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978-0-521-43755-4 - Western Political Theory in the Face of the Future

John Dunn

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*Western political theory  
in the face of the future*

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*For Sophie, William and Paul*

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## *Preface to the Canto edition*

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This book was written, in 1977, to try to bring into focus – and, if possible, to calm – the nagging suspicion that I and my contemporaries did not really understand politics. For all the confidence and the ready self-righteousness of many of our judgments on the topic I found it increasingly difficult to believe that the great bulk of these judgments were grounded in anything at all dependable, or indeed that, taken together, they even made sense. When I came to publish the book in 1979, I was unpleasantly conscious of how far I had failed to lay that suspicion to rest.

The question I asked was simple enough. How far did one particular range of beliefs, the conceptions of politics which had developed in the western world over the preceding two and a half thousand years, enable its holders to understand the world in which they lived and the future that lay ahead of it? Much has changed since 1977. But the question itself has lost nothing in pertinence or urgency. To understand politics, we still need to know what it is reasonable for us to want and care about, how the human world now is and why it is as it is, and how we could act to achieve what we want and secure what we care about. This is what political theory attempts to show us. How well equipped is it for that task?

I have altered a few allusions in the first edition which are now jarringly out of date, and added a number of new references for the reader's convenience. I have also removed a scattering of male pronouns where these (to me) now read offensively. But with one glaring exception (page 101 note 34) I have not felt it honourable to adjust the balance of intellectual judgment set out in its initial guise, in the hope of rendering this retrospectively more prepossessing. Instead, I have added a new Conclusion which tries to press the question harder and to give it a franker and clearer answer. In its brief compass, this gives today the response to the question I initially asked which I now wish I had given on its first appearance.

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*Preface to the Canto Edition*

Since the book is reappearing in a new format, I should like now to express my gratitude for their generous hospitality to Jack Goody and Geoffrey Hawthorn, the editors of the series Themes in the Social Sciences in which it originally appeared, to Patricia Williams for all her encouragement over the years, and to Richard Fisher and Josie Dixon for launching it once again. I should also like to record how much of what I have learnt since 1977 I have learnt from my friend and colleague Istvan Hont.

*Swavesey, August 1992*

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## *Preface*

This book asks a simple – perhaps indeed a naive – question. Do the traditions of understanding politics which have been developed in Europe over the last two and a half millennia possess any real residual capacity to direct us in the face of the world which now confronts us? Do they still exert any real imaginative or moral purchase upon this world which we, as a species, have remade so drastically? Or are they simply crazed myths clashing meaninglessly in a night which they can neither understand nor illuminate? The confidence that they do still provide such understanding and guidance is widely enough distributed in the world today, as it has been in the past. It is on open display any day of the week in Washington or Moscow, Pekin or London. But the assurance of the tone with which it is pronounced is not matched at present by the intellectual force and coherence of what is asserted. There is not, of course, anything necessarily very surprising in this state of affairs. If human beings in the past have never understood fully what was happening to the societies in which they lived, why should we expect to be privileged in our insight? If human history has been opaque to its makers thus far, why should it have become transparent to us? But unsurprising though such a condition may well be, it is not in itself necessarily any the more agreeable to experience.

What is attempted here is a sketch of some of the central anomalies of our political understanding today – in what we value politically and what we suppose to be politically possible. It is a sketch both of how these anomalies have come about and of how they now stand. As a sketch it can at best do no more than stimulate and illuminate. For those who have the courtesy and optimism to read it through and who find it neither stimulating nor illuminating (whether because they cannot believe what it argues or because they cannot understand it, or because they already know better), I can only apologize for having wasted their time. It is immodest to offer such a sketch to the public. But it is also intellectually and perhaps even morally reprehensible, at least for those whose



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profession is to teach about politics, not tacitly to have such a sketch at the back of their minds – at their disposal. (While the immodesty may be mercifully rare, the unavailability of the sketch is perhaps, distressingly, more common.) The present text was written as a set of lectures for a particular audience; but it was also written out of a sense of belated embarrassment at the glib relations between a number of my own political opinions and expectations – and thus written in the first instance simply to clear my own head. The question which I have tried to answer for myself is simply whether my own conceptions of political value and possibility make sense. The answer is discouragingly indefinite, but not abjectly despondent. It would be nice to be shown how to make it unsuperstitiously more definite and more encouraging.

The text itself is written to be read continuously and without prior historical or philosophical knowledge. The footnotes are intended as guides to the pursuit of further inquiries into sundry issues discussed or, in a few cases, as justifications for some of the more flagrant formulations in the text. Earlier versions of each chapter were given as lectures whilst acting as Cecil H. & Ida Green Visiting Professor at the University of British Columbia. I am deeply grateful, to the University and to many individuals, for the extraordinary kindness and hospitality with which I was treated during the fortnight which I spent in its beautiful setting.

This book has had more and better friends than it deserves already. I owe particular debts in connection with it to Patricia Williams for her advice and kindness and to Ed Hundert for his companionship and encouragement. Once again I have trespassed grossly on the patience and the critical energies of Geoffrey Hawthorn and Quentin Skinner and once again they have encouraged me where encouragement seemed distantly permissible and made me try again where even their charity was overstretched. I only wish that the results of my further efforts were a more impressive testimony to my gratitude.

*Cambridge, August 1978*