American Political Science, Liberalism, and the Invention of Political Theory

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Only that which has not history is definable. —Nietzsche

This essay, most narrowly specified, is part of an account of the discoursive history of academic political theory in the United States. It can, however, for at least two reasons, be construed as a study in the history of political science. First, the period under consideration, 1940–50, was a crucial one in the development of this discipline, and the issues that arose in the subfield of political theory were determinative with respect to its subsequent evolution. Second, the discourse of political theory was also the basic vehicle for reflection on the state of the discipline, its past, and its future prospects. But the relationship between political science and political theory has, since the beginning of the period in question, been an uneasy one. The principal purpose of this essay is to explain that relationship and to explore the origins of a controversy that fundamentally shaped the structure and content of contemporary academic political theory.

Political theory today has little to say to or about its parent field, and much of political theory is of marginal interest and intelligibility to many political scientists. This estrangement cannot be explained merely in terms of normal trends in professional differentiation. It is in part the legacy of an old quarrel that was one of the principal factors in the emergence of the independent interdisciplinary field of political theory. Since the early 1970s, the subfield of political theory in political science, once understood to be the core of the discipline, has tended to reflect concerns generated within the wider, more autonomous field that has evolved its own institutional structure, issue nexus, and self-image.


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This situation has sometimes been perceived as a problem, but it has seldom occasioned great concern among either political theorists or political scientists as a whole. In some quarters, both in political theory and mainstream political science, there is a sense of relief that the tension between field and subfield that had characterized the behavioral era has been ameliorated by intellectual distance. There are narrow but weighty professional pressures that tend to lead to the validation of separation but that are rationalized in terms of notions of intellectual pluralism. Often the problem is depreciated by noting that it is more apparent than real if one takes into account the manner in which the policy turn of the postbehavioral era has produced a convergence between normative and empirical research. But the propensity to confront the issue on a superficial level conceals both the historical source of the problem and some very basic difficulties that cannot easily be dismissed.

A readily accessible and familiar explanation of the alienation of political theory from political science locates the cause in the conflict that arose in the course of the behavioral revolution and its attack on the study of the history of political theory as antiquarian and inimical to the development of empirical theory and a scientific study of politics. This explanation is not incorrect, but it is incomplete. It is necessary to reach a deeper historical sense of the genealogy of political theory and to recover some of the more fundamental issues that occasioned the controversy we associate with behavioralism and its aftermath. By the early 1950s some of these issues had already been submerged in the rhetoric and legitimating philosophies that characterized the debate between “traditional” and “scientific” theory. A pivotal transformation in the discourse of political theory, which occurred during the 1940s, was obscured. An understanding of that transformation is also important for exploring the general problem of the relationship between academic political inquiry and politics—a problem that was at the heart of the controversy about political theory as it originally developed.

The Real History of Political Theory

The basic images of political theory of and by which we are now possessed, images of theory as both a product and activity and as both a subject matter and mode of inquiry, have been generated within, and have little meaning outside, the language of political theory as an academic field. Attempts to endow political theory with world-historical significance by seeking its past in a great tradition from Plato to the present, by categorically defining it as the reflective and critical dimension of political life, by understanding it as a tributary of theory in the natural sciences, or by creating other putative identities that would enhance the authority of this professional field and provide foundations for its claim to knowledge, cannot withstand much analytical
scrutiny (Gunnell 1986). Although we have become accustomed to thinking of the history of political theory as the chronologically ordered canon of classic texts, such history is in fact largely a reified analytical construct. What we might call the "real history of political theory" is the history of the academic field that created this image as its subject matter and projected it as its past. Furthermore, despite the current distance between political theory and political science, these images, and the field of political theory itself, were largely an invention of U.S. political science.

Although it is important to investigate the early development of the concept of political theory as well as the academic practice that gave rise to it (Gunnell 1983), the current species of both essentially came into existence after 1940 in the wake of the emigration of refugee scholars from Germany. Although the émigrés did not, for the most part, come to the United States understanding themselves as political theorists, this eventually became their identity. The adoption, appropriation, or discovery of this identity and the propagation of their image of, and concerns about, liberalism, as well as a related conceptual cluster including positivism and relativism, precipitated a scholarly and ideological conflict within political science that was manifest in a debate about political theory. Although the behavioral revolution was hardly one-dimensional, it was in an important respect initially a conservative rebellion catalyzed by, and directed against, the encroachment of a vision that was hostile to the traditional values of U.S. political science.

Notions of theory as the history of political ideas and as part of empirical social-scientific inquiry had, through the 1930s, been consistently understood as either complementary or even merely diachronic and synchronic modes of the same endeavor, which involved explaining politics by linking behavior and ideas. Charles Merriam, despite his emphasis on jettisoning or surpassing history as a form of inquiry, neither disparaged the paradigmatic studies of the history of political theories associated with his mentor, William Dunning, nor perceived any serious discontinuity between such studies—in which he himself participated significantly—and the advancement of social scientific theory. But a more significant factor in explaining the lack of tension was an underlying intellectual consensus that transcended various scholarly and ideological divisions between empiricism and idealism, history and science, and statism and laissez-faire. The history of political theory was understood by all as the history of the development of scientific knowledge about politics and as a story of the progress of the symbiotic relationship between such knowledge and the evolution of liberal democratic thought and institutions.

The notions of political theory and the disciplinary practices that developed between the late 1800s and the 1930s were, to be sure, the receptacle for the discourse that emerged in the 1940s. The arguments, for example, of someone such as Leo Strauss about the rise and decline of the great
tradition would not have taken hold if the basic idea of the tradition had not already gained conventional acceptance in the work of George Sabine and his predecessors, and there was nothing in the behavioral credo that had not been already articulated as an ideal to which political science should aspire. But the transformation was dramatic. The dominant consensus was frontally challenged for the first time, and political theory, as the focus of controversy, became an essentially contested concept.

The great change began almost unnoticed, or at least uncomprehended, as the claims of Strauss, Hannah Arendt, Hans Morgenthau, Theodor Adorno, Eric Voegelin, Franz Neumann, Arnold Brecht, Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, and others, in varying ways and degrees but inexorably, reshaped the discourse of political theory. Despite some very great differences in ideological and philosophical perspective, they looked much alike to the successors of Merriam as they uniformly and on very similar bases challenged the liberal, scientific, relativistic, historicist perspective that dominated political theory and political science. What might be taken as the politically conservative arguments of individuals such as Voegelin were initially more professionally visible than those on the Left associated with the Institute for Social Research, but they all propagated the thesis that liberalism, either inherently or because of its degenerate condition, was at the core of a modern crisis and implicated in the rise of totalitarianism.

It would be far too simplistic to suggest that the behavioral revolution should be understood exclusively as a reaction to this challenge, but we have lost sight of the degree to which its arguments were originally formed in response to it. The attack on liberalism and science and the rejection of the progressive-pragmatic vision of history were too basic to allow any syncretic resolution. The sense of liberal givenness, which characteristically allowed U.S. theorists to embrace relativism and the idea of the separation of facts and values while remaining totally committed to definite political ideals, was incompatible with the transcendental speculation and philosophies of history, whether of the Marxist or natural-law variety, that marked the new literature. Since at least the turn of the century, such ideas had traditionally been specifically what most U.S. political theorists had understood themselves as rejecting.

I seek to specify as precisely as possible how the controversy commenced and how it shaped the discourse of political theory. The situation as it first emerged was not clear to many of the participants. The new ideas had often not taken distinct and published form when the conflict began, and some of those involved in the controversy were at first truly perplexed. Individuals such as Sabine, whose influential analysis of political theory was not significantly different from that of those devoted to empirical political science, found himself the target of those whose ideas he largely shared simply because he represented the history of political theory. Similarly, pro-
tobehavioralists and the founders of the behavioral movement, such as David Easton, saw not only a growing tendency toward historical and evaluative analysis that was pointedly at the expense of the idea of a scientific study of politics and liberal values but one that was being mounted within the genre of political theory, which had heretofore reflected the constitutive conventions of the discipline of political science.

The Transformation of Political Theory

Apart from textbooks, there was at the beginning of the 1940s a dearth of literature distinctly understood as political theory, and institutionally, as a subfield of political science, it had all but disappeared. The revitalization of discourse could be construed as beginning with the publication of Sabine’s 1939 article, “What is Political Theory?” in the first issue of the Journal of Politics and with the appearance, in the same year, of the Review of Politics (which became a principle vehicle for the work of the émigrés). The resumption of discussion about political theory and its place in political science was in part prompted by an increasing concern about the status of the scientific study of politics which, despite the work of Harold Lasswell and others connected with the Chicago school during the 1930s, had received limited attention after Merriam’s enthusiastic claims in the 1920s. More than a decade before the behavioral revolution, Benjamin Lippincott (1940) argued that in practice the discipline of political science was much as it had been at the turn of the century and that the greatest deficiency was theoretical. What passed as political theory had been devoted to the recounting of past ideas, and even among those committed to science, there was an “aversion” and “hostility” to theory (p. 130). But most important was the renewed reflection on liberal political values and the beginning of the impact of newly arrived European scholars who severely questioned the scientific faith and liberalism as well as the historical vision that united them.

A pointed “challenge” to political scientists was advanced by William Foote Whyte in an article published in 1943. This piece (quite accidentally) served as the principal catalyst for the incipient controversy. Whyte was a social anthropologist who had been studying political organization in a slum district, and there is no indication that he had any notion of the nerve endings that would be agitated by his comments. He suggested that the war had occasioned a concern about democratic values that had led political scientists to “write political philosophy and ethics” and neglect the study of “plain politics.” He argued that “a scientific study of politics” required “the discovery of certain uniformities or laws” and that political scientists should direct their attention to “the description and analysis of political behavior” (pp. 692–93).

The most immediate response to Whyte was by John Hallowell (1944a)
whose work would become one of the principal conduits through which the ideas of the émigrés entered political theory and whose voice would come to represent the new mood in the field. The response, however, moved the discussion to a very different context. Whyte, much like Lippincott, was writing from the perspective of traditional American social science, but Hallowell identified this critique, as well as the general commitment to science in the discipline, with an intellectual position that was not only alien but unfamiliar to most U.S. political scientists. Hallowell suggested that Whyte's views reflected "increasingly positivistic" trends that threatened to undermine "all belief in transcendental truth and value" that could serve as a barrier to intellectual and political "nihilism" (pp. 642–43).

The political-theory research committee of the American Political Science Association had been largely inactive in the early years of the war, but in 1943 it met, under the chairmanship of Francis G. Wilson, and attempted to sort out the issues that were beginning to surface. Wilson noted that there was now a "deep cleavage among political theorists in the area of primary ideas" on an "ultimate issue" (Wilson et al. 1944, 726–27). The exact nature of this issue and cleavage was something that he had some difficulty in specifying. One facet of the issue, or one way of stating it, involved a conflict between those who, like the "great political thinkers," took metaphysics seriously and those who believed that philosophy was relevant only as "logical thought." Was scientific "detachment" from traditional philosophy a sign of "progress" or "ineptitude"? Another definition of the problem was in terms of a clash between the "theological approach" and the "empirical" or "positivistic," scientific, or liberal technique of social study. A theological perspective was considered by some as necessary for understanding both the past and contemporary society, but there was a question of what constituted such a perspective and the manner in which it might conflict with the "approaches of idealistic and rationalistic liberalism" that were more characteristic of political science (p. 727).

There was also a recognition of a conflict between those who stressed "value-free discussions in political science" and those who believed that there was "more in politics than simply clinical observation." All agreed that it was important to "formulate and criticize values" and that there should be "a frontal attack" on the problem of "value in American political society," and many believed that in some sense it was necessary and possible to arrive at "valid social and political principles." There was much the same kind of discussion about knowledge of regularities regarding "political behavior." Most were willing to compromise at some point and acknowledge that both "utopia" and the "facts" should be given consideration (pp. 727–28, 730), but it was clear that the consensus in political theory was breaking down.

Some believed, Wilson reported, that the fundamental cleavage was
manifest in the differences between the thought of the Middle Ages and that of the modern age, between natural law and natural rights. There was also a division between those who argued that the United States needed a consciousness of history and that an examination of our philosophy of history was in order and those who wanted to concentrate on practical questions of political choice and the "ends-means relationship." There was also a general, but maybe less than enthusiastic, agreement that there was a need for a greater availability of the "texts of the great thinkers" and that "the political tradition of the West must be subjected to close scrutiny."

Wilson, who was a specialist in American political thought and a consistent spokesman for a U.S. brand of conservatism, did his best to report and make sense of the various and sometimes novel notions of theory that surfaced in these discussions and to reconcile them. Neither task was easy. The issues being formulated were radically different from those that had been characteristic of American political science and political theory.

In the symposium, Benjamin Wright (who had written on the American tradition of natural law) claimed that the greatest need of the period was for a statement of objectives in terms of ideals, since there was no "clear conception of what we are fighting for, what goals we should seek to attain, even in this country, after the war" (739–40). Ernest S. Griffith, on the other hand, argued that "research in political theory hitherto has been largely synonymous with searches for the origin, growth, and decline in ideas, principles, and doctrines," while what was required, if there was to be "precision" in the field, was more attention to "the basic concepts that underlie all theory" and to the definition of these concepts. Such research, he cautioned, should not be understood as a search for "correct" concepts, since theorists have too long looked for absolute principles and failed to recognize that principles are subjective and historically relative to various institutional arrangements (pp. 740–42).

The claims of Wright and Griffith could easily be situated within the characteristic discourse of the field and did not necessarily represent sharply conflicting attitudes. The increasing tension between such positions, however, indicated a different kind of influence. Voegelin, who had fled to the United States in 1938, was beginning to make his mark on professional discussions of political theory during this period, and in this symposium he presented at some length the basic research scheme and thesis regarding the derailment of modern political thought that would inform his New Science of Politics (1952)—a book that would epitomize one of the poles of political theory during the 1950s and 1960s.

Voegelin suggested that the study of the history of political ideas had been represented with distinction by individuals like Dunning and Sabine and was of particular importance to U.S. scholars who had done the most to
develop this field, over which they had held a "monopoly." He claimed, however, that it was now necessary to rethink the field in light of the vast new historical knowledge available and in terms of the general philosophy of history.

The increasingly pivotal issue of relativism was, at this time, grounded in a concrete concern about the defense of liberal democratic principles. The war and the domestic political crises of the 1930s that preceded it had prompted an uneasiness about the lack of an articulate and philosophically grounded democratic ideology. And the work of individuals like Charles Beard and John Dewey had already incited a controversy about historicism and relativism as a threat to both political values and scientific objectivity. The concern about relativism, then, was not without precedent. But as the issue entered the literature of political theory, it took on a reconstituted identity based on new claims about the origins of totalitarianism. The assessment advanced by émigré scholars, and by Hallowell, was that the problem of totalitarianism was at root a problem of science, liberalism, and relativism and that it was susceptible in large part to a philosophical or religious solution.

If we want to understand fully the behavioral animus toward "traditional" political theory, it is necessary to take account of the extent to which what had actually been traditional in American political theory was being fundamentally challenged. The unhappiness with liberalism and science that would mark much of the major work in the history of political theory by the 1960s (Strauss, Voegelin, Arendt, and others) was already taking shape. And it propagated the image of a crisis and decline in Western political history and thought. Hallowell, in reviewing Brecht's account of the decline of the German republic, argued (1944b) that Brecht did not sufficiently stress the degree to which that decline was "a direct consequence of the liberal's lack of conviction in his own philosophy." The solution, for Hallowell, was a renewal of what he believed were the religious and spiritual foundations of liberal democracy.

Hallowell's attack on liberalism became strident (1947), and the substance of his argument was hardly congenial to American political science. Merriam, for example, had stressed the danger of theology to liberalism while Hallowell was suggesting that secular liberalism, with the disintegration of religious conscience, led to anarchy and tyranny. Much of the tradition of U.S. social science had grown out of an attempt to replace religion as a cohesive social force with a science of social control and public policy that would realize liberal values, but now "political theorists" were claiming that liberalism and "the liberal science of politics" were a failure and the breeding ground of totalitarianism.

It would be a mistake to assume that political scientists committed to the scientific study of politics were unconcerned with values—either as an object
of study or as premises and goals of empirical inquiry. As Herman Finer put it (1945), “the need was for an ideology that would accomplish for democracy what Marxism had done for Soviet Communism” (p. 239). These claims would be overshadowed by the renewed commitment to scientific inquiry by the end of the decade, but the “value-free” stance of behavioralism did not entail a rejection or neglect of what it understood as liberal democratic values. Gabriel Almond, for instance, even argued that the “chief challenge” of the day was to seek “a valid theory of natural law” (Almond et al. 1946). The problem was not that the new influences in political theory stressed values but that behavioralism could not countenance the idea that science and liberalism exemplified social and intellectual decline.

The symposium, “Politics and Ethics,” in which Almond participated was conceived as an attempt to explore further the issues that had been raised by Whyte. But, for the most part, the participants talked past one another, and the arguments were by now far removed from Whyte’s actual concern and understanding. Whyte claimed that he did not recognize the target of Hallowell’s criticism—that he had never even met anyone who represented the position attributed to him. He stated that he was not interested in the “philosophy of science” and “positivism” and that Hallowell had gone off on a “tangent” and created a “straw man” (p. 301). Hallowell was caught up in a realm of ideas and issues that were distinctly European and closely related to the arguments of individuals such as Arnold Brecht.

Brecht had been a political actor and administrator who did not enter academia, or what he understood as the pursuit of “science,” until he came to the United States and the New School of Social Research in 1933 after a period of Nazi harassment. Around the turn of the decade, he published several articles dealing with the question of relativism, absolutism, and science that eventually became the basis of his book, Political Theory: The Foundations of Twentieth-Century Political Thought (1959). Brecht did not directly attribute the rise of national socialism to a philosophical context, but, like many others, he was concerned about the influence of legal positivism and relativism on judges and lawyers who applied laws that were morally reprehensible. He believed, however, that it was impossible to seek a form of “scientific” proof or some rationalistic equivalent for moral principles and natural law. Moral judgment was a matter of human volition even though no less lacking in validity. Brecht argued that scientific value relativism, as expounded by Max Weber, Hans Kelsen, Gustav Radbruch, and Lasswell, had once seemed a liberating philosophy, but in the face of Nazism it became a paralyzing one. In a search for intellectual authority to combat totalitarianism, intellectuals, however mistakenly, “turned from being political scientists to becoming ethical philosophers or theologians (if not simply bad logicians) and they called this science” (1970, pp. 434, 490). For Brecht, the great dilemma
of modern political theory was that there was no scientific knowledge of values. His solution was to teach "the limits of science" and urge other ways to bridge the is and ought (p. 494).

In 1947, Brecht reported on a roundtable ("Beyond Relativism in Political Theory") that included Francis Coker, Roland Pennock, Lippincott, Wright, Voegelin, Hallowell, and Almond. Kelsen was unable to attend, but he sent a message indicating that despite the growing unpopularity of value relativism in the United States, he was still an adherent and remained a critic of moral "absolutism." For Kelsen, as well as for most U.S. political scientists and theorists, value skepticism and relativism were understood as the foundations of liberal democratic theory. Only on this basis, they believed, could liberal democracy be justified. Moral absolutism signaled political absolutism for émigrés like Kelsen, while for Kelsen's erstwhile student, Voegelin, relativism abetted and reflected the decline of the West.

Brecht suggested that the paradox of modernity was that "modern science and modern scientific methods, with all their splendor of achievement, have led to an ethical vacuum, a religious vacuum, and a philosophical vacuum." He argued that the situation had come to a point where social science found it impossible to distinguish between right and wrong, good and evil, and justice and injustice. Political science was particularly affected by this dilemma, because it dealt most directly with the phenomena of nazism, fascism, and communism, which had "settled down" in this vacuum. Brecht claimed that "no political theorist can honestly avoid the issue" posed by "scientific relativism" (pp. 470–71). Most participants in the symposium offered little in the way of a concrete recommendation for getting "beyond relativism."

There has not been sufficient recognition of the degree to which the transcendentural urge and historical pessimism manifest in the émigré literature affected political theory. It contributed to the split between political theory and political science during the behavioral era and to the eventual constitution of political theory as an independent field. Although the behavioral revolution, or counterrevolution, in many ways transformed the mainstream practice of the discipline, it was, at least theoretically, a reaffirmation of past ideals—ideals that did not rest easily alongside the arguments that characterized the new literature of political theory. Although the behavioralists singled out the study of the history of political theory as requiring displacement, transformation, or supercession, this was more because it was the genre to which most of the offending arguments happened to belong than because the literature characteristic of the field before 1940 actually embodied the problems with which behavioralists were concerned.

By 1950, there was an antiscientific, antiliberal sentiment in political theory even though neither the medium nor the message were always entirely
clear. Although, for example, Arendt had published widely during the 1940s in a variety of journals, her first major work in English, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, did not appear until 1951. Much of Strauss’s *Natural Right and History* was originally presented as Walgren lectures at the University of Chicago in 1949, a year after his appointment, but the book was not published until 1953. Strauss had already announced in his work on Hobbes (1936) some of his distinctive themes, including the depreciation of both liberalism and the new science of politics, but the book received little attention and surely not much comprehension.

Although these attacks on science, liberalism, and the legitimacy of the modern age had not yet coalesced into a definite oppositional force in political science, they were at least engendering an alien mood that had a considerable professional impact. There were all sorts of reasons to reassert the scientific image of political science in the postwar years, and the new voices in political theory were not only failing to do so but were inimical to such an image. The need for scientific theory was the theme of William Anderson’s survey of political science in 1949. What was required, he argued, was an “established body of tested propositions concerning the political nature and activities of man that are applicable throughout the world and presumably at all times” (p. 309). It was, he claimed, necessary to distinguish between politics and science and pursue the latter, and the way to do this was to study individual “human political behavior” or the “political atom” and produce knowledge in the “field of scientific method” (pp. 312–14).

Behavioralists, beginning in the 1950s, would increasingly emphasize their dedication to a vision of pure science, but the underlying concern at the end of the decade was still the articulation and realization of a science of liberal politics. In two articles, on Bagehot (1949) and Lasswell (1950), that closely preceded his analysis of the “decline of political theory” (1951), Easton made clear that the pursuit of science was a means and not an end and that the belief in the complementarity of scientific realism and liberal democracy was still alive. The ultimate purpose remained political rationality, but the immediate goal was to create a theoretically grounded science of politics equal to this task.

The individuals most responsible for affecting and sustaining the behavioral revolution had almost without exception been primarily trained in the field of historical and normative political theory, as traditionally conceived. While the debate within the discipline would eventually often be understood as a conflict between political scientists and political theorists, it really signified a split between different conceptions of theory. Few of the early behavioralists understood themselves as antitheoretical, and probably very few initially understood their concern with scientific political theory as a rejection of their earlier education. To some extent, what was involved was a lag
between the graduate educational establishment and the new literature and mood of political theory. The theorists trained in the 1930s and 1940s had, for the most part, not been exposed to the arguments of the new wave of European thought that was appearing in political theory, and they felt a good deal more at home with the traditional goals of the field than with the perspective that characterized this literature. Ultimately they felt compelled to choose between political theory and political science, and the choice was as much ideological as professional. But by the mid-1950s, the behavioral critique of political theory was forcing the same polarizing choice on theorists concerned with historical and normative issues.

In 1950, Lippincott attempted, as he had a decade earlier, to make sense of what constituted political theory in the United States and to provide a critical analysis of the field. He suggested that political theory was at least potentially—and as correctly understood—the “most scientific branch” of political science. It was, however, an area in which political scientists had “produced little,” if theory were defined, as he believed it should be, “as the systematic analysis of political relations.” It should, he argued, be concerned with “general” claims about the “actions and behavior of men” and with particular events and institutions only as objects for testing its principles (pp. 208–9). Up to this point, Lippincott argued, “the greatest effort has been devoted to writing the history of political ideas” and “defining and classifying terms and principles of politics.” The methods in political theory had been basically historical, and the “emphasis placed on the history of political ideas has meant very largely the abandonment of the aim of science” (pp. 209, 211, 214).

The call for science was increasingly accompanied by an attack on the existing practice of political theory. Theory was often described as historical, teleological, utopian, moralistic, ethical, and generally obscurantist. There was more going on in these critiques than was readily visible, and the exact target of the criticism was often not clearly or easily specified. By 1950, however, Hallowell had brought together his arguments in a comprehensive work (The Main Currents of Modern Political Thought). It reflected and summarized claims that had emerged in the discourse of political theory during the 1940s, and it initiated a genre that would find its classic expression in the work of Strauss, Voegelin, and others during the next decade. Even a work such as Sheldon Wolin’s Politics and Vision (1960), which ideologically and philosophically was far removed from the positions of Hallowell, Voegelin, and Strauss, was still a story of liberalism and the decline of modern politics. The imprint of the 1940s was fundamental for the future of political theory.

Although Hallowell’s book was about “modern political thought,” a large portion was devoted to a synoptic reconstruction of the development of
political ideas from ancient times up through the emergence of what he designated as "integral liberalism," which he claimed was an outgrowth of the ideas of individuals like Grotius and Locke. The image projected was one of a seamless web of history that moved from the classical world through the evolution of modern science, the Renaissance, and Hobbes to the rise of liberalism. However, the story of modern political thought was now a story of decline—a decline as organic as the upward slope of the past and one that was offered as an explanation of modern political problems and "the crisis of our times" exemplified in socialism, Marxism, the Soviet Union, fascism, and the theory and practice of totalitarianism in general. But the most basic problem was the decadence of contemporary liberalism and its inability to defend and maintain itself.

In Hallowell's saga, the main villain was positivism, which in turn he viewed as a direct outgrowth of the Enlightenment, utilitarianism, and German idealism. His notion of positivism was the very general one of an "attempt to transfer to the study of social and human phenomena the methods and concepts of the natural sciences," and he believed that it was represented by the work of Comte. J. S. Mill, Herbert Spencer, Lester Frank Ward, and Gumpowicz. Positivism, with its attendant separation of fact and value, and relativism undermined liberalism and allowed the rise of antiliberal political movements.

Some émigrés like Kelsen (1948) and Felix Oppenheim (1950) would continue to argue, like U.S. liberals, that relativism and empiricism were more conducive to democracy than moral absolutism. They claimed that there was a root connection between democracy and the spirit embodied in the scientific method. The imminent debate between "scientific" and "traditional" political theory would be far from simply a debate about method and political inquiry or even about an emphasis on values as opposed to facts. It was, in the end, a debate about liberalism, its foundation, and its fate—and about the relationship between political theory and politics.

There was an increasingly extravagant dimension to the rhetoric on both sides of the debate. Actual research and publication in the field hardly matched the picture of "positivism" that was painted by the critics of scientism, and the image of moralistic political theory on which the protobehavioralists focused was equally unreflective of the literature. To claim that political science was "mostly history and ethics" was simply counterfactual, and to argue that "the propositions of political theory have a character of 'unreality' and futility that bars out any serious interest in their discussion" (Perry 1950, 399, 401) was clearly to speak generically on the basis of a narrow and unspecified body of literature. But there was, ironically, a sense in which each faction was now beginning to fulfill the image conjured up by its opponents.

Herbert Simon, George A. Lundberg, and Lasswell participated in the
discussion and pressed, as they would in many forums, for making the language of social science scientific. Although they did not specify their sources, they were clearly no longer strangers to the positivist philosophy of science. Simon enunciated a model of science as a system of predictive-cum-explanatory general propositions from which could be deduced other propositions about concrete observables that were therefore testable. Science was conceived methodologically as a unity, and human action as an object of inquiry was viewed as requiring no departure from the methods of natural science.

For Simon, it was essential that political science adopt what he considered to be the more advanced methods of the other social sciences, and he insisted that central to this task was a transformation and redefinition of political theory that would entail “consistent distinctions between political theory (i.e., scientific statements about the phenomena of politics) and the history of political thought (i.e., statements about what people have said about political theory and political ethics)” (p. 411).

Lasswell warned against getting too involved in the question of what “science” means and neglecting the practical end toward which scientific inquiry was ultimately directed, that is, “to decrease the indeterminacy of important political judgments,” but he advocated “more attention to the construction of theoretical models” that would guide research (pp. 423, 425). Exactly what was entailed by the commitment, or recommitment, to science was not very clearly defined, but there definitely was a new philosophic dimension to the argument. Lasswell’s collaboration with Kaplan, who had been a student of Carnap’s, was one obvious point of intersection. And they had stated in the introduction to their book (1950) that it reflected a new scientific outlook informed by “a thorough-going empiricist philosophy of the sciences” based on “logical positivism, operationalism, instrumentalism” (pp. xiii–xiv). Maybe their position was actually more justified than informed by this philosophy, but in the face of new philosophical challenges, political scientists attempted more self-consciously to ground and articulate their scientific faith.

By 1950, some mainstream political scientists were becoming uneasy about the implications of the new scientism. Paul Appleby (1950), speculating on the direction of political science during the next twenty-five years, argued that a much broader value-oriented vision was required than the one that was then developing in the discipline, and for many the concern was still to link science to problems of practical politics (White 1950). Easton’s call for the reconstruction of political theory has quite reasonably often been construed as the first shot fired in the behavioral revolution. But although The Political System (1953) was, to be sure, a critique of the study of the history of political theory and a plea for the creation of scientific theory, it is sometimes forgotten
that it was an explicit challenge to the new “mood” in political theory and an attempt to find a basis for the reconciliation of political science and political theory that would at the same time sustain and advance liberal democratic values (chap. 1). By mid-decade such meditative integrating efforts had largely given way to the alienating forces that pushed political theory and political science along different paths. And in an important sense the language and agenda of political theory, for at least a generation, had already been set.

Conclusion

The literature of political theory is, and since the late 1930s has been, saturated with discussions about liberalism and its tradition, rise and decline, faith, dangers, limits, collapse, challenges, agony, paradox, irony, spirit, development, end, poverty, and crisis and its relation to innumerable things, individuals, and other political concepts. Even when the concept is not specifically a focus of discussion, the concern about liberalism significantly structures the discursive universe of political theory. An understanding of this situation requires a grasp of those initiating issues that informed the invention of political theory and that fundamentally shaped its real history. The enthusiastic reception of European thought in recent years, such as that associated with Habermas, is directly related to its perpetuation of the critique of liberalism, and surely some of the literature that has had the greatest impact on the field has been devoted to attempts, such as that of John Rawls, to provide new foundations for liberal theory.

Although the tension between political science and political theory was, and in large part has remained, the product of a disagreement about liberalism, the controversy quite early on became detached from concrete political issues. From the beginning, there was a tendency for the debates about liberalism to escape the political concerns that had given rise to them. For the émigrés, the experience of Weimar and totalitarianism was determinative and came close to confirming the idea that in Germany, as in Athens and Rome, liberalism was the manifestation of political decline and the threshold of tyranny. No matter how much individuals like Strauss and Marcuse might disagree on various grounds, they were at one in extending the analogy to contemporary politics in the United States. And even their specific critiques of liberalism were not all that different. For U.S. political scientists also, the rise of totalitarianism and its attendant ideologies during the 1930s, as well as the domestic problem of rationalizing the conflict between government and the economic enterprise, indicated a need to rearticulate and ground the principles of liberal democracy. If a sense of crisis regarding liberalism, in theory and practice, had not been part of the world of political science, the arguments of the émigrés would likely not have carried the weight that they did.
On both sides of the controversy, however, there continued to be an alienating displacement of the issues. In the case of the émigrés, there was a philosophization of their experience and a projection of the analysis onto recalcitrant political circumstances in the United States as well as the ambiguous screen of world history. This produced an estrangement between academic political theory and politics that has plagued the subsequent evolution of the field. The defense of liberalism among political scientists also became oblique. Either it became the validation of an image that was not easily related to political realities, or it took the form of a philosophy of science, conceptual frameworks, and empirical findings that often seemed to confirm the existence and efficacy of liberal society.

The debate about relativism was also originally grounded in a practical issue that was eventually obscured by the philosophical formulation of the problem. This was the problem of the relationship between academic and public discourse or between philosophy, political theory, and political science on the one hand and politics on the other. This concern about the authority of political inquiry and the intellectuals who engaged in it was equally prominent in the work of both the émigrés and the practitioners of traditional American political science, but the responses were different.

Although relativism, as a philosophical problem, may arise in reaction to crises in substantive practices such as science and politics, it more basically and frequently reflects a crisis in the understanding of the relationship between first- and second-order discourses, that is, between, for example, academic political theory and politics. It is a problem in part because second-order inquiry conceives its mission as the proprietary one of discovering, validating, or explicating the grounds of judgment in the activity it has appropriated as its subject matter. But the problem is often only tangentially one of the possibility and integrity of practical judgment. The pursuit of a solution to the problem of relativism is a quest for a comprehensive answer to the infinitely complex and contextually diverse questions attending the nexus between theory and practice. It most essentially reflects a crisis in the self-image of political theory and the foundations of its claims to knowledge.

The world of the émigrés was one of not only political but intellectual and professional insecurity, and the problem of relativism was a philosophical expression of their anxiety. The question of the authority of academic inquiry was an important concern for political science, but there were several reasons why the discipline tended not to perceive relativism as a threat. Easton’s remedy for the decline of political theory, for example, called for the reconstitution of value theory without jettisoning the liberal belief in the relativity of values and their emotive nontranscendental basis. One reason that political science was able to absorb the issue of relativism was because it was an essential part of the pragmatic liberal creed of fallibility and progress in both
scientific inquiry and politics. But the liberal science of politics had its own grounds of certainty.

There was, first of all, the belief that history validated liberalism and that liberal values were embedded in the basic institutions of U.S. politics. Relativism never was taken as implying that one value was as good as another but only that values reflected contexts and perspectives. Furthermore, certainty was to be achieved through science. Although science could not yield values as such, it seemed to select, confirm, and discredit them in various ways, and, again, there was the belief that the logic and procedures of science and liberal democracy were inherently mutually supportive and that both rested on a pragmatic notion of truth and the eschewal of absolutist speculation. Finally, political science was, much more than the emerging autonomous enterprise of political theory, an established disciplinary practice with its substantive criteria of judgment and, despite continuing concern about its public role and possibilities, a sense of practical efficacy and professional identity. It was, consequently, less daunted by the philosophical phantom of relativism that haunted émigré political theorists.

The discipline of political science constituted a context that profoundly and singularly shaped the institutional form and ideational content of political theory. Political theory, in turn, was deeply implicated in some of the most fundamental changes that took place in political science, including both the behavioral and postbehavioral revolutions. Today, political theory has largely retreated from an involvement with, let alone critique of, political science, and political science has, for the most part, afforded political theory the ultimate disdain of pure tolerance. This situation has allowed many important issues, both explicit and implicit, to slide into obscurity or to become, as in the case of liberalism and relativism, detached from the practical concerns that originally generated them. Professional pressures, under the guise of intellectual principle, continue to push in the direction of separatism, but the results are debilitating. Both political science and political theory have been diminished. The former has lost its most important critical and reflective dimension, and the latter has lost its congenital and maybe most authentic field of action.

REFERENCES


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