


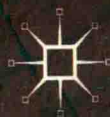
Political Theory and Social Science



Cutting Against the Grain



John G. Gunnell



POLITICAL THEORY
AND SOCIAL SCIENCE
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POLITICAL THEORY AND SOCIAL SCIENCE
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First published in 2011 by PALGRAVE MACMILLAN® in the United States—a division of St. Martin's Press LLC, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

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ISBN: 978-0-230-10954-4

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available from the Library of Congress.

A catalogue record of the book is available from the British Library.

Design by Scribe Inc.

First edition: January 2011

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed and bound in Great Britain by

CPI Antony Rowe, Chippenham and Eastbourne

Preoccupied with what you rather must do
Than what you should, made you against the grain

—Shakespeare, *Coriolanus*

PREFACE

The formulation of this book has, for the past five years, been a persistent focus of my work. It builds significantly on the analysis of metapractices and the theory of conventional objects presented in my *The Orders of Discourse* (1998), and like that volume, it reflects an orientation that is rooted in my understanding of the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein, which, in terms of both issues and approach, I take to represent a challenge to the contemporary spirit of much of both political theory and social science. My immediate intention, however, is neither to pursue a systematic and comprehensive interpretation of Wittgenstein's work nor to explore fully its implications for thinking about the conduct of social scientific inquiry, but my goal is to move significantly further, but selectively, toward the latter goal.

There are several individuals I wish particularly to acknowledge but whom I do not want to saddle with any attributions of agreement with the arguments set forth in the following chapters. I have discussed much of the content of this volume with my brilliant colleague Peter Breiner (at the State University of New York at Albany) whose comprehensive knowledge of political theory is matched by his knowledge of politics. Although I was familiar with Linda Zerilli's outstanding work in feminist theory and her judicious and creative application of Wittgensteinian analysis, we were not personally acquainted until three years ago when we began a conversation from which I have gained a great amount of insight and encouragement. Linda read and generously commented on the penultimate version of the manuscript. James Farr and Mary Dietz are models of academic citizenship, and I have benefited, among other things, from Jim's objective and original scholarship on the history of political science and from Mary's dedication and skill as the editor of *Political Theory*. Ever since I was a Fulbright lecturer in Denmark in 1993, I have been engaged in a dialogue with Henrik Bang about issues in social science and democratic theory, and his work has provided a wider perspective on these issues. Gavin Kitching, in Australia, kindly read a late version of the manuscript and offered helpful comments and corrections. In the course of writing the manuscript, I gained confidence from the work of the English philosophers Rupert Read, Phil Hutchinson, and Wes Sharrock

whose interpretations of Wittgenstein, Peter Winch, and Thomas Kuhn correspond very closely to mine.

There are three former students to whom I am particularly indebted. The most venerable is Sanford Schram who supportively commented on an early version of the manuscript and who not only has been exceptionally successful in bringing political theory to bear on empirical research but also has uniquely succeeded in actually making political science matter. Christopher Robinson not only provided a very detailed commentary on a draft of the manuscript but also, for many years, has been a consistent interlocutor in a conversation about Wittgenstein and political theory. Brian Schmidt's work has realized my hopes for encouraging scholarship on the history of subfields of political science and for applying political theory to these areas—in his case, the study of international relations. I am also indebted to conversations with graduate students in a series of seminars at the University of California at Irvine and especially to Michael Jensen and Michael Latner.

It will be evident that I have diverged significantly from the perspective on political theory into which I was introduced at Berkeley a half-century ago, but I remain deeply indebted to that introduction. If, fresh out of the navy, I had not naïvely stumbled into Sheldon Wolin's advanced seminar on late modern liberalism, I might not have encountered the mystery of "the political," which I have sought for so long to, in more than one sense, unravel. Although it may appear at times that I am picking a quarrel with Hanna Pitkin, I deeply respect and have gained from an encounter with her scholarship. I would never have become so involved with the work of Wittgenstein and J. L. Austin if she had not urged me, several years after we had both left Berkeley, to secure, by interlibrary loan, Stanley Cavell's already dog-eared Harvard doctoral dissertation and if she had not written *Wittgenstein and Justice*.

While on "permanent sabbatical" during the past couple of years, I appreciate having been allowed affiliated scholar status and access to university facilities by the Department of Political Science at the University of California at Davis, and participation in the Political Theory Reading Group has kept me textually grounded in the classic literature.

I thank both Sage Publications and Cambridge Publications for allowing the incorporation of revised portions of material originally published in their journals.

Finally, as always, I have been the recipient of Dede's constant support for what sometimes distracts from the larger scheme of things.

References to Wittgenstein are to the *Philosophical Investigations* and to numbered remarks rather than to page numbers, unless otherwise indicated by "p."

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INTRODUCTION

This sort of investigation is immensely important and very much *against the grain* of some of you.

—Wittgenstein

THIS BOOK PIVOTS ON THE ISSUES OF THE CHARACTER, status, and role of academic political theory. At the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, these matters continue to be significant not only for the practice of this subfield of political science and for assessing its place in the discipline but also for thinking about the nature of social scientific inquiry in general. I reject the assumption that political theory is *sui generis*. Political theory as a specific academic field was an invention of American political science, and many of the issues that are endemic to political and social science continue to surface most distinctly in the literature of political theory. The past and future of political theory are inextricably linked to those of the social sciences as a whole, and in turn, these disciplines must be understood and judged more broadly as species of what I refer to as metapractices. The latter are, most simply stated, those practices of knowledge that are defined by the fact that they speak about, and to, other human practices.

The inherent problematic of metapractices is etymologically represented by the ambiguity of “meta” as a prefix, which, because I use it so extensively in this work, requires some clarification. Exactly what this term meant in ancient Greek language depended a great deal on the grammatical context, where it diversely signified beyond, above, with, among, next, and changing. It was typically both spatial and temporal in its connotation but later began to take on a sense of superiority when Andronicus redacted Aristotle’s discussion of first philosophy and titled it “metaphysics.” This sense of “meta” as qualitatively “higher” persisted into the nineteenth century and beyond, but it is best to construe it simply as indicating that metapractices consist of derivative discourses that presuppose an “other.” One theme running through this book is an exploration of how many metapractices had their origins in their subject matter. The social sciences as a whole sprung from the practices of social and political life, and the philosophies of both natural and social science began as

elements of those discourses. Significant portions of this volume are less about political theory per se than about generic dimensions of metapragmatic inquiry and the general problems of the *cognitive* and *practical* relationship of social science to its subject matter. My concern is with what might be understood as a philosophy of social science applied to problems of political inquiry, and it is what I categorize as primarily a third-order form of analysis in that it is about the nature of second-order studies such as social science and philosophy, which are directed toward the first-order claims of fields such as natural science, politics, ordinary language, and religion. The philosophy of social science is, however, ultimately inseparable from the history of social science, and although the latter is not, for the most part, directly the subject of this work, the chapters in many ways presuppose this background (Gunnell 1993, 2004).

Recent controversies in American political science, such as that revolving around the Perestroika “revolt,” are actually perennial in character and reflect many of the issues encountered in the following chapters, but these controversies have often achieved little in the way of significantly new conceptual traction. Despite all the recent emphasis on interpretive and qualitative approaches to inquiry as an alternative or complement to what is often characterized as positivistic social science, these claims remain theoretically and epistemologically unredeemed, and they are often wedded to the assumption that such approaches are different ways of accessing a common object of inquiry. What is crucial, however, is a confrontation with the theoretical issue of the nature of that object and with what this entails for the conduct of inquiry. This work does not, for the most part, deal directly with substantive issues in political theory such as democracy, justice, citizenship, liberty, authority, and so on. The focus is on the character of political theory as a scholarly enterprise, the nature of its subject matter, and its relationship to that subject matter. A reader might very reasonably complain that I talk about political theory rather than doing it, but this is also what might be said about the relationship between political theorists and politics. My distribution of emphasis derives in part from a persistent skepticism about the degree to which social science possesses any special capacity to make normative judgments about politics. Dilemmas arising from the relationships between inquiry and its object are much of what this book is about. It will be increasingly apparent that while I advance no definite prescriptive arguments about these relationships, I resist some of the claims and assumptions that political theorists make regarding this matter, and I tend to think that more attention should be given to achieving clarity about the thinking that goes on *within* politics rather than to what theorists think *about* politics.

Although each chapter pursues a distinct theme, they are thematically contiguous and move from an examination of the past and present of academic political theory to a consideration of social science as a form of metapractical interpretive analysis and then to an extended consideration of what Wittgenstein's work entails with respect to confronting the complex problems involved in the relationship between social science and its subject matter as well as the question of what constitutes the nature of that subject matter.

The first chapter, "In Search of Political Theory," presents an overview of the evolution and current character of academic political theory. Although framed against the background of a general historical account of this subfield of political science, the basic purpose of this chapter is to penetrate the surface of that history, to locate the identity of the basic genre from which this literature originated, and to explore the residual problems that are manifest in the contemporary practices of political theory. Although the continuing estranged relationship between mainstream political science and much of political theory has been properly attributed to developments during the last half of the twentieth century, the roots of this alienation are historically deeper. Many of the conversations of political theory are the progeny of a discursive form that attended the birth of modern social science. This genre was a legitimating rhetoric situated in the interstices of social science, philosophy, and politics. The study of the history of political thought originated as such a rhetorical vehicle, and it constitutes a paradigm case for examining the extent to which such a discourse can be transformed into an authentic practice of knowledge. The study of the history of political thought has succeeded to a greater extent than certain other elements of political theory, which, transfixed by the tension between their practical aspirations and academic context, have become anomalous appendages to the social scientific study of politics. To understand the condition of political theory requires, however, a yet deeper grasp of the fundamental character of metapractices.

The second chapter, "Social Scientific Inquiry and the Metapractical Voice," pursues the idea of political theory, and social science in general, as a necessarily interpretive enterprise. Through an examination of two paradigmatic arguments, those of Max Weber and Michael Oakeshott, this chapter explores the character of metapractical analysis and what is fundamentally involved in a practice of knowledge that is devoted to investigating conceptually preconstituted phenomena. Discussions of Weber's essay "The 'Objectivity' of Knowledge in Social Science and Social Policy" and Oakeshott's reflections "On the Theoretical

Understanding of Human Conduct” have seldom included a detailed textual analysis of the arguments. Such an analysis is important because these essays not only thoroughly address the issue of the nature of social scientific inquiry but also uniquely confront and illuminate the paradoxes that have been particularly prominent in conversations about the identity and role of fields such as political science and political theory. These paradoxes, however, are not eliminable and arise from the very nature of metapragmatic investigation. Although to some degree both Weber and Oakeshott sought to defend the authority of metapragmatic claims, they were more sensitive than much of contemporary critical social science to the problems of the practical relationship between social science and its subject matter.

Political theory and social science, in their search for epistemic privilege as a path to practical purchase, have consistently attempted to posit a foundation of judgment and reason that is deeper than the conventional artifacts that constitute their subject matter. The third chapter, “Fear of Conventions,” critically examines two recent, and often entwined, attempts to establish such a foundation for social scientific explanation and to demonstrate the epiphenomenal character of social phenomena. The turn to various forms of philosophical realism as a social scientific metatheory represents an attempt to posit a transcendental basis of explanation and assessment, while the recent popularity of the application of cognitive science to political theory, and to social scientific investigation in general, is a manifestation of the search for an empirical foundation. While the specter of relativism is often posited as a threat both to the objectivity of metapragmatic inquiry and to the integrity of its subject matter, the issue of relativism really springs from the epistemological anxiety of metapragmatics regarding their claims to know and judge their subject matter. Although the uses of both philosophical realism and cognitive science in social science deserve more discussion than I undertake here (Gunnell 2007, 2009b), my focus is on how the embrace of this literature contrasts with what Wittgenstein insisted was the autonomy of conventional or social phenomena and the character of interpretive inquiry.

The fourth chapter, “Engaging Wittgenstein,” is devoted both to a critical discussion of certain aspects of the past reception of Wittgenstein’s work by political and social theorists and to a preliminary exploration of some of the more positive implications of his work for thinking about the nature of social scientific inquiry. Because political and social theorists have typically turned to philosophy when suffering from cognitive insecurity, the work of Wittgenstein, arguably the most influential philosopher of the twentieth century, has been no exception. Although

there have been astute applications of his philosophy to the analysis of both substantive and conceptual issues in political theory, a prominent, if not the dominant, motif in both positive and negative engagements with Wittgenstein has been an attempt to validate prior commitments. While some have taken Wittgenstein to be the primary exemplar and author of relativism, others have desperately sought in his work new bases of metapractical certainty. And while some have attempted to enlist his work in a defense of radical democracy, others have viewed his writing as inherently conservative. What is paradoxical, however, is that both Wittgenstein's view of the relationship between philosophy and its subject matter and his account of language imply a subversion of these various agendas. For more than a generation, social and political theorists have sought to adapt Wittgenstein's work to their purposes, but what most theorists have attempted to do is recreate Wittgenstein in their own images rather than boldly confront the implications of his work. In seeking to move further in the direction of considering the relevance of Wittgenstein's philosophy for social inquiry, there are certain existing intellectual signposts, and a significant one, but still not sufficiently acknowledged, is the work of Peter Winch.

The fifth chapter, "Social Science and Justice," argues that Winch's work remains the best guide for thinking about what a Wittgensteinian approach to social scientific inquiry would involve. The basic question posed is how political theory, or any form of metapractical inquiry, can do justice to its subject matter in terms of providing both a descriptive account and a normative assessment. This chapter revisits Winch's work as a bridge to a renewed consideration of the importance of Wittgenstein's philosophy for thinking about the idea of a social science. Despite the extensive commentary on the work of Winch, there has been inadequate recognition of the extent to which he discerned the significance of Wittgenstein's philosophy for confronting issues regarding the nature and interpretation of social phenomena. Winch's concern with the field of anthropology demonstrates the manner in which the issues in this field put into relief many of the fundamental problems of social science, and I argue that his analysis can be further illuminated by examining one of the most contentious contemporary debates in this field. This case concretely illustrates the paradoxes involved in metapractices such as philosophy and social science seeking to explain and judge various forms of life, and it further indicates the limitations of philosophical realism and other philosophical doctrines as a basis of social scientific inquiry.

Chapter 6, "Interpretation and the Autonomy of Concepts," is devoted to examining Wittgenstein's account of words, concepts, understanding,

and interpretation. If, in fact, social science is an interpretive enterprise and, as Wittgenstein insisted, philosophical or metapractical investigations are conceptual investigations, it is necessary to elaborate what this involves and to untangle some of the confusions that typically attend discussions of these matters. Although philosophy and social science may in many ways represent quite different forms of research, they are, as Winch emphasized, logically comparable endeavors with respect to both their interpretive character and the nature of their subject matter. Wittgenstein stressed both the theoretical autonomy of conventional phenomena and the distinction between the cognitive character of an interpretive enterprise and the forms of interaction involved in the practices that constitute its object of inquiry. One of the most pervasive analytical failures in the literature of political theory and political science is a tendency not to distinguish adequately between words and concepts, and this is closely allied with a conflation of the concepts often referred to as understanding and interpretation.

In the final chapter, "Political Theory and the American Scholar," I return to the historical background of the study of politics as well as to the contemporary tension between political theory and mainstream political science, but I also suggest that some of the dilemmas of political theory are rooted less in the field itself than in the more general relationship between American politics and American scholarship. From the beginning, there has been a tendency to exoticize both politics and the role of those who study it, and this has added significantly to the problems that still inhabit and inhibit the field of political theory.

A friend once suggested, and at least facetiously complained, that while I had begun, many years ago, to wield an intellectual "chainsaw" in the battle against the scientific pretensions of behavioralism in political science, I lost control of that critical tool and allowed it to cut into the very roots of political theory from which my criticisms had derived. And others, such as Sheldon Wolin, George Kateb, Richard Flathman, J. G. A. Pocock, and Quentin Skinner have made similar claims but in a much more serious manner (e.g., Nelson 1986; Skinner 1988). The dissenting views expressed in these chapters are, however, not intended to suggest either that contemporary political theory is as a whole lacking excellent scholarship but only that significant elements of the literature are still haunted by persistent mythologies and conceptual muddles. To continue the metaphor, my aim has not been to clear-cut the terrain of political theory but to eliminate some of the intellectual deadwood and underbrush with which it has become entangled and that have sometimes prevented it from fully flourishing as a significant and authentic academic

contribution. Although this work is admittedly critical in tenor, a positive argument flows from each of my quarrels with various dimensions of the literature. My experience has been that the reception of the kinds of arguments advanced in the following pages has been characterized less by frontal challenges than by intimations that the arguments are uncongenial and somehow depreciate the basic spirit and aspirations of practitioners of political theory. One's professional academic identity is, however, often more sensitive to criticism than one's political identity.

Among the debris that still clutters the literature of various aspects of political theory are the remnants of the belief that the classic canon, from Plato to Marx and beyond, represents an actual historical tradition that is holistically infused with indigenous meaning; that the genealogy of political theory is fundamentally different from that of the discipline of political science; that there can be a theory of politics that construes politics as a natural kind and that lends universality to the vocations of those who study it; that the philosophy of science represents a descriptive account of natural science and yields the criteria of scientific explanation; that epistemology, historically and logically, precedes theory; that there is a philosophical answer to the theory/practice problem and issues such as relativism; that it is possible to pose and answer the question of how, in general, thought and language make contact with the "world" and to posit an unrepresented datum that is the metaphysical basis of our representations and the ground of empirical and normative judgment; that our conventional practices can be explained biologically or in terms of other subconventional claims; and that the meaning of words is either the expression of mental representations or the reflection of theoretically untainted objects.

I have, on past occasions, attempted to dispel elements of these myths and offer an alternative vision regarding the past and present of political theory and of its character and subject matter (e.g., 1975, 1979, 1986, 1998), but cutting against the grain inevitably leaves some rough edges, which I hope, in some measure, to smooth over in the following pages. It would be far too pretentious to suggest that what I wish to accomplish for political theory is the kind of thing that Wittgenstein did, or wished to do, for philosophy, but that is my model, however deficient this effort may certainly be.

IN SEARCH OF POLITICAL THEORY

A picture is conjured up which seems to fix the sense *unambiguously*.

—Wittgenstein

MORE THAN 40 YEARS AGO, SHELDON WOLIN FAMOUSLY EVOKED the image of “political theory as a vocation” (1969). The initial context was the inaugural panel of the Conference for Study of Political Thought, which took place at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association. Wolin summoned those who believed that, in the midst of the social and political turmoil of the 1960s, mainstream political science not only had become quiescent (at least by its inaction, as Leo Strauss and others had also claimed) but also was implicated in abetting the crises of the time. Although intellectual and ideological issues were indeed involved, Wolin was implicitly also giving voice to a professional identity for a large segment of the academic subfield of political theory that was increasingly defined by its estrangement from the parent discipline. The conference would eventually become primarily a forum for scholars who were devoted to the study of the history of political thought and whose work would eventually serve in some respects to undermine the vision of epic political theory to which Wolin subscribed. Wolin’s image of the vocation was, however, as mythical as what much of political science had believed to be the method of science, and it was only the latest entry in a long history of mythologizing this academic practice. The opposed hegemonic legitimating myths of tradition and science that defined, and divided, the literature of the behavioral era of American political science ultimately could neither withstand critical scrutiny nor suppress the latent differences within both political science and the subfield of political theory. The demise of the bipolar character of political science during the 1970s and the intellectual exodus of much of political theory brought an

end to the sense of unity that had accrued to the image of the “vocation.” Although this image would persist, it was difficult to sustain as the sub-field of political theory became increasingly diverse and as the discipline from which it wished to differentiate itself also became more methodologically and ideologically diffuse. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, literature devoted to examining the identity of political theory attested to the persistently pluralistic, and ambiguous, character of this intellectual enterprise and to the problem of its anomalous relationship to both political science and politics.

In 2000, an edited book (Frank and Tambornino) pointedly posed, for a new generation, the question of what had become of the “vocation.” Although sometimes ambivalent about whether the reference was to Wolin’s image or to the actual character and condition of political theory as a professional academic activity, the concerns specified as “animating” the volume were “the character and status of contemporary political theory, its place in the academy and its role in public life” (x). Although the book was clearly intended less as a critical analysis than as a search for the identity and significance of political theory, the editors claimed that there were now, in effect, many vocations of political theory and that while these should be politically relevant, it was important to recognize the value of detachment and question “the assumption that political theory should avoid straying from direct engagement with current events” (xv). The pluralistic character of political theory was attributed in part to intellectual diversity within the field but particularly to flux within the domain of “the political.” The issue implicitly posed, however, whether trends in political theory were determined more by professional and scholarly issues or more by events in politics, was not directly confronted. Although the editors warily applauded how intellectual eclecticism had enlivened political theory and contributed to its flourishing, they worried about the dissolution of identity and about “our ability to speak of a vocation at all” (xiii–xiv). Although there was some attempt to indicate a sense of unity and continuity, the editors were unable to attest to more than an unspecified “family resemblance” among the many modes of theorizing.

The lead essay was by Wolin (2000, 3–22) who focused on, and worried about, what he had come to believe was a growing loss of identity in the field. He emphasized the fact that the conference from which the volume derived had been devoted to the future of the field and to students who would become professional political theorists. The conference, he noted, had been prompted by the “perennial uncertainty and controversy about political theory’s relationship to political and social science, to philosophy, to history, as well as its relationship, if any, to the ‘real’