The Politics of Objectivity

Modern political conflict characteristically reflects and represents deep-seated but also unacknowledged and un-analyzed disagreements about what it means to be "objective." In defending this proposition, Peter Steinberger seeks to reaffirm the idea of rationalism in politics by examining important problems of public life explicitly in the light of established philosophical doctrine. *The Politics of Objectivity* invokes, thereby, an age-old, though now widely ignored, tradition of Western thought according to which all political thinking is inevitably embedded in and underwritten by larger structures of metaphysical inquiry. Building on earlier studies of the idea of the state, and focusing on highly contested practices of objectivity in judgment, this book suggests that political conflict is an essentially discursive enterprise deeply implicated in the rational pursuit of theories about how things in the world really are.

PETER J. STEINBERGER is Robert H. and Blanche Day Ellis Professor of Political Science and Humanities at Reed College. His books include *The Idea of the State* (Cambridge University Press, 2004), *Logic and Politics: Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (1988), and *The Concept of Political Judgment* (1993). His articles have appeared in many scholarly journals including *American Political Science Review*, *American Journal of Political Science*, *Journal of Politics*, *Political Theory*, and *Political Studies* as well as in such general interest publications as the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *Christian Science Monitor*.

The Politics of Objectivity

An Essay on the Foundations of Political Conflict

PETER J. STEINBERGER

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107109384

First published 2015

Printed in the United Kingdom by Clays, St Ives plc

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data
Steinberger, Peter J., 1948–
The politics of objectivity : an essay on the foundations of political conflict / Peter J. Steinberger.
pages cm
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-1-107-10938-4 (hardback)
1. Objectivity–Political aspects. 2. Practical reason–Political aspects. 3. Political culture. I. Title.
BD220.S74 2015
303.6–dc23 2015010004

ISBN 978-1-107-10938-4 Hardback

For Mo, comme toujours

Contents

Preface *page* ix

1 Three kinds of objectivity 1
2 The idea of political conflict 61
3 Discursive displacement 143
4 Objectivity and politics 194

Index 271

Preface

This book continues – and, I hope, extends and deepens – a line of thought that I have been pursuing for about twenty-five years. The overall goal has been to address a series of important issues in political philosophy by exploring some of the ways in which those issues reflect fundamental problems of philosophy per se. As such, the larger project runs directly counter to the tendency, characteristic of much postwar political thought, to see speculation about politics as somehow *sui generis* – an activity independent of, in particular, rational metaphysical speculation.

The perspective I have adopted presupposes, in the first instance, that philosophy, properly understood, is an inquiry neither into the nature of reality, nor into the structure of the cosmos, nor into the real existence of moral right and wrong. Rather, it is always – albeit sometimes only implicitly – the systematic study of our thoughts about such things. I would suggest, for example, that we can fruitfully approach Plato by attributing to him not the claim that the universe is composed, in part, of a multiplicity of immutable, invisible, divinely created Forms but, rather, the claim that we are committed to believing in the existence of such things, and this simply and solely because a belief in their existence is required if our thoughts are to be coherent and intelligible. And so too for the rich and varied gamut of claims and orientations that philosophers have produced and adopted over the centuries, from Aristotelian functionalism to Augustinian cosmology, from Thomist proofs of the existence of God to Descartes's *cogito*, from the empiricism of Hume to the phenomenology of Hegel. In all such cases, arguments might be best – most usefully – construed as attempting to describe not what the world is really like but, rather, what we must think the world is really like if we are to avoid paralyzing self-contradiction.

Understood in this way, the practice of philosophy is in large part the activity of analyzing concepts. But more, it is the activity of analyzing

concepts that somehow we already have in advance of our engagement with the world; for our theories about the world are always fully inscribed in a more or less well established conceptual apparatus of one kind or another that makes thinking possible in the first place. Philosophy is concerned both with the careful and rigorous description of what we explicitly think about – how we conceptualize – things and also with uncovering exactly what further beliefs those thoughts entail, thoughts to which we are, for that very reason, committed. In effect, philosophical endeavor is the process of thought thinking itself. It is the rational reconstruction of a conceptual apparatus from the perspective of that self-same apparatus.

Of course, these claims about philosophy are also at the same time claims within philosophy. Philosophy is, after all, just another concept to be analyzed, its various implications rationally reconstructed. And I would suggest that a faithful reconstruction would uncover at least two corollary claims. First, philosophical speculation, as I have described it, is a universal feature of human thought such that the professional philosopher is doing pretty much what everyone does – trying to put one's ideas in order – only more self-consciously, more systematically and, one hopes, with greater rigor. Thinking is a matter not simply of making distinctions by applying concepts to particular things but also of uncovering, explicating, critically evaluating and, if necessary, revising the distinctions that we have made so as to compose, to the degree possible, a self-consistent system of belief; and I think that an honest examination of everyday discourse in all of its motley forms would show this to be as true of ordinary thinking as it is of technical, self-consciously intellectual or theoretical endeavor. The practice of rational reconstruction is ubiquitous and universal. But second, human thought also commits us perforce to one or another variety of holism according to which any proposition is intelligible only in light of the role that it plays within larger structures of propositions that themselves reflect, in turn, a system of shared commitments among a community of thinkers. All particular claims, without exception, emerge out of, and have truth value in terms of, the vast, indeed limitless array of interconnected claims that compose, in any particular socio-historical circumstance, a universe of discourse. I should add that in proceeding along these lines I understand myself to be embracing a point of view that is, in the broadest sense, Kantian, and that manifests itself in an astonishingly

wide variety of essentially twentieth-century philosophical formulations including, for example, the phenomenological hermeneutics of Heidegger and Gadamer, the descriptive metaphysics of Strawson, the transcendental realism of Putnam, and the linguistic inferentialism of Brandom.

If, moreover, such a perspective is understood as describing – or attempting to describe – pretty much the full and comprehensive range of human thinking about things, then surely this would include thinking about politics as much as anything else. Indeed, the defining ambition of my overall project has been to formulate and defend a series of theoretical propositions about politics that are directly and explicitly underwritten and informed by the prevailing claims of contemporary – which is to say, post-Kantian – philosophy, claims that are embraced, though in different ways, by so-called continental and analytic traditions alike. As I have suggested above, political philosophy was long understood to be embedded in and sustained by broader philosophical systems. But the awareness and/or acknowledgment of this connection seems to have weakened considerably, beginning perhaps in the second half of the nineteenth century; and more recently, any such connection has been actively denied by theorists who have, in one way or another, sought an approach that is "political, not metaphysical." My own view is that such a denial, though now something of an orthodoxy, is and can only be a self-delusion, that political thought, like thought in general, is hostage to one or another structure of rational metaphysical presupposition, and that a failure, willful or otherwise, to acknowledge this fact is a fairly reliable source of error.

Of course, the upshot of these various claims is to collapse, or greatly minimize, the putative gulf between political philosophy on the one hand and political action on the other. Insofar as philosophical speculation, broadly construed, functions as a refined and highly self-conscious but nonetheless faithful instantiation of human thinking per se, so is systematic political speculation continuous with, indeed part and parcel of, on-the-ground political enterprise. Just as we are all philosophers, regularly and routinely seeking, however inchoately, to make sense of the often tacit and implicit arguments and distinctions that underwrite everyday life, so are we all practitioners of political philosophy in search of coherent, intelligible and rationally defensible approaches to matters of public consequence. Obviously, some of us do this very well, others of us – the vast majority – much less so. But

the underlying impulse is omnipresent. It is a substantial part of what constitutes us as political beings.

In thus connecting political philosophy with important, notably discursive features of political practice, it might seem that I am making common cause with, in particular, those historians of political thought for whom even the greatest texts of the canon are best understood as ideological documents responding to local controversies and driven by sectarian interests. But in fact, my approach is rather the opposite of this. Instead of seeking to reduce the presumably elevated and universalizing pretentions of political theory to the rhetoric of partisan discourse, I believe, to the exact contrary, that ordinary political endeavor is always at base an attempt to embody a decidedly philosophical – indeed, rational and metaphysical – agenda of one kind or another. I propose, in effect, not an ideological interpretation of political philosophy but, instead, a philosophical account of political practice; and again, one consequence is to reject the view that politics is sharply different from or discontinuous with the other manifold features of social existence.

I myself first began to pursue the line of inquiry to which this book is devoted by thinking about Hegel's *Rechtsphilosophie*. Perhaps paradoxically, it was during the course of my Hegel studies that I first started to realize, if only dimly, that my own dispositions were in fact very much "analytical" – I was, and am, interested above all in forms of argumentation and proof of a sort conventionally associated with Anglo-American philosophy – and this was entirely new to me since my training (though that seems not quite the right word) had been primarily in a kind of literary prudence as practiced by such latter-day political theorists as Leo Strauss, Michael Oakeshott and, perhaps preeminently, Hannah Arendt. While I continue to believe that much of what I said about Hegel's specifically political thought was in fact quite correct, my attempt analytically to reconstruct his method was sharply criticized by philosophers (as distinct from political theorists), and for good reason. If those criticisms sometimes seemed like picking at a scab on an otherwise healthy limb, they nonetheless had the salutary effect of making me realize that I didn't know what I didn't know. The result of subsequently looking more deeply into Hegel's method was, somewhat unexpectedly, an investigation into the concept of political judgment; and it was in the course of that investigation that I began to understand more clearly – rationally to reconstruct – my

own intellectual proclivities and commitments. The study of judgment culminated with some more or less casual speculations about what I called the ubiquity of judgment, and these in turn prompted an inquiry into the idea of a political state wherein judgment is, indeed, omnipresent. I formulated – I would like to say uncovered or deduced – a metaphysical theory of the state according to which the state is itself a metaphysical theory, i.e., the authoritative embodiment of a society's shared understanding of how things in the world really are.

The present book takes what seems to me the next logical step. Given a metaphysical theory of the state, how should we understand the undeniable fact of political conflict within the state? In pursuing this question, I make what may first appear to be two quite distinct arguments. On the one hand, I explore what I believe to be the underlying logic of our shared if only implicit concept of political conflict. On the other, I examine, again primarily as a conceptual or philosophical matter, what I am calling the politics of objectivity, understood as an edifying and, for the contemporary world, extremely significant exemplar of that underlying logic. The basic presupposition here is that my account of politics and objectivity would be unintelligible absent my account of political conflict, and that my approach to conflict would be far less compelling and urgent absent my theory of objectivity.

Weaving together these two lines of thought, the one with the other, has presented a kind of rhetorical challenge. In the end, I have adopted a strategy that seems best suited to acknowledging, at once, the separate identity of each strand and their mutual connection. Thus, Chapter 1 focuses on the exemplar by taking a sustained look at the concept of objectivity itself. Chapter 2 shifts the focus to the logic of political conflict in general, reflecting, as it does, the metaphysical theory of the state. The third chapter elaborates on this logic and introduces the notion of discursive displacement, understood as a potentially useful way of thinking systematically about the circumstances of conflict. In the last chapter, I return to the exemplar and attempt to show how the present-day politics of objectivity does indeed illustrate, and helps deepen our understanding of, the overall theoretical model. By the end, however, it will become apparent that what seem to be two different though related arguments are, in fact, deeply interconnected, the one with the other. The study of objectivity and the study of political conflict, as I understand them, are in fact entirely mutually dependent. They represent, in effect,

two essential and inseparable parts of a single, organic theory – a structure of interdependence that becomes fully intelligible, though, only after the arguments have been elaborated at length. The result is, as with my previous books, a defense of rationalism in politics, a defense that should be understood not primarily as a prescription coming, so to speak, from the outside but, rather, as a description of what I believe to be the inherent and constitutive tendencies of political endeavor itself. Indeed, the only strictly prescriptive element of my argument is the exhortation to recognize clearly what it is that we always already do, if often only implicitly, for I believe that a highly self-conscious and explicitly critical as opposed to merely tacit and unacknowledged practice of rational engagement is the surest way to improve our chances of actually getting things more or less right.

It should nonetheless be clear at the outset that this is a work not of political science but of political philosophy. I understand political science in particular and social science in general to be either the exploration of causal relations among social facts or else the interpretation of the meaning of such facts as they are apprehended by social actors themselves. These are two very different things, but they are both methods or modes of describing real-world events or actions, and of doing so by seeking to develop, in one manner or other, a systematic accounting of empirical observations. My goals are descriptive as well, but otherwise quite distinct. I am proposing rationally to reconstruct, on the one hand, the underlying logic of political conflict and, on the other, the underlying logic of the practice of objectivity, in each case with a view toward discovering and explicating the intelligibility of our own thoughts. I am pursuing, in other words, the project of making a conceptual apparatus comprehensible to itself. This is an essentially philosophical exercise, but it is not thereby unconnected to scientific endeavor. Indeed to the contrary, it should be understood as potentially giving rise to a number of hypotheses that could inform and shape the detailed investigation of particular social and political phenomena. Of course, properly to engage in any such investigation would be a serious and enormously challenging undertaking in its own right, far beyond the scope of the present book and far beyond the capacities of its author. In this sense, my ambitions are comparatively modest, namely, to offer some hopefully provocative suggestions for scientific study, but to do so primarily in order to clarify and

recommend the plausibility of, rather than rigorously test, the arguments that I am proposing.

I owe a deep debt of gratitude to my colleagues in our little Band of Eight – Paul Apostolidis, Bill Curtis, John Holzwarth, Tamara Metz, Jeanne Morefield, Alex Sager and Andrew Valls – for their searching commentary, terrific insights, and wonderful fellowship. Having the opportunity to share with them an intensive engagement with an earlier draft of this book has been the kind of thing that makes intellectual life so rewarding; and the book itself, whatever its merits and faults, is massively better for their contributions. I am grateful, as well, to Geoff Kemp for detailed and helpful comments, and to Casiano Hacker-Cordon for many hours of engaging and enlightening conversation. Although originally conceived and written for the present book, parts of Chapter 2 first appeared in Robert Schuett and Peter M. Stirk, eds., *The Concept of the State in International Relations* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), and I am thankful for the opportunity to republish those sections here. In a quite different vein, I cannot but express my heartfelt appreciation to the many friends and associates who live and work in and around the area between Montparnasse and Invalides and who provided the kind of support – friendship, intellectual stimulation, language instruction, squash matches, travel, foodstuffs of all description – that helps sustain scholarly endeavor. I should add that my most exacting and inspiring critic happens also to be my sweetheart, and it is to her that this book, like all my books, is dedicated. Finally, and as always, I am grateful to the remarkable, indeed rather miraculous, intellectual community that is Reed College – students and colleagues alike – which, more than any institution of which I am aware, celebrates and promotes the life of the mind.