The Nature of Political Theory

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Dedicated to the memory of
John Petrov Plamenatz,
Chichele Professor of Social and
Political Theory in the
University of Oxford 1967–1975,
by former colleagues and pupils

Contents

Introduction

David Miller and Larry Siedentop

In the last two decades, political theory has re-emerged as a distinct intellectual activity in Britain and the United States. It has developed out of two pre-existing academic traditions—'political thought' as studied in departments of government, and 'political philosophy' as practised in philosophy departments. While drawing on both traditions, it has come to differ from each. It differs from 'political thought' chiefly by being less historical in focus, less given up to examining the development of political ideas through time. Political theory differs from 'political philosophy', on the other hand, because it is less formal and atomistic, less concerned to establish logical relationships between individual political concepts. It does not, indeed, restrict itself to what are now often called 'second-order' questions, questions about the definition and use of the central terms of political argument—terms such as 'authority', 'liberty', and 'justice'. It can (and often does) undertake the revision or extension of purely normative theory, as well as exploring the links between political concepts on the one hand and the changing structure of society on the other.

Political theory is, therefore, an essentially mixed mode of thought. It not only embraces deductive argument and empirical theory, but combines these with normative concerns (in a way that we shall try to elucidate), so acquiring a practical, action-guiding character. This last feature brings its role in some respects close to that of 'ideology' as the word is usually understood. Yet few political theorists would accept that what they do is merely to restate or refine some class ideology or socially influential point of view. Most would hold that the criticism of ideas, far from defending or propagating the interests of particular social groups or classes, is the most effective means of leading such groups or classes to redefine their own interests. Political theorists would prefer to understand their role not as providing a sanction for interests or groups, but as acting as a goad—inducing people to reconsider beliefs previously taken for granted, to notice the fuller implications of their value-commitments, or perhaps to recognize the incompatibility between different goals that they espouse. Implicit in that

view is the idea that a political theorist should be able to move, with confidence and skill, between social conditions and political concepts. That suggests that political theorists should be adept at understanding how concepts are joined together in points of view or ideologies, and how those, in turn, spring out of particular social conditions and help to transform them. This ability to move between meanings or concepts and social conditions—to see how every stable social order necessarily implies widely shared beliefs, but also how those beliefs may contain the seeds of further social change—need not impair, and may in fact promote, advances in strictly normative theory.

To that extent, then, political theory is associated with a more active impulse than either 'the study of political thought' or 'doing political philosophy'. It involves, at least implicitly, the assumption that shaping social and political concepts is also, in the longer run, shaping social and political institutions.

The several modes of thought now combined in political theory were, of course, also joined together in the major works that popularly help to identify the tradition of political thought in the West—Aristotle's *Politics*, Hobbes's *Leviathan*, and Rousseau's *Social Contract*, among others. But until recently these modes were combined in a less self-conscious way, a way which reflected a less advanced division of intellectual labour than we live with today. The growth of self-consciousness about method did not, it should be emphasized, suddenly make it easier to write important books in this 'mixed' mode. On the contrary, the emergence of the distinctions mentioned above probably inhibited thinkers at first, and made it more likely that they would confine themselves to one of the three modes—doing, that is, formal conceptual analysis, 'value-free' empirical theory, or offering relatively brief defences of particular policies or values. Only in the last few years have more ambitious and synthetic works appeared, attempting, albeit with only partial success, to combine the modes—works like Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*, Nozick's *Anarchy, State and Utopia*, Oakeshott's *On Human Conduct*, and Dworkin's *Taking Rights Seriously*.

[1]J. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1972); R. Nozick, *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1974); M. Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1975); R. Dworkin, *Taking Rights Seriously* (London, Duckworth, 1978).

The thirty or forty years before this outburst, the period, say, from the mid-1930s to the early 1970s, might be described as a period of 'regrouping'—a period when the several modes of argument drew apart and took each other's measure, before seeking new ways of combining. No figure loomed larger in the world of Anglo-American political theory during this period than John Plamenatz. Plamenatz, a Fellow of All Souls and then of Nuffield College, later became Chichele Professor of Social and Political Theory in the University of Oxford, a chair he held from 1967 to 1975. His first work, *Consent, Freedom and Political Obligation*, appeared in 1938, and his last, *Karl Marx's Philosophy of Man*, in 1975, the year of his death.[2] Thus Plamenatz's active career as a writer and thinker coincided almost exactly with this 'regrouping', and with the growing self-consciousness about method that accompanied it. Yet at first glance Plamenatz's work may seem to be insulated from the trends which, together, have led to the emergence of 'political theory' out of the earlier 'political thought' and 'political philosophy'. Some indeed have criticized him precisely for not innovating or putting his own point of view directly —for, as it were, 'hiding' among the classical texts of political thought.

That criticism is only partly true. Despite the fact that most of his published writings took the form of commentaries on the ideas of major political thinkers since Machiavelli, Plamenatz's handling of such thinkers was far removed from the conventional historical treatment. His most celebrated book, *Man and Society* published in 1963,[3] is a case in point. Successive chapters of that book reveal Plamenatz holding a conversation with the leading political minds since the Renaissance, a conversation in which he subjects their assumptions and definitions to a rigorous and subtle analysis. He wielded the principle of non-contradiction like a fine scalpel. That resolute probing led Plamenatz largely to disregard the context in which the texts he took up were written—to a point where he was severely criticized by Quentin Skinner and others who, following Pocock and drawing on the hermeneutic tradition, doubted whether concepts and arguments could or should be detached from a particular language that was tied to a place and a time. To such

[2] J. P. Plamenatz, *Consent, Freedom and Political Obligation* (London, Oxford University Press, 1938); *Karl Marx's Philosophy of Man* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1975).

[3] J. P. Plamenatz, *Man and Society*, 2 vols. (London, Longman, 1963).

critics, the apparently historical framework of Plamenatz's analyses was misleading. In their view, the tenor of his first book *Consent, Freedom and Political Obligation*—an attempt to identify inconsistencies in the use of basic political terms and to offer some improved definitions—would be a better guide to the nature of his enterprise. That book does indeed bear the mark of a kind of positivism, the philosophical imprint of the 1930s.

So we have two conflicting views of the work of this leading figure: he is seen on the one hand as relatively detached from the tendencies of his own day, and on the other as exhibiting certain features of the movement that was reshaping philosophical argument, in Oxford and elsewhere. Neither side would contest the extraordinary integrity of Plamenatz's enterprise, or deny the spirit of patient truth-telling which informs his examination of classical writers and texts. But the character of the enterprise is disputed. And that dispute itself throws light on the period of 'regrouping'.

Up to a point *both* views of Plamenatz's work are correct. His relationship to his own age and its intellectual currents was two-sided. Plamenatz reacted against some trends, but was deeply and permanently influenced by others. By looking both at the character of his *œuvre* and at his account of how he understood political theory as an activity, we can begin to understand some of the currents which have shaped political theory since the 1930s.

Perhaps the first thing to notice is the absence of any major *new* ideology, the extent to which disputes about values and concepts could still be placed within a framework of inherited ideologies—notably, Conservatism, Liberalism, and Socialism, which had been bequeathed to the twentieth century by the nineteenth. Of course, refinements within those ideologies took place, variations emerged, and the implications, both theoretical and institutional, of these ideologies were traced further than before. But the lack of any major new ideology—which may in itself have contributed to discussions about the 'end' of ideology in the 1960s—was a striking fact. No doubt, to be fully understood, that fact would have to be related to economic trends as well as political events. But it must also be placed against a specifically intellectual background. Now, arguably, the two most important features of that background in the Anglo-American world were the professionalizing of intellectual life and the prestige of the natural sciences.

The increasing division of labour in the intellectual world paral-

leled, of course, developments in society at large. But that did not make the effect of professionalizing any less important. Perhaps the most obvious consequence of the professionalizing of intellectual life was the felt need for those who thought and wrote to have a 'subject' or a 'field'—an area of concern which could be clearly marked out and contrasted with the areas 'covered' by other subjects. That search for a *raison d'être*, as much institutional as intellectual, powerfully reinforced interest in methodology in the academic world. The search was, moreover, made more urgent by the apparent success of the natural sciences in identifying their province, in holding up a method which yielded undoubted results. 'Method' therefore seemed to be the key to content, the guarantee of results. Positivism—in the sense of a philosophical standpoint that took an empiricist account of explanation in the natural sciences to be definitive, and then held up this account as a paradigm for knowledge generally—became an academic force to conjure with by the 1930s and 1940s. It began to leave a mark on the study of politics, creating strong pressures for a more quantitative and model-based discipline of 'political science'. At the same time it induced philosophers to redefine their role, as one of clarifying and defining the concepts which would then be used in the construction of positive science. The impact of this redefinition on political philosophy could be seen in the work of writers such as Weldon, who, in *The Vocabulary of Politics* (1953), saw his task as one of eliminating the verbal muddles which hindered the progress of positive political science.[4]

These two tendencies—the professionalizing of intellectual life and the impact of the natural scientific model on both social science and philosophy—form the backdrop against which Plamenatz's career at Oxford must be set. One of the reasons why his work is so interesting, and why examining that *œuvre* throws so much light on the emergence of political theory, now becomes apparent. Plamenatz strongly resisted the professionalizing trends at work, while at the same time accepting a philosophical position that regarded social science, interpreted in a positivist manner, as relatively unproblematic. Hence his writing displays two contrasting features. On the one hand, he disliked the move into professional jargon, a move towards 'special' languages which

[4] T. D. Weldon, *The Vocabulary of Politics* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1953).

might serve the interests not so much of truth as of the 'profession'. The standard of clarity and simplicity that he set himself was drawn from a much earlier period, especially from French writers of the 'great' seventeenth century, writers such as Pascal. The idea that political theorizing should continue to be an activity in which one man talks to another—in which that man looks deeply into himself as well as at the world around him—informed his writings more and more. He detested the pretentious. On the other hand, Plamenatz took it for granted that science itself was a relatively straightforward undertaking. He also assumed, as we shall shortly see, that there were no radical difficulties in applying the scientific model of explanation to the social world. In that sense, Plamenatz's work and conception of his own activity rested on a point of view that contained an element of positivism.

The grip of positivism on the social sciences has since been greatly weakened. This is due in part to the important debate about social explanation which Peter Winch, drawing on the later Wittgenstein, helped to create with his book *The Idea of a Social Science*.[5] That debate involved drawing a more careful distinction between explanation in terms of rules or reasons and causal explanation, as well as raising the important question whether, in certain circumstances, 'reasons' may also count as 'causes'. It helped to undermine the positivist view that the terms in which social activity is to be explained are external to that activity itself—in the extreme version, behaviourism, the social scientist's subject-matter is taken to be observable behaviour which can be identified without reference to intentions or beliefs. By contrast, the critics of positivism drew attention to the fact that ideas and beliefs play a constituent role in social life—that the identity of actions and practices depends upon the intentions of the agents concerned —and inferred that a social scientist's explanation of any human activity must begin from the participants' own understanding of their conduct, even if eventually going beyond it.

What is fascinating about Plamenatz's writings, viewed over his entire career, is that he moved steadily towards that view *de facto*— without fully revising his earlier view of the nature of political theory as an activity. Thus, his work became ever subtler, and was free of any trace of reductionism by the time of *Man and Society*—informed,

[5] P. Winch, *The Idea of a Social Science* (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958).

that is, by a sharp sense of the social nature of man, and of what we have called the constituent role of ideas. None the less, he still clung to the possibility of a value-free social science, and spoke of science as if the model of explanation thrown up by physics in the seventeenth century, and elaborated by empiricist philosophy since the eighteenth, did not need significant amendment to be applied in an appropriate way to the social world. In that sense, he broke with positivism in practice, while at the same time continuing to embrace certain tenets of positivism philosophically.

That admixture of positivism emerges most clearly on those rare occasions when he chose to explain and defend political theory as an activity.[6] Writing at a time when linguistic philosophy and empirical political science were still the dominant modes of enquiry in departments of philosophy and politics respectively, he avoided a direct confrontation with either school. He did not dispute that political concepts should be analysed philosophically; and he allowed that it was possible, in principle, to study politics in an empirical and value-free way. He believed it sufficient to say (in defence of his own activity) that there was another form of thought, distinct from analytical philosophy and from political science, that was both intellectually respectable and of great importance to human beings. Its purpose was to enable them to understand their place in the world, and thereby to help them decide which rules should govern their future conduct. Plamenatz called this form of thought 'practical philosophy', and regarded political theory as one of its main components. He claimed that practical philosophy met needs which neither philosophy in the technical sense nor science was able to meet, and he implied that it could not be reduced to ideology or to the mere expression of preferences as to how men should live.

For several reasons, the form of this defence is of great significance. Consider how much Plamenatz conceded to his opponents. Although he dismissed exaggerated claims made for conceptual analysis, he allowed that 'at the moment, because political thinkers still use ambiguous concepts, the careful analysis of these concepts is still needed to show that many traditional problems are spurious,

[6]See especially J. P. Plamenatz, 'The Use of Political Theory', *Political Studies*, 8 (1960), 37–47, reprinted in A. Quinton (ed.), *Political Philosophy* (London, Oxford University Press, 1967) (page references to the reprinted version); and Plamenatz, *Man and Society*, Introduction.

arising only because the men who put them have fallen victims to the confusions and intricacies of language.'[7] In granting this he did not make it clear whether the concepts central to traditional political theory can be fully understood through the kind of analysis proposed by linguistic philosophers. He observed that the concepts in question were ambiguous, but he did not ask whether the ambiguity was of the familiar kind that can be eliminated by careful definition and attention to the use of terms, or whether it might not be more recalcitrant, arising from the fact that such concepts take on different shapes in different political traditions. Thus, he did not reject 'ordinary language' as a sufficient basis for analysis. He accepted the linguistic philosopher's own definition of his task, as an under-labourer who tidies up political discourse without needing to engage in substantive political argument: whereas if political concepts are more deeply ambiguous in the way just suggested, the philosopher who wishes to give a full account of any of them must explore their relations with different points of view or ideologies, and probably also abandon the veil of political neutrality if he wishes to defend a preferred conception. In the latter case the division between political philosopher and political theorist would be eroded if not dissolved.

Furthermore, although Plamenatz insisted that political science as understood by his contemporaries could not replace political theory—since unlike the latter it was unable to provide men with practical guidance—he also largely accepted the political scientists' own description of their role. Indeed, in one of his later books, *Ideology*, he argued at length against the thesis that the social sciences are inescapably value-laden in a way that the natural sciences are not. He allowed that the terms in which social behaviour was explained necessarily changed as society itself changed; he admitted too that many of the concepts used for explanatory purposes had, in fact, both descriptive and evaluative functions. But none of this meant that the social sciences could not be value-neutral and objective. For 'thought is objective where there are definite, consistent and relevant criteria of truth or probability which it satisfies; it is value-free when it describes or explains without passing value judgements, overtly or covertly. Thought about human behaviour, merely because this behaviour is purposeful and

[7] Plamenatz, 'The Use of Political Theory', p. 22.

is often affected by how men think about it, and often gives effect or expression to judgements of value, is not thereby precluded from being objective and value-free.'[8] Changes in the language of social explanation did not mean that the criteria of explanation changed as well: moreover the fact that the words used to explain social behaviour often had, in other contexts, both descriptive and evaluative roles did not imply that they could never be used descriptively without also being used to pass value-judgements. Thus the social sciences, although more likely than the natural sciences to be influenced by the value-stances of their practitioners, could, at least in principle, emancipate themselves from this influence and become entirely descriptive and explanatory in nature.

The danger of these concessions, which in effect sharply separate the formal study of political concepts from the empirical study of political life, is that political theory will be left without the requisite intellectual credentials. Plamenatz himself was at pains to argue that political theory was not merely free-floating speculation or the expression of personal feelings. Practical philosophies, he said, 'should aim at self-consistency and at taking account of the facts'; again, 'political theory . . . is not fantasy or the parading of prejudices; nor is it an intellectual game. Still less is it linguistic analysis. It is an elaborate, rigorous, difficult and useful undertaking . . . it must be systematic, self-consistent and realistic.'[9] These remarks suggest that he had in mind criteria which political theory must satisfy, even though he did not spell them out explicitly. What is now striking is that the criteria which are hinted at in these passages—logical consistency, empirical adequacy, and theoretical scope—are precisely those acknowledged in analytical political philosophy and in empirical social science. Thus the intellectual credentials of political theory, assuming it to have some, are no different from those belonging to the disciplines from which Plamenatz allowed it to be separated. This suggests that a satisfactory defence of political theory must involve a reassessment of the claims made on behalf of analytical political philosophy and social or political science.

Let us consider analytical political philosophy first. The relevant claim here is that political concepts can be analysed in a formal

[8] J. P. Plamenatz, *Ideology* (London, Pall Mall, 1970), p. 65.

[9] Plamenatz, 'The Use of Political Theory', p. 29.

manner, that is without introducing either empirical evidence or any evaluative commitments. It is assumed, for instance, that the formal question 'what does "democracy" mean?' can be separated both from the empirical question 'How may the ideals of democracy be realized?' and from the evaluative question 'Why is democracy valuable?'. But this assumption is open to challenge.[10] The concepts used in political argument are typically contestable concepts, in the sense that each may be interpreted in a variety of incompatible ways without manifest absurdity. Such contests cannot be resolved by formal means. There is no unequivocal 'ordinary use of language' to which appeal can be made to settle disputes about the meaning of a term like 'democracy'. Instead we find that any given speaker's use of the term depends on that speaker's overall political outlook—on the meanings he attaches to other terms, and on his political commitments. Thus, establishing a preferred meaning for such a term involves engaging in substantive political argument, bringing forward both empirical evidence and moral principle to justify the general perspective to which the preferred meaning corresponds. This does not imply that there is no such intellectual activity as 'analysing political concepts': but it does imply that the boundary between political philosophy (if the term is reserved for this activity) and political theory is extremely porous, consisting at most in a difference of emphasis. It also implies that the criteria employed in political philosophy are by no means purely formal: questions about the moral acceptability and empirical realism of proposed political arrangements intrude upon the business of conceptual clarification.

Next let us consider social science. Plamenatz's account of political theory was developed against a view of social science as a descriptive and explanatory activity, whose theoretical claims were judged by their success or failure in accounting for observed social phenomena. Although, on this view, a social scientist's moral and political preferences might influence his choice of subject for research, his explanatory claims themselves would be value-neutral; they would neither be influenced by, nor would they influence, his political standpoint. The challenge to this view stems from two connected observations. First, contrary to the thesis of

[10] For more detailed criticism, see David Miller, 'Linguistic Philosophy and Political Theory', below.

value-neutrality, the explanatory framework adopted by a social scientist has what Charles Taylor calls a 'value-slope'; meaning that, although it does not strictly entail any prescriptive conclusion about the kind of social and political order that should be realized, it does *support* such conclusions.[11] It does so because each framework embodies a certain view of human needs and potentialities. This in turn limits the range of political possibilities—many conceivable states of affairs are ruled out immediately by adopting the framework—while, of those that remain in play, some will appear better than others at meeting human needs as identified by the framework. By this means the positivists' radical separation of facts and values is called into question. Second, the choice between alternative explanatory frameworks cannot be made entirely on empirical grounds. For several reasons, some unique to the social sciences, others shared with the natural sciences, a given body of evidence can be accommodated by alternative theories without providing decisive support for any one of them. This does not mean that there is no progress in social science, or that no theory is ever finally discredited by the evidence, but it suggests that at any moment there may well be several theoretical frameworks competing to explain any given set of facts.

Taking these two observations together, we are led to the conclusion that the theoretical position adopted by a social scientist must be value-related, inasmuch as it supports a political standpoint of a particular kind, while its choice is not wholly dictated by the evidence to hand. This is not to say that every social scientist has political considerations consciously in mind when developing his theoretical position; he may be a-political, or he may believe, under the influence of a positivist philosophy of social science, that his political commitments are completely independent of his explanatory framework. The point is rather that the two-way link between explanatory framework and political standpoint means both that evaluative criteria may influence theory-construction in the social sciences, and that these sciences always have implications for practical questions of political conduct which go beyond the selection of the optimum means to previously chosen ends. The distinction between social science, whose function is descriptive

[11] C. Taylor, 'Neutrality in Political Science' in P. Laslett and W. G. Runciman (eds.), *Philosophy, Politics and Society*, Third Series (Oxford, Blackwell, 1967).

and/or explanatory, and political theory, whose function is practical, is thereby eroded. Instead, we may think in terms of a spectrum of theoretical activity, at one end of which stand those practitioners whose aim is to account for a body of evidence without much theoretical elaboration, and at the other end of which stand sophisticated theorists whose contact with empirical evidence is indirect, and whose chief interest lies in developing or revising normative theory.

This reconsideration of the character of analytical political philosophy and of social science bears out Plamenatz's suggestion that political theory is not to be distinguished from these other activities by the criteria of truth that it employs; but it does so without leaving political theory in the position of a poor relation. Since formal criteria are not sufficient in political philosophy, and empirical criteria are not sufficient in social science, it is no disgrace that political theorists use a complex mixture of empirical, formal, and evaluative criteria in developing their positions. At the same time, it is clear that political theory cannot be insulated from these other branches of enquiry. It both contributes to, and borrows from, analytical political philosophy and social science. Indeed we have suggested that the boundaries drawn between these three forms of intellectual activity are conventional in character, representing a convenient academic division of labour, but no clear-cut differences of method.

The account of political theory that we have just sketched goes beyond Plamenatz's. Yet this account often consorts better with his own practice as a political theorist than the one which he gave in the very different intellectual climate of the early 1960s. For one of the motifs that runs throughout his work—it is especially prominent in *Man and Society*—is the idea that man's nature is shaped by his social relationships, while those relationships in turn are shaped—indeed partly constituted—by men's beliefs about themselves. It was the presence of this idea in the thought of Rousseau, Hegel, and Marx, and its relative absence in Hobbes, Locke, and the English utilitarians, that eventually drew Plamenatz to speak with greater warmth of thinkers whose political sympathies were at times far removed from his own than of those with whom he had more in common politically. But the idea has profound consequences both for the philosophy of social explanation and for the analysis of social and political concepts. If beliefs play a constituent role in social