

The Crisis of Political Theory

An Inquiry into
Contemporary Thought

Om Bakshi

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THE CRISIS OF POLITICAL THEORY

**To my mother
and
Vijay and Surinder**

Preface

This is an attempt to study the state of political theory in our times. I have tried to show that in the English-speaking countries political theory, as traditionally practised, is in crisis. Of course, this is not a claim that is being advanced for the first time. Particularly in the 1950s and 60s, it was widely held that political theory was dead or dying. But this view did not go unchallenged. And even those who had at one stage proclaimed the demise of political theory, later felt that they had been rather hasty in coming to this conclusion. In any case, it was argued, the application of the techniques of linguistic analysis to the concepts of politics had led to the revival of political theory—so what was once held responsible for killing political theory was later given the credit for reviving it! But apparently this did not settle the issue. Scholars have continued to find it necessary to reassure themselves on the state of political theory. They have claimed its revival when, for example, philosophers turned to the study of substantive normative issues, or scholars began to take interest in matters of public concern such as abortion, divorce, and so on. It is not possible here to go into details. What should be noted is that in spite of the oft-repeated claim that political theory is flourishing, uneasiness remains. This is why, I think, an attempt can still be made to assess the present state of political theory.

An assessment of this kind is inevitably based on a certain view of the nature of traditional political theory. And there is no doubt that the view developed in this work is only one interpretation. It is my hope, however, that this interpretation will contribute towards a better understanding of the work of traditional political theorists and the history of political theory.

I would, however, like to point out that my interest in the state of political theory is not primarily historical. Rather it arises from the feeling that contemporary scholars have not been able to approach the study of politics meaningfully. And this seems to be largely the result of a rejection of the assumptions which have through the ages provided the basis for the study of politics. I believe that the approach developed by traditional political thinkers would help us

today in studying society and politics meaningfully.* It is, of course, possible to provide a more elaborate defence of the traditional approach than the one that has been offered in this work. But, I think, for the purposes of our inquiry it will suffice.

This work is a substantially revised version of my doctoral dissertation submitted to the University of Delhi. I have great pleasure in acknowledging the debt I owe my teacher and friend Professor Randhir Singh who supervised this research. I have discussed my work with him at every stage, benefiting immensely from his wisdom and kindness. Indeed I have learnt so much from him that I would like to think of this work as a tribute to him. I am extremely grateful to Sir Isaiah Berlin for his detailed comments and for providing encouragement. Meenakshi helped me in revising this work.

I am also indebted to various institutions which have supported and encouraged me in my research. SGTB Khalsa College, University of Delhi, gave me leave of absence from my lectureship. The Indian Council of Social Science Research and the University Grants Commission granted me fellowships.

New Delhi
10 August, 1987

Om Bakshi

* This does not mean that the traditional approach is beyond criticism. Indeed we can adopt it only after taking notice of the critique developed in the Postscript.

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CHAPTER I

The Nature of Political Theory

Like so much else of the Western intellectual heritage, political theory also originated in ancient Greece. It began with the reflections of Socrates and the sophists on politics in the fifth century before Christ. And it was in the writings of Plato and Aristotle that the form which it was to retain for a long time crystallized. Despite vast changes in social and political life since its inception, political theory is said to have 'maintained its standing as a subject of perennial philosophical concern'.¹ However, barely a decade after Sabine had thus proclaimed the perennality of interest in it, the decline of political theory was proclaimed. From 1950 onwards, it was increasingly argued that political theory, which had had an impressive tradition extending more than two thousand years, had declined. For the next two decades at least there was intense discussion and debate on the state of political theory in our times.

An inquiry into the arguments advanced in the course of the debate would show that there has been no agreement among the participants on the nature of political theory. This is one reason for the divergence in views on the state of political theory. It is clear that an assessment of the state of political theory would depend on the conception of political theory with which one begins. In fact, the whole question of the state of political theory could be reduced to a matter of definition. It has, for example, been argued by some that the fear that political philosophy is coming to an end is 'based on a complete misunderstanding'.² For what those who have expressed this fear have in mind is that philosophers are no longer interested in the normative questions which arise in politics. But even if traditionally philosophers have been interested in these questions, these, we are told, are not properly philosophical questions. The task of political philosophy is to analyse the language employed in political discourse. In this way, simply by redefining political philosophy in a manner that excludes inquiries traditionally made,

the whole debate on the state of political theory has been shown to be pointless. It is for this reason that we should begin with a discussion on the nature of political theory as it has been conceived by political theorists in the past.

Though political theory is one of the oldest subjects of study, there is no agreement on the name itself. It is interesting that Aristotle did not even consider the study of politics to be a theoretical inquiry. Today scholars use the term political theory to describe the works of thinkers like him. Though some prefer the term political philosophy to the term political theory, a number of scholars do not distinguish between them. In his well-known article on the nature of political theory, Sabine, for example, loosely uses both the terms, political theory and political philosophy, to refer to the works of past political thinkers.³ The journal *Political Theory* is described as 'An International Journal of Political Philosophy'. However, there has been a strong tendency in recent thought to regard as theoretical only such studies on politics as purport to fulfil an 'explanatory' function. This has led a large number of scholars to prefer the term political philosophy to describe the classics, which are widely believed to be essentially works on moral theory. There are others who argue that past thinkers not only philosophized about normative issues in politics but also sought to describe and explain political phenomena. According to them, a traditional work on politics is a blend of political philosophy and political science. Whereas some prefer the term political theory, others prefer the term political thought to describe the works of past political thinkers.

It could be argued that this disagreement among political scientists reflects the confusion about the kind of subject political theory is. But it should also be realized that in recent years there has been intense controversy over the nature of political inquiry itself. A number of attempts have been made to define the proper way of thinking about politics. It has, for example, been argued that the task of political theory is to perform an 'explanatory' function. Followers of contemporary philosophy define political philosophy as a second order inquiry which is concerned with the analysis of the language employed in political discourse. The advantage of this approach is that it yields a consistent system, sharply demarcating the area of study and defining the methods of inquiry. With this approach, however, the nature of political theory becomes a matter of definition. It is obvious that the field and the method of inquiry

will depend on the definition which one accepts. It has thus been argued that this approach could be used 'to justify practically any form of political theory' and reject others.⁴ Though such an approach may yield consistency, there is also the possibility that it may in the bargain sacrifice richness of content. Take, for instance, the concept of political philosophy developed under the impetus of the movement which has dominated English philosophy in recent years. According to it, the task of political philosophy is to analyse the concepts and styles of reasoning which occur in political discourse. It is admitted that political philosophers have traditionally been concerned with the study of normative questions which arise in politics, but it is argued that this inquiry has nothing to do with philosophy proper. In this way one first postulates a conception of political philosophy and then proceeds to interpret the work of traditional political philosophers in the light of such a conception. It is perhaps difficult to question an attempt to redefine the nature of political theory, especially at a time when the traditional mode of political inquiry has been questioned and the right way of thinking about politics itself is an important issue in contemporary thought. But one may wonder whether it is legitimate to interpret the work of past political theorists in terms of a preconceived notion of political theory.

A number of scholars have sought to derive the nature of political theory from the history of political theory. Sabine is one of the main exponents of the historical approach. He finds it 'usually unprofitable to argue, speculatively and *a priori*, about the form or the purposes that a branch of science or philosophy ought to have'. In his view the question about the nature of political theory 'ought to be answered descriptively, since in fact political philosophy is whatever philosophers have thought about civil society and called by that name'.⁵ But it could be argued that this approach is too deferential to tradition. Cobban, who also prefers to elicit the nature of political theory from the way past political theorists wrote on politics, rather than 'to *invent* political theory', epitomizes the attitude of deference when he asks us to be 'modest enough' to believe that the traditional mode of theorizing about politics is the right way of considering the problems of political theory.⁶ At a time when the traditional style of theorizing about politics has come in for sharp criticism and there is a strong sentiment in favour of making a break with it, it is difficult to defend a notion of political inquiry simply by saying

that it has been adopted by thinkers since times immemorial. In other words, the question of the validity or otherwise of the proper way of thinking about politics cannot be disposed of by arguing that this is how political thinkers have traditionally approached the study of politics. It is, therefore, necessary to keep the question of the nature of the traditional style of theorizing about politics separate from the question of the justification of this style.

But still the historical approach is not free from difficulties, for there is no uniformity in the tradition of political theory. One reason is that through the ages the basis for approaching the study of politics has not remained unchanged. By defining the nature of knowledge, philosophy provides the conditions for the pursuit of a theoretical study of politics. But in the course of history, the nature of knowledge has often been redefined. Alternative methods and techniques of inquiry have also been proposed. Under the impetus of successive philosophical movements, thus, the basis for approaching the study of politics has altered radically. An historical account of the nature of political theory is, therefore, likely to be incomplete.

Another reason for unevenness in the tradition of political theory is that political thinkers have generally written in response to specific social and political situations. In other words, it is not merely intellectual dissatisfaction with prevailing theories which has led to the development of political theories. Thus, students of past political ideas have sought to understand a political theory by relating it to the circumstances in which it was produced. According to Sabine, for example, 'one of the characteristics' of political theory is that it occurs as a part of or an incident in politics itself.⁷ In every political theory, therefore, there is a reference to 'a specific situation' which one needs to grasp in order to understand what the philosopher is thinking about.

Sabine's argument is connected with his interpretation of the nature of the problems of political theory. According to him, every political theorist has written with a view to solving the problems confronting the prevailing society. Thus the historical situation 'sets a problem to be solved'.⁸ Cobban also accepts this view of the problems of political theory. According to him, Bentham, for example, sought 'to establish a theoretical basis for the legislative and administrative reforms that were urgently needed in *his* day'. Mill 'lived in an age when new social problems called for measures of state action which conflicted with established ideals of individual liberty'.

He therefore attempted 'to reconcile the two demands'.⁹ The implication of perceiving political theory essentially as a response to the problems confronting society, Cobban points out, is that the issues a thinker discussed were 'not chosen arbitrarily, or as a result of some theoretical argument'. Rather, theoretical discussion was 'determined by the actual conditions and problems of the day'. Cobban believes this 'essentially practical' orientation is an important characteristic of political theory. A classical political theorist 'wrote with a practical purpose in mind'. He was 'a party man'.¹⁰ But some students of political theory find it difficult to accept this view, for they believe it obfuscates the distinction between a political theorist and a publicist.¹¹

If we interpret political theory as essentially a response to a historical situation, we are also likely to ignore the continuing concerns which political thinkers of different ages have shared. The dependence of political theory on the historical situation should not, therefore, be over-emphasized. It is true that a political thinker was invariably spurred on by a certain historical situation and the urge to intervene in it, but he never thought of himself as writing a tract merely for his times. Thus, while dealing with issues raised by a historical situation, a political thinker raised questions which were of larger interest. An inquiry into the history of political theory would show that some problems have been repeatedly raised by political theorists in the past. One could refer, for example, to such problems as the nature of the state, reasons for obeying it, the relationship between the individual and the state, the nature of ends in politics, and so on. Not every thinker has been interested in all these problems and the urgency which a particular problem assumed at any given time has also varied. Yet there has been sufficient agreement among traditional political thinkers on the problems of political theory. This has helped to define at least roughly the area of political discourse and to impart a degree of continuity to the tradition of political theory.

A number of scholars have, of course, noted that the problems of political theory abide. Allen, for example, points out that though every age is concerned with certain questions which are peculiar to it, the fundamental questions tend to be asked at all times.¹² In fact, in his opinion, what saves the thought of an age from ephemerality is its attempt to grapple with questions which abide. In the course of history, a number of political thinkers have tried to provide answers

to these questions, none of which have, however, proved completely satisfactory. The problems of political theory remain 'perennial and still unsolved'.¹³ The existence of a number of mutually exclusive solutions to the problems of political theory has, in fact, led scholars like Allen to believe that the problems of political theory are such as to defy satisfactory solution. The fundamental questions of political thought, says Allen, 'remain always the same and always, strictly speaking, unanswered'.¹⁴ His inquiry into the political thought of the sixteenth century shows that it too was 'ultimately concerned with questions no more satisfactorily answered now than they were then'.¹⁵ It is, however, not immediately clear as to why the problems of political theory are fated to remain unsolved. Allen does not take up this question. But this has led some scholars to wonder whether the questions traditionally asked by political philosophers are legitimate questions.¹⁶

It cannot be denied that the traditional political theorist was deeply interested in politics. He wrote with the purpose of solving the social and political problems confronting society. But this was a theoretical exercise for him. A political theorist traced problems to the way the social and political life of society was organized. He inquired whether the principles on which it was organized could be extended to provide the basis for solving problems or whether entirely new principles had to be developed. The normative principles of a thinker were thus closely connected with his understanding of the social and political reality of his times and his assessment of the prevailing principles. Thus, a political theory not only has a normative but also an empirical side. A number of thinkers have, in fact, gone far beyond giving mere descriptive accounts of the prevailing conditions and have sought to develop a more comprehensive understanding of social and political reality. It is these normative and empirical inquiries which separate a political theory from a reform plan on the one hand and a utopia on the other. The study of politics as conceived in the classical tradition is a theoretical exercise different from the pragmatic exercise of a publicist and the utopian exercise of an idealist. In the course of this exercise such questions as the relationship between the individual and the state, the reasons for obeying authority, have been raised. This is because these questions are basic to the way the social and political life of a society is organized and have arisen in all civilized societies. Though there is a tendency to interpret them in a timeless manner, the concrete form

in which these questions have been raised at different times has varied. Since social and political conditions change, the solutions provided at a given time tend to become anachronistic and the need to answer these questions afresh thus arises.

It is clear that traditional political theorists were deeply interested in the normative issues which arise in politics. This has led a large number of scholars to believe that political theories are merely value theories. But it should be realized that political theorists were interested not only in the normative but also in the empirical aspect of politics. And so traditional political theories combined normative inquiry with empirical investigation. Though for purposes of analysis the normative and empirical elements could be separated, they were closely connected in the works of past thinkers. Of course, some thinkers were interested more in offering solutions than in carefully developing empirical theories. The philosophical positions which some adopted also did not prove very helpful in developing an empirical knowledge of politics. But since the primary concern of traditional thinkers was with the solution of problems confronting society, it became necessary for them to inquire into the existing social and political reality. The traditional notion of political inquiry thus enabled a thinker to address himself to the task of developing an empirical understanding of the social and political reality. How far a thinker succeeded in developing an empirical understanding can be known only after studying his writings. But it is necessary to abandon the view that traditional thinkers were not interested in the empirical aspect of politics. Even a thinker like Plato, who is commonly cited in support of the view that traditional thinkers had little interest in the realities of social and political life, was not merely fantasizing. An inquiry would show that his political programme is closely connected with his sociological analysis. In fact, Plato approached 'social phenomena in the spirit of scientific investigation'. One is struck by 'the wealth and detail of his observations' and 'the amazing acuteness of his sociological intuition'. 'He saw things which had not been seen before him, and which were rediscovered only in our time.' An example is 'his emphasis upon the *economic background* of the political life and the historical development' which was later revived by Marx. Indeed, in spite of the fact that Plato did not have the necessary data for theorizing about politics and society, he succeeded in constructing 'an astonishingly realistic theory of society, capable of explaining

the main trends in the historical development of the Greek city-states as well as the social and political forces at work in his own day'.¹⁷

It is, however, important to note that the impulse behind the traditional approach to the study of politics was moral. Traditional political theorists did not theorize in response to problems of theory. In the course of theorizing, they did, of course, contend with prevailing theories. Some of them also sought to work out the implications of a prevailing theory. But political theories have generally been developed in response to problems of social and political life. Political thinkers like Plato and Hobbes were, of course, not concerned with problems which merely raise technical questions such as those which could be solved by adjusting means to the accepted ends. They were primarily concerned with problems which raised issues regarding the normative basis of a given society. These problems have generally been thrown up by social and economic changes in society. The more far-reaching the changes, the greater the sharpness with which questions regarding the normative basis of society have arisen. A number of political theories, such as those of Plato, Hobbes, Marx, and others, have been produced in the midst of profound changes in social and economic reality.

Thus, what distinguishes the task of the political theorist is that social and political conditions change. Whereas the physicist's way of perceiving the world may change, the political theorist's world itself changes in a way that it does not for the physicist. A political theory may therefore be invalidated not only if it does not quite succeed in accounting for the facts; it may also be rendered obsolete if the social and political world in response to which it was developed itself changes. The changes may be such as could be accommodated by adjustments in the existing theory, but they may be so far-reaching as to require a fundamental change in perspective, concepts, and vocabulary. Above all, they may require a reformulation of political principles. In recent years, there has been much criticism of the variety of political theory. It has been argued that, though a number of thinkers have theorized about politics, we do not have a theory of politics which could even remotely be compared to theory in any of the natural sciences such as physics. What we call political theory is 'a collection of individual theories which stand side by side, each one impervious to the impact of new observations and to the advent of new theories'. This has led some

scholars to suggest that political theories of the past were perhaps not meant to perform the 'representative' function which theory performs in the natural sciences.¹⁸ But it should be realized that new theories of politics have been developed in response to changes in social and political reality. Though this renders the history of political theory more a record of successive attempts to theorize about changing reality, it is only in this way that political theory is able to fulfil its theoretical functions meaningfully.

The thrust of the argument is that a political theory should be apprehended in a historical perspective. A number of students of past political ideas have, of course, interpreted political theory as a response to a historical situation. But a certain ambivalence has remained. A leading exponent of the historical approach like Sabine also hesitates particularly in evaluating a political theory in historical terms. A political theory, according to him, should excel not only in 'analysis of a present situation' but also in 'suggestiveness for other situations'.¹⁹ Perhaps the apprehension is that evaluation of a theory in historical terms would mean that it has relevance only for the social and political conditions in which it originated. So he considers it necessary to inquire whether a political theory has been able to 'weave itself into the developing tradition of the subject'. But the apprehension is based on a misunderstanding. For a theory can be evaluated only in terms of the problems it purports to solve. What historians of political thought have, however, generally done is to inquire into the internal consistency of a theory, the range of questions asked, the method of inquiry adopted, the sufficiency of evidence furnished, and so on. While the importance of such an inquiry cannot be overemphasized, it is also necessary to ask whether a thinker was able to develop an empirical understanding of the existing social and political reality and whether he was able to provide a basis for solving the existing social and political problems. This is how the empirical and normative theories of a thinker could be tested.

A number of scholars, however, do not think that historical changes significantly affect the relevance of a political theory. The argument is that political theories are essentially 'ways of looking at man and society'.²⁰ And so the subject matter presents problems which preserve a considerable degree of continuity and similarity from one age to another. Scholars like Plamenatz, who take this position, are not oblivious that social conditions change. They also concede that different political theories reflect these changes.