

Introduction: The Problem of the Passions

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The passions and politics have not always been at odds—there was a time when the two languages seemed to complement one another and effortlessly flow together. Any reader of Plutarch’s *Lives* will be familiar with the way duelling passions set the action of his political biographies in motion. No Plutarchan subject lacks a love of honour (*philotimia*), but honour is risky since it may attract envy (*phthonos*) rather than emulation (*zelos*). The statesman will need hope (*elpis*) to motivate his undertakings and see them through to completion, but also fear (*phobos*) to keep him from hubris. Anger (*orge*) can be a powerful goad, though in excess it is blinding, while apathy (*apatheia*) has a cooling effect that is clarifying in moderation, yet it harbours the potential to sink the agent into a slumber from which he will awake only after the opportune moment has passed.¹

In Western societies today, we no longer trust the language of the passions to state the truth about political phenomena. We believe public affairs should be subject to rule of law, not the irrational private whims of politicians, and we expect decent political actors—from voters to public officials—to conduct themselves dispassionately. Even when confronted by bad behaviour in politics, we tend to prefer the exact if indiscriminate language of ‘power’ and ‘interest’ to the subtle taxonomies that come from reading public words and deeds against the long index of the passions. It is true, as Mark Philp points out in our interview in this volume (pp. 81-107), that the discourse of corruption remains perhaps the last acknowledged preserve of the passions in modern liberal democracies. But in a sense this is the greatest testament to our belief that we have successfully purged the passions from public life: the passions have become politics’ other.

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¹ Plutarch, *Parallel Lives*, 2 vols., trans. J. Dryden, rev. A. H. Clough (New York: Modern Library, 2001).

How did this transformation come about? What was lost and gained as a consequence? How should we interpret the passions and their relation to the political realm—and what are the ramifications for us as interpreters? The papers collected in this volume offer a set of answers to these questions, and though they are not likely to settle them definitively, they do take some initial steps toward clarifying our understanding. The contributions come in a variety of forms and genres—a lecture, research articles, an interview, and reviews—but each takes up in its own way the question of how human beings are shaped, as persons and communities, by the complex interaction of their affective and social natures.

A longstanding theme in the historiography of the passions and politics has been the depiction of the early modern period as a turning-point. This was a time when European thinkers both rediscovered the political power of the passions (for good or ill) and set out to order, direct, and control them in unprecedented ways. In *The Passions and the Interests* (1977), Albert Hirschman famously argued that early modern thinkers from Mandeville to Montesquieu pioneered a method of sublimating dangerous antisocial passions into relatively innocuous ‘interests’ whose conflict would both become definitive of the sphere of civil society and set it on a course of perpetual economic improvement.² Hirschman traced one thread, but there are others, and two are explored here, in papers initially presented at the *Politics & Poetics* conference on ‘Politics and Envy’ held in Oxford on 11-12 August 2022.

In an extended close reading of Machiavelli’s *Discourses on Livy*, Rebecca McCumbers Flavin (‘Machiavelli, Envy, and the Corrupt Republic’, 51-80) provides a much-needed reassessment of that thinker’s ambiguous political legacy through a consideration of his largely neglected views about envy. The *Discourses* are the traditional proof-text for commentators who interpret Machiavelli as a civic republican, and Flavin takes Machiavelli’s republican sympathies seriously. She shows how the *Discourses* aim to provide remedies for forms of political corruption, including envy, that can destabilize republics and render them susceptible to tyranny. And Machiavelli’s counsels for overcoming envy stick to that republican program, at least in part: he tries to moderate the ambitions of prospective

² Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism Before Its Triumph*, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997 [1977]).

tyrants, and he advocates for institutional and legal mechanisms that will promote stability. Yet he is also painfully clear, as Flavin demonstrates, that the only guaranteed remedy for envy—especially in corrupt republics that lack adequate constitutional checks—is to ‘eliminate the envious’ by any means necessary (51). This sounds less like the republican Machiavelli of recent vintage and more like the notorious ‘Machiavel’ whose established reputation Leo Strauss was only repeating when he called him a ‘teacher of evil’ (52). How to make sense of these political counsels and intellectual legacies at apparent cross-purposes? Flavin concludes on an ironic note when she points out that Machiavelli’s own advice, if followed, would tend to make ‘mistrust endemic, effectively rendering his own strategies for eradicating envy unworkable’ (80). Her argument helps us reconcile the Machiavelli of *The Prince* and the *Discourses*, the apologist for tyrants and the republican patriot, by showing how his response to the problem of envy is consistent between them, even if it is not what our theories lead us to expect.

Flavin’s essay presents Machiavelli as standing in an ambiguous relation to modern liberal democracy, of which he has sometimes been cited as a forerunner. On the one hand, his overriding aim of political stability is one that liberal democracy shares, and many of the institutional mechanisms he devises for it—particularly their mitigating effect on the passions—bear a strong resemblance to the procedures of modern constitutionalism. On the other hand, the fact that Machiavelli could never disentangle constitutionalism, in his own mind, from the necessity of ferocious cruelty, suggests an undercurrent of violence present in the modern project. And this duality is not unique to Machiavelli’s thought. The anxiety that the liberal state is not as neutral and peaceful as it purports to be has gained credibility in recent years, as poststructuralist and postcolonial critics of liberal empire point out the selective application and, more importantly, the intrinsic limits of liberal ideology.

Samuel Piccolo takes up these issues in his reflections on John Locke, James Tully, and North American indigenous thought (‘Modern Constitutionalism, Treaty Federalism, Indigenous Peoples, and the Problem of Envy’, 21-50). Tully is an example of a scholar who has wholly accepted the postcolonial narrative about liberal constitutionalism’s hypocritical intolerance of non-liberal others. His particular focus has been on how the political thought of John Locke,

with its basis in individual property rights, set the stage for subsequent (and ongoing) conflicts between North American indigenous peoples and liberal states in the U.S. and Canada. In place of the social contract and state-of-nature theories that undergird the American and Canadian constitutions, Tully proposes to substitute an anti-foundationalist, constructivist, postmodern multiculturalism that he calls ‘strange multiplicity’ or ‘treaty federalism’ (25-29). Piccolo believes that we should take Tully’s critical argument seriously, but he questions Tully’s solution, and exposing its weaknesses leads him back to Locke.

What Tully misses, Piccolo argues, is that Locke’s political theory was developed in part as a response and corrective to the problem of the passions, particularly envy or ‘covetousness’. The conflicts that arise from covetousness are one of the factors that motivate Lockean subjects to exit the state of nature, but Locke does not repudiate the acquisitive passions, and he notoriously disparages the ‘Indians in America’ who seem to lack them. Rather, as Piccolo puts it, Locke thinks it is ‘good ... that we are desirous for *more*, because the production of *more* is what leads to the progressive improvement of humankind’s estate’ (32). The social compact does not put an end to envy, but seeks to mitigate its excesses and direct its energy to productive ends through ‘a single authoritative definition of property rights and a constitutional government with the political authority to enforce those rights’ (33).

This idea, that ‘envy (among other passions) is a problem to which constitutional government is the solution’ (34), has echoed down through the subsequent liberal tradition from Kant to Rawls. Yet Tully, in his critique of Locke and his legacies, overlooks the theme altogether, and this raises the possibility that his substitute for modern constitutionalism—by eliminating institutional checks on the acquisitive passions—will unleash the potential for violent conflict. Piccolo points to cases of civil strife in postcolonial Africa as examples of the disorder that can arise when legal authorities and constitutional norms are suddenly suspended in the course of casting off imperial rule (39-40). The irony, for Piccolo, is that there are more prudent alternatives available to Tully than *fiat iustitia, et pereat mundus*. Specifically, there are ways of counteracting the anti-social passions, including envy, other than liberal constitutionalism. And one of these is not only contemplated (if only to be rejected)

by Locke, but is also upheld today by the very indigenous peoples whom Tully purports to be defending against liberal imperialism: namely, natural teleology as moral sanction against acquisitiveness. Whereas indigenous traditions affirm this principle as ethically and politically binding in terms occasionally reminiscent of premodern Western traditions (41-46), Tully cannot accept it because it runs against his postmodern hyper-nominalism, conventionalism, and pluralist aversion to ‘metaphysics’.

Contemporary anxiety about the passions in politics—a hesitancy to acknowledge their presence, for fear of what it may imply—is something I discuss further in my interview with Mark Philp (‘The Passions, Real Politics, and the Practice of Political Theory’, 81-107). Philp is one of the leading representatives of the contemporary realist approach to political theory, although his particular brand is more contextualist and sociologically-oriented than others. While he does not discount the importance of ‘ideal theory’ altogether, Philp has a strong aversion to abstraction and a suspicion that many theories are so out of touch with the character of concrete political phenomena that they cannot be meaningfully implemented, even if given the chance. Our interview is wide-ranging, but one consistent theme is that efforts to establish political legitimacy are hampered by overly theoretical, legalistic, and rule-oriented approaches to the problem that tend to level differences of culture and custom as well as the complex personalities of political agents. ‘Political things aren’t just abstract commitments that we all hold. They’re things we feel on the pulses’ (83), Philp says. This means that any potential political settlement must take into account the full range of contextual constraints on individual agency, of which human beings’ passionate and embodied character is one.

This conviction has led Philp to reevaluate contemporary political discourse surrounding ‘corruption’, which he thinks is often more innocuous, and sometimes more dangerous, than Western publics’ overly moralized outlook recognizes (90-92). While few, for example, would question the need for public officials to act ‘impartially’, the definition of partiality is itself political and naturally varies across communities. What is considered ‘greedy’, ‘selfish’, and ‘unfair’ in one context may be regarded as ordinary behaviour or even extraordinary virtue in another context, as Philp illustrates with a telling example from Kenya (90). ‘Corruption is not always the worst

problem. And often it's not corruption that is the problem', he argues—it's the particular harms done by public officials responding to the demands of their context, whether or not they are labelled 'corrupt' (92). Yet this creates a problem for contemporary liberal theory, which 'tends to treat the public as uniform' (96) and insist on uniform measures like state sovereignty or rule of law, even in circumstances where giving ground to non-political modes of social organization would better serve political order by strengthening it within its narrow remit.

If Philp is concerned with how our perceptions of the passions affect us politically, Rémi Brague is preoccupied with our self-perception as persons ('My Humble Self', 8-20). 'Medieval authors harp upon arguments like, "we were made out of a filthy drop of semen", "we were born between blood and shit"', he tells us (12). A contemporary reader may scoff at the apparent self-hatred in such notions, but Brague warns us that with the rise of modern disdain for such attitudes came a corresponding loss of access to the virtue of humility. Nor has modern science—with its discovery of evolution and other 'humiliations'—been able to reverse this trend, since the 'enlightenment' of scientific knowledge is always contrasted with 'benighted' common sense and thus 'conceal[s] a boundless pride' (16). Humility is a 'basic virtue', in Brague's terms, a kind of 'virtue of the virtues' that predisposes us to pursue goodness by reminding us that we are 'wanting, that virtues have to be got, that they are there waiting for me, that I am concerned and entrusted with the task of acquiring them' (14). Without humility, human relations to the natural world, to history, and to God become corrupted by an attitude that instrumentalizes anything and everything external to the ego. If Piccolo recommends a humble attitude toward nature and its purposes in order to overcome the pathologies of envy, and Philp encourages a humble outlook on the varieties of political possibility in context, Brague carries the insight deeper into our self-identity as persons. What it means to exist as a being with first-person experience of a third-person world, in Husserl's formulation, is to 'accept what offers itself in intuition, such as it gives itself'. For Brague (following a clue from Heidegger) this 'as it gives itself' means *with humility*: 'the given should not be taken regardless of its limits, but only inside the sacred precinct in which it gives itself' (20). To do otherwise is to make ourselves something less than persons.

If there is a single theme uniting the contributions to this volume, it is that we have not yet come to terms with the disruption in our attitudes toward the passions that was brought about by modern politics. Contemporary liberal theorists are not unaware of the problem,³ but the papers presented here are sceptical of their solutions for a number of reasons. Flavin suggests that, if Machiavelli is an exemplar in any regard, there may be an appetite for violence lurking behind the modern demand for political stability. Piccolo endorses this notion by pointing to the challenge of accommodating indigenous peoples within liberal constitutional frameworks, though he cautions against counter-productive post- or hyper-modern solutions and suggests looking for guidance to surviving premodern traditions instead. Philp can agree here that we are more likely to arrive at satisfactory political settlements by investigating the practices already in use rather than conjuring theoretical panaceas. As Brague in the end makes explicit, the passions and politics will never come to an agreement until we have the humility to acknowledge them.

This volume concludes with a series of review essays on similar topics in affect-theory, from envy to hope, and extending analysis of the sociable passions into the economic realm. These contributions speak for themselves but also for others, and I won't try to summarize them here. But I do owe a number of humble acknowledgments. First, to David Frisch, who helped me reconceive what *Politics & Poetics* could be and helped me organize our 2022 conference in Oxford. Second, to Joel Byman, who worked tirelessly on the editing, layout, and publication of these papers down to (and a bit beyond) the end. Finally, I owe a debt of gratitude to Dominic Burbidge, who invited me to edit this issue of *Politics & Poetics* and entrusted me with the resources to make it excellent. His sound judgment is reflected wherever this volume succeeds.

³ See John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), Pt. III; Martha Nussbaum, *Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).