Symposium: What is Political?

Introduction

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Twentieth-century political theory tended to insist on the autonomy of politics from other domains of human thought and action. In an ideologically fragmented age, preoccupation with 'the' political (even while assigning it radically divergent meanings) notably transcended divisions of language, method, and nationality. Carl Schmitt's definition in terms of the antithesis between friend and enemy was only the most notorious instance of a wider fixation.[1] The Weimar crisis propelled to prominence at least two more thinkers who interpreted politics as a realm apart: Hannah Arendt opposed the political to the social, and explained the rise of European totalitarianism as a product of their confusion.[2] For Leo Strauss, it was politics and philosophy that were locked in intractable quarrel: the cataclysm of the 1940s arose from modern philosophers' denial of this conflict and consequent abdication of political responsibility.[3]

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[1] Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, exp. ed., tr. G. Schwab (University of Chicago Press, 2007 [1932]).

[2] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 2nd ed. (Harcourt Brace, 1973 [1951]); *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. (University of Chicago Press, 1998 [1958]).

[3] Leo Strauss, 'German Nihilism' [1941], ed. D. Janssens & D. Tanguay, *Interpretation* 26.3 (1999), 353-378; 'The Three Waves of Modernity' in *An Introduction to Political Philosophy: Ten Essays by Leo Strauss*, ed. H. Gildin (Wayne State University

Rival ideas of the political and its opposites continued to proliferate in the postwar era, and not only among those who fell under Schmitt's influence. John Rawls rescued the social contract tradition from antifoundationalist critique by declaring liberalism 'political not metaphysical.'[4] Jürgen Habermas and Norberto Bobbio followed suit in identifying the public sphere with pluralism, equality, and human rights.[5] For an array of radical democrats in the mould of Sheldon Wolin and Chantal Mouffe, meanwhile, politics became the locus of popular sovereignty over and against liberal norms.[6] All of these figures have their followers today, and their schools of thought have become canonical. The claim running across their otherwise divergent oeuvres is that politics is radically separate from other spheres of life—that it possesses integrity only when free for autonomous self-direction—and that failure to recognize this may have disastrous political consequences. The reduction of politics to applied morality and metaphysics on the one hand, the foreclosure of the moral and metaphysical horizon by its absorption into politics on the other, remain the dominant anxieties of political theorists on left and right. The agonist critique of political moralism and its obfuscation of power relations has also retained its bipartisan crossover appeal.

Yet there are signs of a growing weariness with the concept of the political. Contemporary realists such as Raymond Geuss and Mark Philp advocate for a contextual approach that relativizes the distinction between public and private and downgrades political order to one among many in the multidimensional social matrix.[7] Critics of

Press, 1989 [1975]), 81-98.

[4] John Rawls, 'Justice as Fairness: Political Not Metaphysical', *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 14 (1985), 223-252; *Political Liberalism*, exp. ed. (Columbia University Press, 2005 [1993]).

[5] Jürgen Habermas, *Theory and Practice*, tr. J. Viertel (Beacon Press, 1973); *Between Facts and Norms*, tr. W. Rehg (MIT Press, 1996); *The Inclusion of the Other*, ed. C. Cronin & P. De Greiff (MIT Press, 1998); Norberto Bobbio, *The Future of Democracy*, tr. R. Griffin, ed. R. Bellamy (University of Minnesota Press, 1987); *Democracy and Dictatorship*, tr. P. Kennedy (Polity Press, 1989); *Liberalism and Democracy*, tr. M. Ryle & K. Soper (Verso, 1990).

[6] Sheldon Wolin, *Politics and Vision*, exp. ed. (Princeton University Press, 2004 [1960]); *Fugitive Democracy: And Other Essays*, ed. N. Xenos (Princeton University Press, 2016); Chantal Mouffe, *The Return of the Political* (Verso, 1993); *The Democratic Paradox* (Verso, 2000); *On the Political* (Routledge, 2005).

[7] Raymond Geuss, *Public Goods, Private Goods* (Princeton University Press, 2001); *Philosophy and Real Politics* (Princeton University Press, 2008); Mark Philp, *Political*

'Cold War liberalism' argue that an antiprogressive and utopophobic conception of politics—which value pluralists such as Karl Popper and Isaiah Berlin contrasted with 'social engineering'—has hampered welfare states, exacerbated inequality, and undermined projects of emancipatory social change.[8] In short: when politics is reduced to 'the political', results are often less-than-ideal for those who don't hold concrete institutional power.

The political is on its backfoot for the first time since the 1930s, but is it likely to disappear any time soon? And can we really do without it? There are reasons to question the critics' strongest claims. The contextualist critique, for instance, sometimes seems to shrug away 'the' political with the retort that even if politics were a universal phenomenon—which it is not—there would still be as many concepts of the political as there have been political communities, or political theories. In one way, that's perfectly true. But it also seems to beg an easy definition of politics as the 'architectonic' human activity that provides every other with its end.[9] What politics looks like will vary by time and place, but wherever justifications for collective action reach a stopping-point, *that* is political. This isn't the only definition of politics, but right or wrong, contextualization doesn't threaten it. John Locke showed greater political acumen in his early *quaestio disputata* on government than the *Second Treatise* when he related Álvaro Semedo's anecdote about a community of Chinese villagers who valued the 'plait of hair which, by national custom, they wore on their heads' even above their lives. The custom had no civil significance until a conqueror threatened to end it—then it became the commu-

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Conduct (Harvard University Press, 2008); 'The Passions, Real Politics, and the Practice of Political Theory: An Interview', with Connor Grubaugh, *Politics & Poetics* 5 (2023), 81-107.

[8] Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (Princeton University Press, 2013 [1945]); Isaiah Berlin, 'Does Political Theory Still Exist?' in P. Laslettt & W. Runciman, eds., *Philosophy, Politics, and Society* (Blackwell, 1962), 1-33; 'The Pursuit of the Ideal' [1988] and 'Two Concepts of Liberty' [1958] in *The Proper Study of Mankind*, ed. H. Hardy & R. Hausheer (Chatto & Windus, 1997), 1-16, 191-242; Jan-Werner Müller, 'Fear and Freedom: On 'Cold War Liberalism'', *European Journal of Political Theory* 7.1 (2008), 45-64; Samuel Moyn, *Liberalism Against Itself: Cold War Intellectuals and the Making of Our Times* (Yale University Press, 2023).

[9] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, tr. R. Bartlett & S. Collins (University of Chicago Press, 2011), I.1-2, 1094a10-16, a27-b8.

nity's *raison d'être* as well as its *raison de mourir*.[10] Contrary to Locke's later definition of 'Political Power' as the 'Right of making Laws with Penalties of Death, and consequently all less Penalties',[11] this case of sudden and extreme politicization had nothing to do with legitimate authority, sovereign legislation, or criminal punishment. Anything can become political if it rises to the level of a reason for collective action with the power to defeat—and reorder—other reasons.

Critical genealogy of the concept of the political also seems to rest on a presupposition. Even if Cold War liberals were wrong that utopianism is antipolitical, it doesn't follow that politics *is* properly utopian. Genealogists do not deal in eternal verities, so there is no use disputing the argument on essentialist terrain. But there is a whiff of a fallacy in their conviction that 'our' (modern, western, liberal) political tradition either *can* or *ought* to make room for utopian forms of thought and action that have been, in their opinion, too long subject to academic mockery. Exposing the contingency of utopianism's postwar debunking still brings us up short of neo-utopian politics, whether we travel the route of historical excavation and recovery or normative political theory. The suppressed premise is precisely a conception of the political. Recent studies of Karl Marx's 'political theory' can be read as attempts to compensate for this gap.[12] So can reappropriations of Rousseau and the French Revolution.[13] But the fact that they needed to be written in the first place suggests not only that we are still wary of political radicalism for fear of where it may end (which is almost a definition of radicalism), but also that we continue to perceive revolution as violating the proper bounds of politics, whether justly and advisedly or not.

Criticisms of the political as we know it undoubtedly land some punches, and the time is ripe for rethinking its relationship to nature,

[10] John Locke, *Political Essays*, ed. M. Goldie (Cambridge University Press, 1997), 59-60.

[11] John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. P. Laslett, 2nd ed. (Cambridge University Press, 1988), II.i.3.

[12] See William Clare Roberts, *Marx's Inferno: The Political Theory of Capital* (Princeton University Press, 2018); Bruno Leipold, *Citizen Marx: Republicanism and the Formation of Karl Marx's Social and Political Thought* (Princeton University Press, 2024).

[13] See Helena Rosenblatt, *The Lost History of Liberalism* (Princeton Univerisity Press 2018); Annelien de Dijn, *Freedom: An Unruly History* (Harvard University Press); Emma Planinc, *Regenerative Politics* (Columbia University Press, 2024).

religion, ethics, and history. But the risk in banishing the concept all together is that it may obscure and mystify a set of shared experiences that we—at least in the European tradition—have called 'politics' since antiquity. If the experience of politics is something we value, then we will need to draw on the full resources of that tradition to resist new threats to the political arising in our time. How should we, living in the wreckage of the twentieth century, reassess and reappropriate the concept of the political? Answers to the question *What is political?*—including those that reject any notion of 'the' political to begin with—have fundamental implications for all aspects of social and political theory. Yet we seem no closer to comprehending the concept or its history than a century ago. Not only do aspects of the twentieth-century debate remain to be studied and criticized, but controversies over the history of thought in which the debate was often conducted also remain unresolved. If 'politics' is derived from *polis*, what is its significance (if any) for non-western societies? Is modernity's horizon ultimately political—or does modernity threaten the political with extinction? What will be the fate of the political in a world of digital technology and biotechnological enhancement? How does politics relate to religion, the secularization process, and its postmodern crackup?

The difficulty for anyone seeking answers to these questions and a more profound understanding of politics is that it is impossible to evaluate—much less choose between—rival approaches to the political without also committing oneself to the pursuit of the problem and its solution. We can't think about how to think about politics without thinking about politics. The papers in this symposium, originally presented at the 2024 *Politics & Poetics* conference on the political, seize this dilemma by the horns. While each seeks to transcend the concepts of the political we have inherited from the twentieth century, none anticipates the transcendence—or oblivion—of politics per se. Instead, they call for reimmersion in the best of our political traditions and attentiveness to the mounting crises of the political in our time. If politics has a future, it depends on this.