

Introduction

Our political order is in flux, perhaps in crisis, and possibly even in peril and that not only here and there but globally so, not only in unstable regions but equally in the most settled states. The signs are easily recognizable. The world's population, now at 7.2 billion, is set to rise quickly by another 50 percent. This growth, unevenly distributed across continents, is bound to create new poverty, new needs, and new political demands, plausibly also large-scale migrations and perhaps even war. In its course, traditional structures, values, and understandings are quickly dissolving. At the same time, technological change is not letting up, affecting economic, military, and political power in unpredictable ways. Environmental degradation remains also uncontained: the pollution of the air, the earth, and the sea proceed afoot and these affect lives, living spaces, and resources in ways that burden the political sphere. We see the economic weight between developed and developing countries shifting with consequences for global power relations. What adds further weight to all this is that we are also affected by increasing confusion about the nature and meaning of politics. We are uncertain about what to ask from politics – expecting too much of it or too little. We are equally uncertain about what it demands from us, what sort of commitment it calls for. It appears that our concept and conception of politics have lost their mooring.

Through more than two thousand years our political philosophers thought they were clear about their task. For Plato, Aristotle, and their followers political philosophy considered the proper ordering of the *polis*, the empire, or the state. For modern political thinkers the question of justice in the state was of paramount concern. But the *polis* is gone and the modern state faces now an uncertain future. Can we continue to think about politics along the familiar lines when its reality is in such flux? Matters of this sort motivated Sheldon Wolin to call the question: what is political? “one of the basic problems confronting the political philosopher.” Wolin sought to treat political philosophy accordingly as a “form of

discourse concerning what is political” and the political philosopher “as one who philosophizes about the political.”¹ On similar grounds, Michel Foucault has argued that “political analysis and criticism have in a large measure still to be invented.”² He might have said that, in our changing circumstances, such analysis and criticism may have to be invented anew, that we can no longer rely on the old models and are short of new ones.

Following some twentieth-century thinkers I conceive of philosophy as pre-eminently an art of questioning, not as a source of oracular insights. As such I welcome that both politics and political philosophy have become problematic to us – threatening as this situation appears in other respects. By becoming more questionable, politics and political philosophy have opened themselves up to renewed inquiry. Against the dogmatic certainty that still obtains in so much political talk, such an inquiry will know how to live with its questions, unafraid even of being left without final answers. Skepticism will be the handmaiden of this new political thinking; the question its singular tool. It is with this in mind that I take my start from Wolin’s insistence that even the term “political” is in need of questioning. Like Wolin I am interested in the varying explications that our political thinkers have given that term because in them politics itself is reflected in its multi-faceted, changing reality.

I begin with the thought that politics might usefully be conceived as a search for the common good. There are certainly other and more specific conceptions of politics (as government and state, as conflict and its resolution, as the exercise of power, etc.) and I will turn to some of those later on. I begin here, nonetheless, with this characterization of politics because it helps me to define my agenda. The first thing to note is that we can envisage the common good in very different ways, as high and as low, as wide and as narrow. We can speak of this common good in the language of justice, of freedom, security, order, morality, happiness, individual well-being, prosperity, progress, and what have you. We can, moreover, envisage the community for which such a good is sought in different ways: as tribal, local, national, international, or even global, as egalitarian or hierarchical in its order, as traditional or freely constituted, as unified or divided. And we can finally also envisage the search itself in various ways: as organized or spontaneous, as guided or as cooperative, as deliberate or merely implicit, as successful or thwarted. The characterization of politics as a search for the common good alerts us thus right away to the wide scope of what we consider political. Even then this characterization may

¹ Wolin, *Politics and Vision*, p. 5.

² Foucault, “The History of Sexuality,” p. 190.

Introduction

3

prove too narrow. For much of what we call politics is preoccupied with more mundane, more practical, more down-to-earth matters than consideration of the common good. What we call by the name of politics encompasses, in fact, everything from the most trivial, the most local, and the most forgettable incidents of village life to the tragically grand events of world history. I conclude that the “essence” of politics cannot be captured in any short proposition – not even that of politics as a search for the common good. Our concept of politics is, rather, a family resemblance notion in Wittgenstein’s sense and resists being pinned down in any definitional formula.

I am not then saying that the characterization of politics as a search for the common good gives us the essence and meaning of politics. Or that any other concept will do so. But I do want to maintain that the characterization of politics as the search for a common good picks out a particularly illuminating feature of the family of phenomena we call political. We might say of a human family in a similar fashion that there is no single characteristic that all its members share and at the same time that there exist some particularly prominent family traits. (Think of musical talent in the family of Johann Sebastian Bach.) I am not arguing then that the search for the common good is the common characteristic of everything political; but I do want to maintain that this search is a distinctive and particularly illuminating component within the assemblage we know as politics. To pick out such a characteristic in the field of family resemblance means, in fact, to superimpose a concept with boundaries on an open, unbounded area. We do so usually with some practical purpose in mind and that is the case also here with my attempt to view politics in terms of the idea of a search for the common good.

In highlighting this concept I mean to distance myself, first of all, from political thinkers who find it necessary to separate the just and the good and who insist that politics can be concerned only with the question of justice. These thinkers argue that our well-known disputes over what may count as the common good – most pronounced in our own pluralistic society – makes it impossible to understand politics as such a search for a common good. But justice is, as I see it, merely one good among others, not something set apart from and above the common good, and there are disagreements over justice as much as there are over all other goods. Justice is, in addition, a rather limited good; it is the good of a cold, modern, and essentially heartless world in which the issue between us is only what you owe me and what I owe you. When John Rawls describes it as the first virtue of society, he is, on my account, advancing a particular, distinctively

narrow, and essentially Protestant view of the common good. If I had to name a single good for society, on the other hand, it would be survival or flourishing rather than justice. It is, in fact, far from obvious that human society aims at any one thing. We are engaged, rather, in a continuous process of determining goals for ourselves. There will, no doubt, be moments when justice will appear to us as the primary good to which politics must strive, but there will also be moments at which other goods will define for us what we are politically after. And it is in addition the case that different and competing goods will be before our eyes at any one moment. Without that assumption the contesting nature of politics can hardly be understood.

Given the uncertainties of our political reality it is understandable that normative thinkers from Plato to Rawls would be looking for a fixed point outside the political plain from which to assess the political situation. Except that there is no such Archimedean point. If there were a determinate common good, we would have an easier time at passing judgment on our political reality. But politics is not the implementation of a fixed common good; it is, rather, an ongoing search in which various conceptions of the good will be proposed and dismissed. That we engage in this search does not mean that there is a determinate good to be found. We can certainly search for unicorns though there is no such beast. A composer may search for the perfect harmony when there is no such thing and we have to be content, instead, with the history of music. So also in politics. The search for the common good carries us forward even when there is no fixed terminal point to it. We are left thus with the history of the search which is the history of politics, the history of our existence as political beings.

I agree, however, with Rawls that our search for the common good has become increasingly problematic. It is not that we are unable to agree on any such good but we seem to have become disillusioned with the very idea of searching for it. This disillusionment is tied to the growing uncertainty about politics I have noted. The problem is not, as some analyze it, that we believe today only in individual satisfaction. Such an individualism might still be conceived as a common good. It is, rather, that the very idea of a common good is losing its hold on us. The Enlightenment thinkers once imagined a political community of strong individuals; theirs was a conception of the common good, one-sided as it may have been. We face today instead the possibility of a world with no political community and with only weak individuals, committed to no common vision of the good and no shared search for such a good. Is it conceivable that in abandoning the search for a common good we may cease to be genuinely

political beings? Could politics turn out to have been a merely contingent commodity? Something that has not been with us at all times and that may not be forever? That, in turn, makes us ask what we gained by becoming political beings and what we might lose by ceasing to be that.

Once we understand the potential contingency of our political existence, it will also become understandable why our conceptions of that form of existence are so variable. If politics is a contingent commodity, then political philosophy must be likewise. This brings me to a further reason for focusing on the conception of politics as a search for the common good. For this conception stands at the beginning of our entire Western tradition in political thought and precedes as such the classical account of politics as government and the state that has come to us from Plato and Aristotle. The conception of politics as the search for a common good is the one from which all our other philosophical conceptions have taken their departure and against which they must therefore be measured; it deserves for this reason our special attention.

The conception of politics as the search for a common good is known to us through Plato who put it into the mouth of the Sophist Protagoras. It may, for all that, be of much older origin. Plato makes Protagoras say that we engage in politics because the gods have forsaken us and we are now forced to take care of ourselves. But we are badly equipped to do so since nature has left us “naked, unshod, unbedded, and unarmed” and with only an underdeveloped capacity for fairness.³ In order to live together in human communities we need to learn what is needed for “the care of the common” and this requires life-long attentive nurturing. Protagoras declares democracy to be the best system for the search for the common good. In making this point, he opposes himself to three other views: the idea that the common good is delivered by divine inspiration, that it may be chosen for us by an elite, or that it is best proclaimed by royal decree. All three ideas were familiar to the Greeks, but Protagoras and the Athenian democrats rejected all three. The Protagorean view is distinctive because it characterizes politics as a cooperative undertaking; it describes the goal of this undertaking to be a social understanding, not an absolute truth; and it takes the common good to be determined through a shared engagement of essentially equal partners not through an appeal to authority, intellectual or otherwise.

Protagoras’ account of politics is still of interest today; it is historically significant also because Plato adapted it to his very different conception of

³ Plato, *Protagoras*, 321c.

politics. He agreed with Protagoras that politics concerns the *ἐπιμελεια του κοινου* and that, forsaken by the gods, we have to discover this care of the common for ourselves. But he sought to separate this idea from the democratic ethos by arguing that expertise is needed in the search for the common good. In *The Statesman* he wrote: “No other art would advance a stronger claim than that of kingship to be the art of caring for the whole human community.” And he added that caring for the whole community would turn out to be the art of “ruling all mankind.”⁴ Plato thus transformed the Protagorean view of politics in two ways: first, he advanced a new understanding of politics as rule over the *polis* or, as we have learned to say, as government over the state. Through Plato and Aristotle this became the classical conception of politics, passed on to us in different versions to the present moment. Plato’s second great innovation was to maintain that there are experts for the common good just as there are for all other knowledge. In his eyes, the philosophers were the most qualified for determining this good. That idea is also still alive and has continued to give shape to political philosophy. From Plato onwards, political philosophers have seen themselves engaged in defining standards, norms, and principles for political life. Over time, this Platonic view has spread also into other fields. The supposed experts on the common good include now professional politicians, political scientists, economists, psychologists, anthropologists, sociologists, and socio-biologists.

But neither of Plato’s assumptions can any longer be taken for granted. We are not so sure anymore that the essence of politics can be captured in terms of government and state. The classical view of politics must fall by the wayside with the realization that politics is a family resemblance concept. We are also increasingly suspicious of the idea that there is genuine expertise in the search for the common good. We see that search, rather, in the Protagorean manner as a shared undertaking in which everyone will have a voice and that of the philosopher or the expert is only one among others. This new way of thinking has taken shape only in the course of the last two centuries. But it points political thought in a new direction. It is thus becoming clearer that we must distinguish two very different lines of political philosophy. One proceeds in the manner laid out by Plato and Aristotle. It assigns to the philosopher/expert the task to determine the common good. The philosopher will describe this good by laying down norms for political life which he seeks to justify by appeal to intuition or conceptual truth, to reason or nature. We can speak of this

⁴ Plato, *The Statesman*, 276c.

Introduction

7

line of thought as the normative tradition in political philosophy. The other, more recent one revives the idea of the philosopher as a participant in a public exercise. This new, diagnostic form of political thought seeks to advance a more modest form of political philosophy: one more observant of the political realities and more attentive to our limited grasp of them, more alert to the fluidity of the political field, more aware of the fact that we always think about politics under political conditions; a political philosophy not given to the pronouncement of grand principles, but focused, instead, on the language and concepts of politics, more cautious in its practical conclusions, and altogether more skeptical in its outlook.

This book is meant to map a genealogy of the diagnostic enterprise. As such it needs to range widely over the history of political philosophy. Traces of the diagnostic approach can be found throughout that history. My concern is to show how they build up to the full realization of the diagnostic treatment of politics. I will have to speak about such pre-diagnostic thinkers as Aristotle, Machiavelli, and Constant; about the emergence of a more resolutely diagnostic approach in the course of the nineteenth century, and of its maturation in the twentieth century. As all genealogy, my account is meant to provide a critical perspective on its subject-matter. I am interested in the achievements, the power, the promise, but also the shortcomings of diagnosis as practiced so far and finally in its inherent limitations. I proceed on the assumption that the diagnostic undertaking is itself in need of diagnosis, that the enterprise is incomplete until it turns its diagnostic tools on itself. My intention is then not only to examine diagnostic procedures but to practice them as well.

I am motivated in this not only because I believe in the value of the diagnostic approach to politics, but also because an examination of it can throw light on the entire project of political philosophy, because it throws light also on the practical modes of thinking we pursue in actual politics, and because it throws light in this way finally also on politics itself. At the heart of the book lies my conviction that political diagnosis, political philosophy, political thinking, and political reality form one single complex.

The first two chapters of this book are concerned with a critique of the normative tradition in political philosophy in both its rationalistic and its naturalistic form. In Chapters 3 and 4, I describe stages in the emergence of the diagnostic approach. Chapter 3 seeks to show how diagnostic thinking relies on a historical conception of political experience and a historical conception also of political institutions. In Chapter 4, I turn to the great advances of diagnostic thinking in the work of Marx and Nietzsche.

The central chapters, Chapters 5, 6, and 7, proceed to an examination of the writings of Carl Schmitt, Hannah Arendt, and Michel Foucault as paradigmatic contributions to the diagnostic treatment of politics. I try to show how these thinkers sought to give new explications of the concept of the political, ones that were more adequate to the political situation in which they were writing. I proceed to ask whether they succeeded in giving politics a new vital meaning and to what extent their work can spur a new engagement in the search for a common good. This brings me in Chapter 8 to the question of the powers and the limitations of the diagnostic approach to politics. We are left, so it seems, with a degree of uncertainty not only with respect to the project of political philosophy but also with that of politics and, perhaps, with the human project itself. It is, thus, with a question mark that I end my book in Chapter 9.

PART I

*The Search for the Common Good: Beyond
the Normative and the Natural*

CHAPTER I

From normative theory to diagnostic practice

Many political causes call for attention, and engagement on their behalf is surely admirable. But political activism is never enough. Even the most energetic engagement will come to nothing, if we lack political judgment. We can be effective only once we have reached a coherent verdict on what needs to be done and a proper assessment of the situation in which we find ourselves. We certainly can't advance the human condition if we lack a conception of the common good. Much stands in the way of recognizing this – our eagerness to proceed to action, our unwillingness to stand still for reflection, as well as wrong ways of thinking that have accumulated around our political practice. In consequence, we won't be able to improve our political condition unless we first change our minds. Our political activism calls for political analysis and political analysis, in turn, for political criticism.

I begin in this chapter with a critique of the normative tradition in political philosophy and will continue in the next one with a critique of political naturalism. On the way I will seek to describe an alternative kind of political thinking – one that is diagnostic in style and hermeneutic in outlook.

The normative delusion

Philosophically speaking, we are still in the age of normative thinking. Despite the instability we observe in the political field, mainstream political philosophy has succeeded so far in maintaining its characteristically normative viewpoint which holds (1) that political action should be understood as an application of general norms and (2) that these norms have an abstractly philosophical justification. The two assumptions are, of course, separable and a purely sociological theory of norms will accept the first but not the second. I am interested here, though, in the stronger philosophical position that seeks to maintain both propositions. But since I am arguing