

## 1 Introduction

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Many people today have noticed that we do not really understand the political life of the world in which we live (or even that of the nation states of which we are citizens). Some who have noticed this are themselves students of politics by profession: political scientists, political sociologists, political economists, political or social theorists, even the more aspiring of journalists. Many who are in no sense professional students of politics (along with at least some who are) are certainly beginning to fear that this degree of incomprehension may be a source of danger in itself: not simply a (perhaps merciful) impediment to realizing quite how bad things already are, but a further aggravation of a range of hazards which are already acutely alarming. This book expresses just that fear. But it also attempts to show how quite archaic intellectual resources can help us to improve our judgement of the significance of recent political experience, and perhaps even (thereby) our prospects for securing a better rather than a worse political future for ourselves and our descendants.

All western universities which provide an opportunity to study politics offer, as part of their instruction, the study of a miscellany of major historical texts of political interpretation, usually of western provenance and stretching in time from Plato and Aristotle to Rawls and Dworkin. The virtual ubiquity of this practice, however, is far from matched by any corresponding commonality of judgement as to why such an offer is in any sense appropriate, let alone as to how the study of the texts themselves is best envisaged or conducted. 'The history of political theory' (chapter 2) seeks to show why this practice remains not merely intellectually defensible but educationally mandatory. It remains so not because the cultivation of a western canon is a due act of local piety or a preguaranteed exercise of presumptively cosmopolitan cultural authority, but because there is every reason to believe that this canon still holds strictly cognitive resources for a sound understanding of the politics of the world in which we all live, and resources for which there are no full surrogates in the insulated cultural heritage of other portions of the globe. To study this canon historically is not to embrace it uncritically or to defer to it passively. It is

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simply to view it as a sequence of experience in time, and to seek to wring from so viewing it a sharper apprehension of many dimensions of politics which the more recent and heavily scholasticized approaches of the modern social sciences and the continuing processes of ideological struggle and improvisation throughout the globe have singularly failed to provide.

In recent decades the canon has had many critics: political, cultural, epistemological, technical. Often these critics have been essentially right on the points on which they most wished to insist: right about its deformation at one point or another (by patriarchal or imperialist presumptions, by superstition, by parochialism, by inadvertent reification). Where they have been wrong, at least in their cumulative impact, has been in the quite unwarranted suggestion that in the face of modern world politics there is either no need for a coherent and strategic conception of what is really going on, or some other and inherently more reliable basis on which to form such a conception. Here there is really no case to answer: no public claimant on the field of battle with the slightest claim to meet the bill. But, of course, the judgement that the history of political theory does still offer the resources to do so is hardly one which can hope to prevail simply by dint of its own assertion. What I hope to show in this collection of essays, as in some earlier works (Dunn 1980, 1984, 1985, 1989, 1990a, 1990b, 1992), is why the history of political theory is still a key aid in understanding politics (yesterday, today and tomorrow), how that practical capacity bears on the issue of how it can most instructively be studied, and what sorts of illumination it can still provide. If this assessment of its utility is in any sense valid, the utility itself can only be convincingly shown in practice. But if it is indeed valid, then that in turn bears sharply and urgently on the question of how its history is best understood and how that history can most instructively be studied. A professional critique of the history of political theory as putative instance of historical knowledge can be crushingly effective without being especially discerning. After more than thirty years of reflecting on that history, the weightiest judgements about it now seem to me less often clear and negative than I used intuitively to suppose (compare Dunn 1969, Preface with Dunn 1990a, chapter 2). I do not believe that this conclusion is at odds with the analysis I originally offered in 'The identity of the history of ideas' (Dunn 1980, chapter 2; and compare the thoughtful essay by Tuck (1994)). But to be especially discerning, I now reluctantly acknowledge, may simply require a consideration of too intricate and too judgement-dependent a range of factors to permit decisive vindication or conclusive demonstration of command.

The ambiguous relation between academic elaboration and political

illumination is explored further in chapter 3, in a study of the historical sources and intellectual upshots of the conception of a social contract. The most powerful movement in postwar political philosophy in the west, overwhelmingly dominated by philosophers from North America, has been a revived and transformed tradition of contractarianism, which seeks to deploy the idea of a free and rational agreement as clear and authoritative standard for assessing the entire public shape of modern political, economic and social life. The intellectual influence of this body of thought has been singularly at odds with its depressingly modest impact upon political struggle, not least in its own heartlands. This influence, however, is plainly an apt focus for historical understanding in its own right, and at least symptomatically of considerable political importance. It remains striking how little attempt has thus far been made to explain the imbalance between its considerable intellectual appeal and its exiguous political efficacy. As a prelude to such explanation, 'Contractualism' seeks to place the modern revival of the conception of a contract as foundation for political right in the context of its protracted prior history, underlining the sharp shift in analytic attention between its earlier users and its contemporary exponents. It argues that the subject matter which the idea of free and rational choice is now deployed to interpret is in some respects decisively less tractable than that which earlier contractarians volunteered to explicate, and that the further resources which its modern exponents (very reasonably) suppose themselves to have at their disposal are too jejune to give it any real chance of establishing the degree of imaginative ascendancy over countervailing ideological categories (let alone over the formidable congeries of opposed interests which they would also need to face down) to achieve any real political penetration. (Compare the report of the Institute for Public Policy Research's Commission on Social Justice (1994): a somewhat bowdlerized reading even of the implications of Rawls's viewpoint.)

Modern contractarian thought is centrally concerned with the issue of distributive justice. Its classical predecessor, by contrast, focused primarily on the question of political obligation, the validity or otherwise of the claims to political obedience levied by existing holders of political authority, and the basis (if any) on which such claims might be pressed legitimately. Classical contractarians, virtually without exception, saw this as a more fundamental question than the issue of distributive justice: indeed, as the key to understanding politics. Recent philosophers (with the exception of a handful of philosophical anarchists) have ceased for a variety of reasons to view the topic of political obligation as having any special and privileged importance for political understanding, and ceased, too, to presume that it can be rendered intellectually tractable enough for a treat-

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ment of it to be either elegant or powerful. Chapter 4, 'Political obligation', locates the sources of this response and attempts to show how ill judged it is (cf. Dunn 1980, Conclusion) and how enfeebling of political understanding it was always bound to prove. Its central device is a comparison throughout with the political theory of Hobbes, seen not as an exemplar of theoretical success on its own (or any other) terms, but as a more direct and potent address to the fundamental dimension of politics picked out by the problem of political obligation and (in notable contrast to the efforts of twentieth-century political theorists) as being as sharply instructive in its failures and inattentions as in those elements of the problem which it may reasonably be judged to have identified successfully.

Chapter 5 complements this assessment of the superior political illumination of classical contractarian treatment of the issue of political obligation by underlining the greater frankness and political sensitivity of classical contractarian treatment of the mutual trustworthiness or otherwise of human agents or agencies. Whilst once again seeking to register what has motivated this drastic shift in intellectual and political judgement, and fully acknowledging the powerful forces which have prompted it, 'Trust' attempts to right the balance by identifying the massive costs of the disjunction between political and moral understanding which have resulted from it (cf. Baier 1994).

Chapter 6 focuses on a key example of the depoliticization of the relation between issues of mutual trust and forbearance and the exercise of political authority: the claim to freedom of thought and expression. In contrast to a modern logic of individual moral entitlement unsullied by considerations of political practicality, it underlines the consistently political handling of the issue of freedom of conscience in the master works which emerged from Europe's lengthy and brutal experience of religious warfare and persecution. The bowdlerized residue of this experience, as a recipe for interpersonal fairness, has recently enjoyed some prominence (cf. Rawls 1985 and 1993) as a grounding for contemporary liberal politics. But careful consideration of the uncensored originals makes it evident that, however evocative it may prove as an expression of individual political or moral taste, this approach is too reluctant to confront the brutalities of the struggle for political domination to offer sound guidance on how we can hope to tame these in practice.

To register the full political sensitivity and intensity of these issues, the *fatwa* against Salman Rushdie and the barbarities of the new Algerian civil war offer a more instructive focus than the original position (Rawls 1971, 1993). In historical actuality the question of what shape we might freely and rationally choose for a form of collective social and political life

already well entrenched within its own pre-existing political boundaries is appreciably less urgent (and substantially less clear) than the question of what terms we can reasonably hope to agree on for refraining from attempts to slaughter one another with more and more self-righteous zeal. (Compare: 'A Neighbour Country has been of late a Tragical Theatre, from which we might fetch instances, if there needed any, and the world did not in all Countries and Ages furnish examples enough to confirm the received observation, *Necessitas cogit ad Turpia*' (Locke [1689] 1975, II, xxi, 57: p. 272).) For those who favour a less hectic and more domestic focus, helpful contemporary examples might include the regulation of pornography or abortion (Dworkin 1993; Glover 1977; Kahane 1995; MacKinnon 1987, 1989; Sumner 1981; Thomson 1990, pp. 288–93).

A harsh view of the politics of modern liberalism, accordingly, would be that these are essentially unreal, founded on a simple refusal to acknowledge what is really going on in politics or economics (or indeed social life). But a fairer verdict might be that they, like all other reasonably morally ambitious styles of modern politics, have lost their strictly political nerve and exchanged the attempt to judge how moral purpose can be effectively inserted into the political world for the more comfortable topic of what that purpose would consist in if only it were to be so inserted.

Chapter 7 considers the political implications of contemporary liberalism on its own privileged terrain of distributive justice, pointing to the clear parallels in ethical taste over issues of distributive justice between socialists and contemporary liberals and insisting that the recent historical debacle of socialism must be seen primarily as a monumental failure to master practical causality and not as a loss in normative credibility as such. As yet, contemporary liberals have established no claim whatsoever to be able to realize their conceptions of distributive justice in practice, and therefore remain in this sense every bit as Utopian in their explicit political aspirations as their humiliated socialist adversaries. Neither has addressed the issue of effective political agency in a convincing manner, either at the simple formal level of the theory of collective action or at the messier contextual level of assessing contemporary political causality. It is not obvious at present whether this impasse reflects a common error in conceiving justice in distribution in terms of a relatively concrete but indefinite series of social outcomes (a real sceptical possibility in the light of Hayek's or Nozick's critiques), or whether it merely registers a temporary failure of political nerve and economic imagination. But in either case the impasse itself is palpably disastrous for what remain the dominant normative strains in the modern western vision of politics; and it is hard to see how anyone can reasonably hope to elude it without at least

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confronting it frankly and with some tenacity. (For a tentative start see Nagel (1991).) If it cannot in principle be so eluded, then the great bulk of *bien pensant* political opinion in the west today is either hopelessly confused or in grossly bad faith. (*Mal pensant* political opinion, we can be confident, we have ever with us. But it is grim for its hegemony to be essentially intellectually unchallenged.)

Chapter 8 exchanges a domestic focus on the practicality of embodying our moral sensibilities convincingly in the texture of shared social, political and economic life in a particular sovereign political unit for a more cosmopolitan focus on the prospects for averting conspicuously abominable outcomes in distant countries of which we now know more than we can hope to find agreeable. In many ways this issue offers a most illuminating (if unflattering) mirror for the preoccupations of contemporary liberal thinkers in the wake of the Cold War. In place of a Holy War against an adversary which could be confidently anticipated to act abominably but which had long also been plainly too powerful and dangerous for its freedom of action to be successfully restricted within its own territorial perimeter, the new configuration of political, military and economic forces plainly rendered it possible to intervene, with good (or less good) intentions, in a wide variety of settings (Iraq, Somalia, Bosnia, Rwanda, Haiti). Subsequent experience has dissipated any sense of ease and prospective efficacy in such interventions; but it has done little as yet to clarify quite what the balance of power to act, resistance, and political cost really means. ‘The dilemma of humanitarian intervention’ attempts to explain why this experience was bound to prove so discouraging, but also why it cannot readily be brought to a permanent end and replaced either by bland recognition of our comparative impotence or by self-righteous affirmation of our refusal to contemplate the costs of averting infamies of which we are distressingly well aware.

Chapter 9, ‘Specifying and understanding racism’, turns the mirror back on to some of the more intimate and discomfiting aspects of political and economic life in western societies today. It takes what is in many ways the paradigm case of political correctness and tries to show that the political perceptions embodied in the correct liberal response to this topic (one of fastidious but personally unruffled and imaginatively distant revulsion: *de aliis fabula narratur*) are predicated on a quite unwarranted self-righteousness, a very limited feeling for reasonably concrete social justice, and a refusal to acknowledge the limited capacities for effective political and economic agency on the part of what are still the most privileged states in the world. It underlines the political urgency of explaining the incidence of racism in the practical life of modern populations and the extreme unwisdom of assuming that we already know pretty adequately

how to explain this. It is intended to disturb (perhaps even in some measure to offend), on the presumption that racist consciousness is indeed in many ways a political and social poison and that there is no chance whatsoever of checking its ravages unless we recognize more frankly just why it does spread so readily and so rapidly in the societies to which we belong.

The remaining chapters of the book turn more directly to the task of understanding aspects of modern political change and the effectiveness (or otherwise) of political action today. Chapter 10 considers how far contemporary political science or political theory have succeeded in capturing either the main determinants of response by policy makers to growing awareness of global interdependence or the effectiveness of their response to this recognition. It explains why neither professional practice is especially well equipped to identify each of these and why both practices ought nevertheless to be capable of making some contribution to doing so. Only an approach which contrived to combine a realistic conception of the causal dynamics of global economic interaction with a realistic conception both of the cumulative ecological impact of these dynamics and of the constraints on policy choice by contemporary state elites could hope to grasp each accurately. This, once more, is a collective task of some urgency, and one which will scarcely be discharged successfully merely by serendipity.

Chapter 11 turns to the role of democratic political choice and action in facing (or exacerbating) the problems of contemporary political life on the European continent. It was written late in 1991 for a conference in Kichijoji, Tokyo, concerned with the future of democracy in Asia, and reflects a range of judgements made at that time. I have refrained from modifying the phrasing in the (probably in any case futile) attempt to render its more incautious formulations less salient. It certainly did not anticipate either the degree of subsequent disruption in Japan's domestic politics or the hornet's nest stirred up by the Maastricht Treaty. In retrospect, I think it overemphasizes the role of the European Commission, following the terms of vulgar political debate in Britain then and since, and underemphasizes the degree of commitment of a succession of national political leaders in the major European states. But if it is potentially misleading about the determinants of the movement towards European integration and perhaps also overoptimistic about the extent to which this process has ingratiated itself with the electorates of the European Union (this still largely remains to be seen), there is less doubt than at the time of writing about the force of its central point. Whatever has caused the movement of European integration, it has certainly not been the conscious political choices and steady political will of its citizens

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at large. European citizenship, insofar as it has come and is still coming into existence, is a politically created identity. It may still prove a basis for effective agency over time which is clearly superior to the residues of more obdurately national tradition of which we still dispose. But then again, it may not. What I continue to wish to underline is that the force of democracy as a political value tells neither in favour of nor against the prospects for such an outcome. Democracy as a value qualifies the exercise of political authority. It does not and cannot serve to define the territorial scope of political membership.

Chapter 12 turns to the nation state as such as a political format and asks how far the growing sense of the inefficacy of political action in a wide variety of settings over the last decade and more can be attributed to real changes in the power and pertinence of this format. It seeks to distinguish the possible sources of such a sense which lie within the two key component concepts of the idea of a nation state from those which must lie (if they are to lie anywhere at all) in real shifts in the causal properties of economic or political or social structures in the world at large. Whilst the idea of a nation state has always been profoundly equivocal (and correspondingly vulnerable in political practice), it is not plausible that anything of decisive importance about either of its two main conceptual components has become apparent in the course of the last decade or two which would not have been equally clearly apparent for very much longer to anyone who cared to inquire into these. What plainly has changed in the world at large is the sharp compression in the economic discretion of individual national governments and the dramatic acceleration in the known damage (and the still more dramatic amplification of reasonably suspected damage) which human beings have inflicted and are continuing to inflict on their habitats. The first of these certainly threatens the ideological appeal of the nation state and might therefore eventually threaten its practical viability. (On any defensible analysis there is a consequential relation between the ideological appeal of the idea of a nation state and the viability in practice of putative instances of such states.) The second, on some constructions, is already an acute threat to the practical viability of all states and may yet prove to be an irresistible, and therefore in due course a terminal, threat. (This is a hypothesis to refute in practice, not one to rule out of court a priori by theoretical fiat or personal euepepsia.)

Chapter 13 inquires into the principal difficulties which contemporary societies are likely to face in warding off these threats, especially in their more eschatological version. In many ways this seems an unnervingly novel question. But it has a great deal in common with questions that have long preoccupied western interpreters of politics. Chapter 13 seeks



to show, in the hastiest and most informal manner, quite how much a familiarity with the history of western political thinking can offer in formulating and deepening a strategic conception of how such threats might in the end be met successfully. Its main conclusion is the prospective centrality to this endeavour of very large-scale and rapid changes in popular attitudes and the extreme political peril of seeking to orchestrate and implement such changes of attitude principally by accumulating and directing coercive power.

The final chapter, on the heritage and future of the European left, argues that unless this increasingly loosely defined assemblage of political judgement and sentiment contrives to win a political future for itself, the surviving pride in their political heritage of its present bearers will prove to have been wholly unwarranted. To win such a future will require (amongst other things) a palpable intellectual mastery of key problems of practical life which the political left manifestly at present lacks and which they are in little danger of developing (or recovering) until they choose to recognize more frankly that this is indeed the case. There is always the possibility that intellectual mastery of such problems might rationally commit anyone who achieved it to fatalism (and indeed to despair). But a refusal to run this risk, while less hazardous to inane optimism, is as solid a recipe as lies within the reach of human agents for depriving the left of whatever chance of a future to be proud of they still in fact retain. *Sapere aude*.

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