
Review

Politics and the concept of the political: The political imagination

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The introduction of the idea of the political into English language philosophy and theory probably occurred in the 1980s/1990s through the translation of European texts written in languages where a distinction is made between, for example, *die Politik* and *das Politische*, *la politique* and *le politique*, and *la politica* and *il politico*. The first term of each pair can be straightforwardly translated into English as politics, but the second required the invention of an equivalent, the political, and thus the conversion of an adjective into a noun, although arguably the more familiar and possibly less annoying word polity might have done the job (Vollrath, 1987). Two key – and at the same time very different – texts that mediated the translation were Carl Schmitt’s *The Concept of the Political* (1996) and Claude Lefort’s *The Political Forms of Modern Society* (1986). The theories and arguments of those texts were taken up by Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe and Slavoj Žižek, by thinkers of deconstruction following the work of Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean Luc Nancy, and by academics working in the broad field of continental thought and critical theory, more generally.

There are two aspects of the idea of the political which pulled early adopters of the term to it, and equally pushed rejecters from it. Firstly, the political was understood as the basis of a method or criteria which could determine the specificity of politics, as distinct from economics, law, psychology, sociology and similar scientific frameworks that would explain away politics in terms of something else. Secondly, the political was understood as something like the condition of politics in a constitutive rather than transcendental sense, and thus as distinct from politics as it is ordinarily understood, and especially when that ordinariness is explained by non-political scientific frameworks. There is probably a more subjective and conjunctural reason for the pull of the political as well, which is to do with a sense that the then dominant and canonical paradigms of political thought in English speaking universities, such as the work of Rawls, Habermas, the misleadingly named analytical and rational choice approaches, and



liberalism in general, were too methodologically, normatively and empirically restrictive and distorting, as well as uninteresting and predictable. Thus, in many ways, the adoption of the political converged with exciting and interesting structuralist and post-structuralist approaches at the margins of the curriculum and research agendas of political thought. It also gave the work of recognised but marginal thinkers such as Leo Strauss, Hannah Arendt and Sheldon Wolin a bit of salience.

One of the distinctive and original achievements of James Wiley's book is that it flips the problematic of the political in two ways. Firstly, by examining the work of eight canonical thinkers of the political, Wiley weakens the political/politics distinction by contextualising their different but inter-related concepts of the political within the ideas of politics – of what it is and what it should be – that each proposes and advances. This is largely a consequence of the fact that each thinker of the political develops the concept against what each takes to be the prevailing and generally wrong state of affairs regarding the practice of politics at the time of writing. In a sense, the point of the concept of the political is to explain how politics has become alienated, as it were, and to return politics to itself. Largely, that is a matter of the dominance of something else – law, metaphysics, economy, society – over politics (and a weakness of thinkers of the political is their inability to recognise that as a political process). In addition to contextualising each thinker's work in its own historical terms, Wiley also provides a contemporary context in the form of the problem of political realism, understood in the anti-perfectionist sense of writers like Bernard Williams and Raymond Geuss (and not the idealist sense of approaches like critical realism). Secondly, Wiley shows in each case that, far from being constitutive (and thus originary and authentic), the concept of the political is derived, and its derivation, even if from accounts of a prior historical origin, where, with some exceptions, prior means pre-modern, is motivated by an ideological commitment to a transformation of what is understood as the contemporary practice of politics.

The authors Wiley examines are grouped in three parts. The first groups Weber, Schmitt and Ricoeur under 'The State', the second groups Arendt and Wolin under 'The Polis', and the last discusses Lefort and Laclau and Mouffe in the same chapter under the category of 'Society', with an additional summary concluding chapter on 'Theories of the Political, Political Theory and Politics'. The book is fronted by a general introduction on 'The Status of Politics and the Political'. The selection covers the key names associated with the political and the discussions of their work brings in related authors and an impressive grasp of the major interpretive and explanatory research. The discussions also conclude with attempts to show how both the ideas and the political contexts of the authors relate to recent theoretical and political discussions in international relations, political activism and socialism, to mention just three. Wiley also takes quite a broad ecumenical approach, unrestricted by the conventions of the narrow schools that have grown up



around each author. It is thus refreshing to see the likes of Bernard Crick and David Easton brought into the discussion because it helps to show that the debate surrounding the political is not some obscure eccentric fad. On the contrary, it links up with issues that have been present in the mainstream for some time.

The decision to begin with a discussion of Weber focussing mainly on the *Vocation* essay and his lectures and writings about World War I is a good one as it is useful to be reminded of/discover for the first time Weber's ideas about politics. Like the rest of the theorists of 'The State' Weber advanced a very heroic version of the political, with struggles for power present almost everywhere, including morality. Hence, Weber's attraction to currently unfashionable ideas of 'manly conduct' and a 'human code of honour' and 'breed'. As Wiley points out, Weber's realism mystifies the state, a trait which is shared with that other butch realist, Carl Schmitt who, it turns out, never gets beyond a romantic political theology. The inclusion of a discussion of the often-overlooked work of Paul Ricoeur with respect to 'The State' helps to emphasise the fact that a common characteristic of its 'realist' theorisation is a dependency on ideas about theology, violence and ethics, although perhaps more could have been made of the significance of his 'Political Paradox' essay in the context of the Soviet invasion of Hungary.

If anything is common to the thought of Arendt and Wolin it is perhaps their wild, contradictory imagination, over and above their divergent republican and democratic trajectories. Both elevate the creative dimension of the political which, although bearing comparisons with the heroic (and in Arendt's case, the aristocratic), focuses action on the new as 'now'. That is, both are unapologetic, if tragic, moderns. Moreover, both sought to ground the political at street level, and both failed to find a convincing verification of that endeavour. Arendt's work is extensive and the literature that it has inspired, including both J.G.A. Pocock and Richard Sennett, even more extensive, and Wiley has diligently engaged with it. By contrast, the account of Wolin is a bit thin and the emphasis on the 'populist' aspect of his thought possibility misleading, as it does not do justice to the grassroots mobilising that he advocated in the early stages of his career, to the 'fugitive democracy' he advocated towards the end of his life, or to his influence on other US political thinkers.

If there is one strategic mistake in the book, it is probably the attempt to discuss both Lefort and Laclau and Mouffe in the same short chapter, which does not cover the richness of these thinkers. The account of Lefort seems over reliant on Laclau and Mouffe's rather functionalist version of it, which they transform by applying it to different (and worsening, in relation to Lefort's original democratic formulation) political and economic contexts. The contextual account of Lefort remains thin, and it would have been good to have addressed his influence on such diametrically opposed thinkers as Rosanvallon and Abensour. Similarly, Laclau's engagement (or fight) with Žižek over the relation between democracy and populism is missed, and the development of Laclau's thought on an ideal of 'the people' as the



democratic essence is side-lined in favour of a not entirely convincing discussion of what socialism should be. However, those criticisms aside, Wiley has provided solid and useful accounts of a set of important thinkers, which will help make their work relevant to those who self-identify as ‘realists’. Last but not least, it is also supported by an impressive and useful bibliography.

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