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THE POLITICAL IS POLITICAL

CONFORMITY AND THE ILLUSION OF DISSENT IN CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

LORNA FINLAYSON

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The Political Is Political

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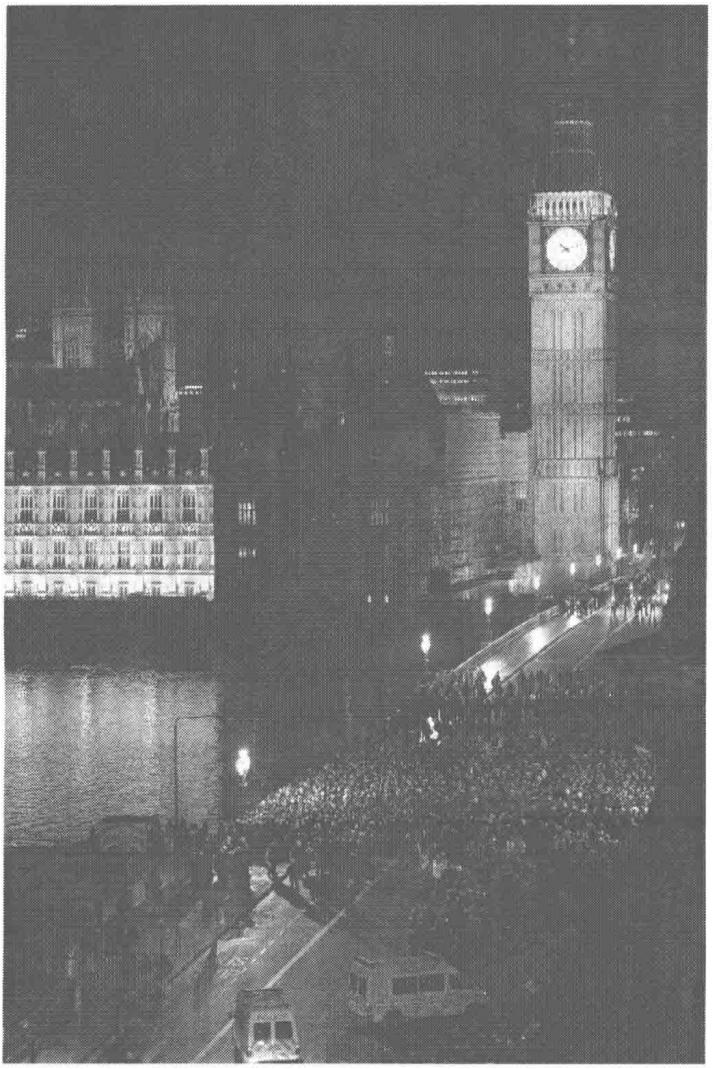

Police kettle protestors against tuition fees on Westminster Bridge, December 9, 2010. Photo: Jon Cartwright.

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Contents

Introduction

YES IT'S FUCKING POLITICAL.

—Skunk Anansie

> Nothing could be more at odds with our stage technique than the prologue of the Euripidean drama. Having a character at the beginning of the play tell us who he is, what has preceded the action, what will happen in the course of the play—a modern stage-writer would describe this as a wilful and unforgivable repudiation of the effect of suspense. We know what is going to happen, so why should we wait until it actually does?
>
> —Nietzsche[1]

Nobody should really have to point out that political philosophy is political.[2] What this book tries to do, nonetheless, is to point out precisely that, and to describe the conditions that make it necessary to do so.

The discipline of political philosophy is (or rather, has become) a peculiar one. Insofar as it differs from related subjects, such as political science or sociology or political theory, the difference conventionally lies in the expectation that at least part of what interests political philosophers will be the explicitly evaluative projects of prescription, recommendation, condemnation, demand and critique. But political philosophy is not just this abstractly defined activity of enquiry. It is also an institution, with its own culture, publications and community of paid professionals—and like any community, it goes through phases and fashions. This book is about the contemporary institution of political philosophy. In particular, it is about the institution of political philosophy in the Anglo-American world. It is concerned above all

to expose that institution's peculiarities and to ask what they tell us: both about the parochial realm of academic political philosophy and about the wider world which (albeit increasingly halfheartedly) produces and fosters it.

This might seem already to raise a problem. This book, I've just admitted, has as its object of study a peculiar and parochial discipline: a particular form of political philosophy, which has taken hold in a particular time and in particular places. So it seems that either I must admit that the study of this phenomenon is of very limited relevance, or else I am at risk of that much more culpable parochialism which mistakes a backwater for the whole ocean, claiming a broad or universal significance for something that is of strictly local interest.

There is a big difference, however, between the assumption that the rest of the world must be just the same as your own particular village, and on the other hand, thinking that the world is a sufficiently interconnected place that in-depth local studies may tell us something about the surrounding environment. The tradition of 'critical theory', to which this book is fairly heavily indebted, has as one of its characteristic features an emphasis on the interconnectedness of the social world, and the commitment to the idea that a lot can be gained from careful scrutiny of small and apparently insignificant details. My project in this book is in the same spirit: it is not that I think that a particular kind of political philosophy is the whole world, or that I think that the whole world (or even the whole of academia, or even of political philosophy) is just like it; but what I do think, and will suggest throughout, is that political philosophy is not an isolated field having nothing to do with anything else around it, but a human institution, overlapping with other human institutions—all of which inevitably bear traces of the social world in which they are embedded. If I didn't think that, I would not have bothered to write about it.

Political philosophy, by definition, must be in some way concerned with or directed at matters political. What the trivial formulation of the title of this book is meant to convey is that the ways in which political philosophy is political *would* seem obvious to us, were it not for the various deceptive mechanisms which, I'll suggest, are at work throughout that discipline's characteristic discourse. These mechanisms are the ideological overgrowth concealing the true political character of this institution.[3]

The point I make in stressing the political nature of political philosophy is parallel to that of the slogan on which my title plays: 'the personal is political.' For feminists of the 1960s and 1970s, this highlighted the fact that

crucial aspects of women's oppression were rendered invisible by a construal of 'the political' which excluded from its scope such phenomena as marriage, the family, beauty norms, and so on.[4] Like the personal, I want to say, the political-philosophical is political in a double sense. First, it has its own internal politics, just as there is an internal politics of (for example) the family. I'll suggest, in particular, that a major theme of the politics of political philosophy is the deployment of methodological norms covertly rigged so as to maintain the dominance of a particular (liberal) framework. The second and related point is that political philosophy has to be understood as a form of human activity which is part of a wider political reality. In other words, political philosophy is political inside and out.

Then there is a further sense to my title, which might be termed the 'aspirational' sense: political philosophy should *strive to be* political—in the same sort of sense in which an individual might decide to think of herself and act as a 'political' rather than an 'apolitical' person. Political philosophy should be informed by political reality and embrace and seek to understand its own political significance.[5] As it stands, of course, few political philosophers would openly disown this ideal—the important question is what the ideal should actually involve. The answer implicit in the chapters that follow is that it must involve, at the very least, abandoning the attempt to uphold a 'trichotomy' between the following:

a. 'politics',
b. 'political philosophy' and
c. the 'methodology of political philosophy'.

One problem, then, is the gulf that opens up between (a) and (b). Contemporary political philosophy seeks to make itself in various ways independent of politics: 'ideal theory' tries to describe what *ought* to be the case politically, regardless of what is;[6] the later Rawls tries to transcend the reality of deep political disagreement through the chimera of a 'political conception of justice', grounded in the 'reasonableness' of citizens.[7] But in addition—and this is in fact no more than an extra-complicated way of maintaining the dichotomy between (a) and (b)—a separate *third* realm is conjured: that of the 'methodology' of political philosophy. The function of this, I'll claim, is to push politics still further away from political philosophy, by sustaining the false impression that 'methodological' considerations (e.g., prized philosophical values such as 'charity', 'clarity' and 'rigour', or competing models of

the relationship between philosophy and politics) can somehow be evaluated without presupposing positions on what might be called 'first-order' political-philosophical questions—that is, questions about the sort of place the world is, could be, or should be. Just as the political-philosophical is political, *the methodological is political-philosophical*.[8]

My main focus will be on collapsing the second gulf of the trichotomy: that is, collapsing the methodological into the first-order political-philosophical—or rather, showing how it already invariably does collapse (although many theorists don't seem to notice it). But it's worth noting that, from the point of view of having already envisaged the closure of the first gulf—the one between politics and political philosophy—this second collapse should come as no surprise. If political philosophy is a species of politics, then the methodology of political philosophy is the activity of reflecting on a species of politics, which is just to say that it is itself a species of political philosophy (and hence of politics too). And this relationship also obtains in reverse: the manner in which the 'methodology' of political philosophy collapses into first-order political philosophy helps us to close the gap between the unity that is political-philosophy-and-its-methodology, on the one hand, and politics—what we might normally think of as political philosophy's object of study—on the other. The point here is not as elaborate as it sounds. The fact that it sounds so off-putting is partly the result of the unnaturalness that often comes with the attempt to describe the structure of arguments in advance of making them—an overrated practice, as I'll suggest shortly. But it is worth briefly explaining two main *ways* in which my effort to close the gap between political philosophy and its methodology may serve, at the same time, to narrow the gap between political philosophy and politics.

First, the account I give of the *function* of the attempt to treat methodological questions as independent of political-philosophical ones produces, in the end, a picture of political philosophy and its methodology as an 'ideological' phenomenon, in something like the Marxist sense of that term—that is, a distortion of reality which occurs because of its tendency to reinforce certain interests. As already noted, political philosophy is itself a piece of politics, inside *and* out: its regulative norms are subservient to a form of liberal theory, which might in turn be seen as subservient to a predominantly liberal political status quo.

Second, it is significant that a central characteristic of that status quo is an apparent 'depoliticization' of life and even of politics itself. The wider social context in which the depoliticization of political philosophy takes place ex-

hibits a more *general* depoliticization which is, if anything, even more palpably absurd than its local manifestation in academia. In the wake of the 'end of ideology' and 'end of history' theses,[9] we are confronted with a world in which student unions are expected to be 'apolitical', environmental and economic crises are regarded as issues that require us to 'transcend' political disagreements (if we are to do justice either to the seriousness of those problems or to the demands of 'practicality') and in which politicians say things like this:

> Stick resolutely to the centre ground. In an era where people no longer see politics through an ideological prism, that is where they want their politicians to be.[10]

Meanwhile, old-fashioned political language finds an unlikely sanctuary in marketing: 'Stand up to split ends!', 'A revolution in eyelash technology'.[11] The depoliticization of political philosophy, in that case, is just more of the same, right down to the technique of breaking the world up into apparently independent fragments: compare the holding apart of politics, political philosophy and methodology with, for example, the disconnect between the university and the rest of society that is presupposed by the contemporary rhetoric of 'representing students *as students*'. To find in political philosophy trends which mirror the trends of politics more broadly is grist to the mill of anyone inclined to cast doubt on the clean detachability of the two.

From its own perspective, then, what I am writing now is a piece of political philosophy *and* a piece of methodology of political philosophy, and even a piece of politics (albeit a very, very puny one).[12] This need not be incompatible with my complaints about all three categories. These complaints are not in the first instance against politics or political philosophy or methodology per se, but against ways of doing them that I allege are currently dominant. Of the three, 'methodology' is perhaps the category most frequently declared inadequate *as such*, on the grounds that it is a self-indulgent diversion of resources from the supposedly more urgent business of getting on and doing some actual political philosophy.[13] Since this is the category to which the contents of this book would most likely be assigned (within the schema that I ultimately want to reject), it's worth saying something now in reply to this kind of anti-methodology sentiment. The first thing to say is that it only really makes sense to dismiss methodological reflection as an unwelcome frivolity if it is assumed that political philosophy is going along sufficiently well. The more derelict or corrupt or decadent political philosophy is

thought to be, the more the charge that the study of *methodology* is decadent loses its bite. Plus, of course, to come to a judgement about whether political philosophy is 'working' is already to take a methodological stance (what does it *mean* for political philosophy to be 'doing its job'?).

Manifestly enough, I don't think that political philosophy is 'working'—not relative to any very admirable ends, anyway. This is not a premise of this book, however, but a case which it tries to make. If it succeeds, it retrospectively justifies the decision to embark on a 'methodological' project in the first place.[14]

The root of at least some anti-methodology sentiment is perhaps just a thoroughly inculcated aversion to behaviour that is deemed disruptive—a word most closely associated with the castigation of naughty schoolchildren. From the vantage point of a school and its teachers trying to discharge their usual functions, having pupils trying to question, criticize, reform or sabotage those functions is at best an irritation, and at worst a serious threat. But that is just to say that many of the normal functions of a school are non- and even anti-educational—and certainly, anti-philosophical.[15] It may be that the closest we can get to an 'essence' of philosophy is a kind of restless and insatiable troublemaking—a disruptiveness that extends to ourselves, our activities and the institutions to which we belong.[16] Since troublemaking is never going to be much appreciated by those on the receiving end of it, it makes some sense to think that if philosophy is not hated or feared, then something has gone wrong.

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That's about as much of an 'introduction', in the normal sense of the term, as this book is going to have, and this is related to the fact that the book is in some respects an eccentric one. I've allowed its form and style, as well as its content, to deviate at times from what will be considered normal or appropriate. This runs the risk of being looked upon as affectation but is on the contrary dictated by sincerity, given the view I put forward as to the current state of political philosophy. It is not just that I have no reason to ape the characteristics of the kind of philosophy I reject—sometimes, in fact, I think it *is* appropriate to do this, for example, in order to make internal criticisms, for example, or just to make points more palatable to one's opponents. The point is that, if I actually mean what I say about the continuity between the philosophical and the methodological (and do not for any reason regard