place still exist.
- The continued theoretical emphasis upon national sovereignty is an anachronism at a time when a man-made Armageddon is a real possibility.
- Modern political theorists tend to see contemporary state powers 'both capitalist and socialist ... predominantly in terms of an exculpatory or accusatory functionalism, as docile instruments for the reproduction of particular modes of production' (Dunn 1985:187). The rivalry between the two rival systems is thus unsatisfactorily seen in these terms and other potent factors in this rivalry are ignored.

There is much more along these lines but these represent the kinds of concerns Dunn has. It is clear that he has a very hard-headed view of the dangers as well as the advantages inherent in any political association.

Paradoxically, he reaches back in history to begin to rethink modern political thinking. On page 189, he reminds the reader that Hobbes can be represented as a theorist whose philosophy of society hinged 'more on the moral and practical benefits of rationally trustworthy cooperation than on the maximal satisfaction of intractable egoistic desires'. He says we must remember the ties between human agency and responsibility and acknowledge that agency is a causal category. Our limits as political beings are not infinite, and history is where we should search for those limits.

His chief recommendation stems from Locke and in modern terms it boils down to a theory of prudence. Political prudence is not a purely ideal value; it necessarily embodies a conception of how the world could, in historical reality and

... through real human agency, be changed to meet its requirements. A cosmopolitan and ethically alert conception of what it is for human beings, individually, collectively and as a species, to be prudent in the world which we now inhabit would have to take the measure of very much which political philosophers today make little (if any) effort to consider. Yet it is only with such a conception at its heart that a modern political philosophy could hope to be altogether serious (Dunn 1985:11).

Perhaps his observations about Locke's notion of trust — that it must be earned — and that we may never abandon 'responsibility for the exercise of power to ruler or government or party' (p. 4) are notions that we could re-examine in the light of our experiences in the 20th century.

Two articles appeared almost simultaneously in 1988, one by Isiah Berlin, the other by Joseph Epstein. In different ways they deal with an experience they both had: they became aware at a more or less advanced age that they had to rethink large areas of their political theories. Berlin's article was originally delivered at the award ceremony in Turin for the first Senator Giovanni Agnelli International Prize, and later published under the title 'On the pursuit of the ideal', in *The New York Review*, 17 March 1988. Epstein's, under the title 'A farewell to Utopia', appeared in *Encounter*, April 1988. They were aimed at a youthful audience and the authors spelt out how they had been led to change their minds about a virtuous or a Utopian world. Epstein

was, in his own words, a 'down-the-line, pull-the-lever man of the left'. He no longer is, having substituted the verities of the left for the pleasure of being able to look at facts as he finds them. His arguments do not concern us here — they are well-covered by Berlin — but it is of interest that he rejects the idea of a perfect world completely and seems to adopt the Popperian view that one should deal with problems before us — no Utopian social engineering.

Let me give a brief exposition of Berlin's views, with which I associate myself completely.

He says that as a student he accepted the Platonic ideals that all genuine questions must have one true answer, all others being errors; secondly, that there must be a dependable path towards the discovery of these truths; and thirdly, that the true answers, when found, must necessarily be compatible with one another and form a single whole. In the case of morals and so also of political philosophy, we should, in principle, be able to conceive what the perfect life — state — must be, founded as it would be on a correct understanding of the rules that governed the universe.

What happened to shake this rather cosy view was his introduction to the works of Machiavelli. Put briefly, what shook him was Machiavelli's calm acceptance that the pagan values of pre-Christian Rome and the values of the Christian world were incompatible and that he could see no overarching principle which could unify them. You simply had to choose between the virtues of strength and power or those of humility and love. Machiavelli's own choice was clear.

The ancient ideal of the *philosophia perennis* was simply rejected by such a view. There can be conflict between *true* ends: therefore it does not make sense to ask for the central problems of life's true answers. We shall see that Ricoeur holds a similar view. (I may mention in an aside that one or two colleagues with whom I have discussed this viewpoint have tended to react with something like horror.)

For political philosophy, one of the implications is that each social world must be understood — the stress is on the word 'understood' — not necessarily evaluated in its own terms.

Berlin argues that he is not espousing relativism by holding this view. Here the argument becomes really interesting. Members of one culture

can, by imaginative insight, *entrare* (this is Vico's term) the values and ideals, the forms of life of another culture. Even having done so and understanding them, they may be found unacceptable. What modern feminist would be prepared to accept the powers of the Roman *pater familias*? Relativism would consist in simple disagreement: 'I like coffee, you prefer tea and there's an end to it.'

Berlin's preferred term is pluralism for that which he now accepts as desirable in a post-*philosophia perennis* world; I may add, also a post-Utopian world. All grand exportable theories, the result of brainstorm or revolution, come under the axe — or would guillotine be a more sensible term?

Pluralism then accepts that there are many different ends that men may seek and still be fully rational, fully men, capable of understanding each other and sympathizing and deriving light from each other, as we derive it from reading Plato, Shakespeare or studying Samurai society in Japan — worlds remote from our own.

We have recognized some values and behaviours in common with other societies — what Spengler's typology amounts to — otherwise there would be complete and permanent mutual incomprehension (as experienced so often between members of different political parties in South Africa). Intercommunication between cultures is possible because what makes men human is common to them and acts as a bridge. We can distinguish between *Homo sapiens* and the species *Canis lupus*.

To distinguish further between relativism and pluralism, Berlin goes on to state that there is a world of objective values, that is to say, ends that men pursue for their own sakes, to which other things are means. I might not like ancient Rome but I can see what it could have been like to have served in the Roman army. We too have an army and I have served in it. Boundaries are not infinite: military discipline would be understood by both a modern sergeant and a centurion.

If a desired end falls beyond the human horizon then true incomprehension may result and the people on the opposite sides of the argument fail to recognize each other as human. Berlin uses the following example: 'If I find men who worship trees, not because they are symbols of fertility or because they are divine, with a mysterious life and powers of their own, or because this grove is sacred to Athena — but

only because they are made of wood; and if I ask them why they worship wood, they say, "Because it is wood" and give no other answer, then I do not know what they mean. If they are human, they are not beings with whom I can communicate' (p. 15). I suspect that the success of much propaganda dehumanizing the one or other group is due to that group's being stripped of all identity other than happening to belong to such and such a group. The atrocities committed in war, without any seeming emotion, could be explained in some way as this.

He goes on to repeat the earlier point that values can clash. They can clash within an individual and more so between different political societies. Which takes precedence: rigorous justice or mercy and compassion? Clearly a painful decision, or war, may be the result of such a clash.

From the points raised above, Berlin concludes that 'the notion of the perfect whole, the ultimate solution, in which all good things co-exist, seems to me not only unattainable — that is a truism — but conceptually incoherent ... Some among the Great Goods cannot live together' (p. 15). Every choice may lead to an irreparable loss. Only the fanatic or someone subjected to a code that knows no deviation is spared this experience. Thus, then, the theoretical objection to the notion of the perfect state as the proper goal of our theoretical endeavours. Political thinking for the future will have to absorb this objection and people will have to stop taking works such as *The Republic* and *Das Kapital* literally, as prescriptions for an earthly paradise.

In his concluding comments Berlin addresses himself to the question 'What is to be done?' How are we to decide on how to choose between different possibilities? There can be no clear reply given the route he has taken for future political philosophizing. He admits, too, that set against the grand, exciting theories of the past, what he proposes may sound dull and pedestrian. But what he says carries the ring of passion.

Collisions may be unavoidable but they can be softened. Claims can be balanced, compromises reached. Again one feels the influence of Popper: feed the hungry, clothe the naked — establish priorities but never absolutes. At all costs avoid extremes of public suffering. Do not push people into untenable positions of intolerable choices. That is the way to bloodshed and revolution. Decency should be a public

aim, so should humility, at least a modicum of it. The alternative to these modest aims to him can only lead to the gas-chamber, the gulag. He says that Kant, the most rigorous of moralists, once in a moment of illumination admitted: 'Out of the crooked timber of humanity no straight thing was ever made.'

Collisions there will and must be but an uneasy equilibrium can be strived for. One must recognise that such an equilibrium will always be threatened and in need of repair — an echo here of Pericles' dictum about freedom.

The next thinker I am dealing with was quoted at the beginning of this chapter, David J. Levy. In chapter eight of his book *Political order*, he deals with his version of 'the new problem of politics'. There are two aspects of the problem and these are closely related to one another:

- The first aspect he identifies has to do with the effect of technology upon the thinking patterns of modern man. The idea has taken root that technology is without limits and that all problems can eventually be solved by the miracles of modern science. Human limitations, recognized in agrarian societies with their attunement to the seasons, are now seen as infinitely extendable.
- The second, attributable at least in part to the first, is the decay in the social bond. The individual, increasingly isolated in his work and other relations from other people, has become increasingly de-institutionalized. That is, he is no longer informed about the human nature of the institutions that keep society going, and does not know what the irreducible needs of a civil society are.

I shall now trace his argument and conclude with suggestions he makes for possible new moves to be made by political philosophers in the light of these problems.

Levy is extremely concerned that people should realize just how fragile an achievement political order really is. Man lacks the instinctual guidance for behaviour possessed by animals and must substitute cultural order for the organic order enjoyed by the animal kingdom. Lacking the ontological security of an organic order the political order has to be kept in being by human care — the continuity of institutions sustained by education and an awareness of their roots. The success of these institutions is a contingent one. There are no natural or

historical imperatives that can act as guarantees in the manner preached by fundamentalists or totalitarian ideologues.

Political thought and political practice are two aspects of a single project: the continuing attempt to imagine and realize the best possible form of life for human society. This was what was referred to in the passage quoted earlier.

Now in former times people reflecting on the best possible organization of their society had to recognize certain ironclad limitations on what they could expect. The already mentioned agrarian society's dependence on the vagaries of climate and the succession of seasons, each demanding a specific response in terms of tasks such as planting, irrigating, reaping, threshing, storing, gave a rhythm to their lives as well as an awareness of mutual dependence. Modern technology has broken both rhythm and direct awareness of dependence. The supermarket can supply almost any foodstuff at any time of the year — as long as it is paid for. As a result, what Levy calls the 'technological view of politics' has developed. Not only has this brought about an ever-rising level of consumer expectations but the physical effects of technology on the environment and the potential effects of modern warfare have put the survival of the planet at risk. Underlying this, or rather accompanying it, is the erosion of the social-psychological foundation of the stability of Western institutions. At present the problem is chiefly confined to the West, but the effects are felt in, for example, the exploitation of the resources of Third World countries.

The restraining power of social institutions, that is to say their ability to act as a check upon human demands, has been weakened. A person with a credit card feels entitled to access to all kinds of goods and services to which access was formerly unthinkable. The world order is no longer seen as beyond wilful control; the immediate environment appears to have been conquered. This new 'awareness' makes it extremely difficult to stop people from wilfully, if ignorantly, damaging the environment. Many examples come to mind: the destruction of rain forests to provide plywood to Japan, the use of 'recreational vehicles' on sand dunes in Namibia, with potentially lethal effects in the long run. A new ethical awareness in both practice and theory has become necessary to cope with these altered circumstances. Thus far political philosophy has merely been marking time.

It should be the role of political order, as embodied in authoritative institutions, to ensure that the increased power of technology works towards the survival rather than the destruction of the group by regulating the uses to which tools and weapons are put. But, as Levy puts it, 'the new problem of politics presents itself in the lack of balance between the unrestrained innovatory dynamic of modern technology and the declining ability of institutions to order the conduct of life' (p. 177). One of the reasons for this is that the 'modern de-institutionalised individual, caught up in the pursuit of his own short-term private satisfactions, is no substitute for the collective wisdom that finds expression in the institutions of moral and political life and in the sense of meaning they traditionally embody' (pp. 177–178). Levy here echoes Ricoeur's lament that there has been a loss of concern for the wider public good, a so-called 'apolitical' attitude, a total privatization of ends and means. He observes 'that the great number of our contemporaries feel themselves first to be consumers, then workers, and only then citizens — is this not the most telling sign, the most striking caricature of a great project gone astray?' (Ricoeur 1987:43–44). As Plato and Aristotle knew, the existence of any kind of particular policy depended directly on the type of adult who is available to maintain it. Modern political structures should re-accommodate 'informed', participating adults.

However, there has been a shift in political priorities. The State is no longer seen, in for example the work of Habermas, as the *necessary* complement to human insufficiencies (which includes inter alia as a *sine qua non* the function of defence), but it is judged in terms of its ability to satisfy the material aspirations of its inhabitants — inhabitants, not citizens. Legitimacy then becomes a matter of satisfying material expectations only. Interestingly a revolt against the materialism implicit here has started in the wealthy nations of the West. The first rather idiosyncratic manifestation was probably the hippy movement of the sixties. More recently, more serious, is the 'Green' movement in Western Europe. These are people who want a system more responsive to the balance required between the demands of man and the possibilities of nature.

But Levy remarks somewhat bitterly that recent political practice has created an electorate which sees the disciplines of political existence not as an integral aspect of man's earthly vocation but as external

and barely tolerable curbs upon the aspirations of the authentic de-institutionalized self. Thinkers such as Habermas have given intellectual weight to this aberrant view.

An earlier point bears repetition: the fact that human desires lack an inherent instinctual restraint (ask any psychiatrist) is the source of the institutional imperative with its restraining authority. As Levy puts it, 'human identity is not a given fact but a lifelong quest that achieves itself in culturally specific forms' (p. 191).

So much for the problem. What solutions does he propose? I am afraid that here Levy offers little of comfort for the political philosopher as theorist. His suggestions have the air of practical political programmes.

First of all he criticizes the gap that has opened up between the public sphere, dominated by so-called experts such as know-all ministers of finance, and the private universe of a population that is alienated from the process of decision-taking that affects its life. He calls for 'participation' in public life by as many people as possible. Politics should be seen as a common human vocation. One should not be an 'expert' to participate in politics, merely be of sound mind.

Next he argues that political judgement is not a technique that can be taught but a practice which can only be perfected by experience — a further reason for broad participation. People should not feel cut off from the political process, the sphere of judgement. Politics must not be something that happens to them, but rather something they help to make happen. This is all very edifying, but in view of his own analysis of modern society it is difficult to see how this is to be implemented. In the dangerous world of technology, prudence in political decision-making is obviously of great importance, and Levy acknowledges the point. But here, too, he has to admit that he cannot see how even an informed citizenry could be expected to make the correct decisions in the complex world of multiple choices.

His only sop to the theoretician, and a rather desperate one at that, is the following: 'in a world in which the conditions of life no longer produce a spontaneous acceptance of the political imperatives of human existence and fulfilment, it may be that only theoretical analysis can provide any sort of replacement at all' (p. 195). But he rather undercuts this view with the observation directly thereafter that

theoretical arguments 'will only exert any influence at all to the extent that they find a place in the general rhetoric of political persuasion. And that is the task, not of the theorist, but of the statesman.'

Now a brief recapitulation. One point emerges very clearly, and that is the total eclipse of 'grand theory' in the thinking of the few writers so far mentioned. One such attempt was made by Rawls in his work *A theory of justice* (1972) which excited much comment but does not seem to have had the practical effect on political practice that the thinkers I have quoted seem to want to flow from political philosophy.

Because of their perception of the political impotence of modern political thinking they aim at exactly that: having an effect, and urgently too. That does not imply a return to the dogmatic certainties of 'grand theory'. Not one, as far as I can make out, has any time for an uncritical acceptance of any of the major traditions which have dominated political thinking in the West. Dunn may look with favour upon the work of Locke; one cannot after all neglect the ways by which the present impasse was reached. The old dictum that those who ignore history are doomed to repeat it is as true in philosophy as anywhere else. So it is that none of these writers can be called a platonist, a marxist, a traditional liberal, utilitarian, or rationalist of the Enlightenment.

I would like to quote just one comment made by Levy which bears on the relevance of liberalism:

The liberal order, and the Kantian morality that is its ethical equivalent and on whose practice its preservation as order rather than as anarchy depends, is itself historically and culturally dependent upon preliberal institutions and on the habits of thought and practice that these encouraged among our forebears, who took them for granted as part of a divinely created cosmic order. Liberal-democratic order therefore can be said to live off a moral and political capital for whose care it has little respect ... (Levy 1987:189).

To some extent this kind of comment can be made a generalization amongst these writers. There is an air of pessimism about the very possibility of political argument. Ricoeur speaks of the 'fragility of political language'. Epstein quotes Swift saying that 'you cannot reason a person out of something he has not been reasoned into'. He says few of us have been reasoned into or out of our politics. Does one ever really win a political argument or feel that you have lost one?

Instead a respect for the notion of prudence is grasped at. Both Berlin and Ricoeur evince signs of having taken to heart Popper's notion of piecemeal social engineering and wishing to apply it to political theorizing. It is an ameliorative, eirenic approach with an emphasis on damage control. Neither man can be accused of naiveté or the lack of a historical perspective. Ricoeur pleads for a return to a philosophical anthropology in all its historical and symbolic dimensions. He wants people to be aware of the long timespan of the human adventure — the *longue durée*, a point also made very forcefully by Brenda Cohen in her book *Education and the individual* (1981:70). Criticizing the marxist relativizing of education in terms of prevailing economic modes, she refers to 'the timespan and continuity of Western culture, in which ethical and epistemological discussion have progressed without reference to the many different economic orders of society which have succeeded each other over the course of two milleniums'.

The search for new ways of dealing with new problems thus clearly does not preclude, indeed it seems to require, looking at the past. Ricoeur insists on studying the roots of our heritage, going back to the Torah, the teaching of the early Christian church and the Greek ethic of virtue and the political philosophy that goes with it. However, coupled with this must go the possibilities of what Epstein calls 'political deprogramming', in his case from dogmatic socialism. Having been 'deprogrammed', he says he now feels free to criticize anything and anyone. And better still, the right *not* to have to criticize. This double-barrelled aim seems to me to just about sum up the task of the political philosopher.

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