THIRD EDITION

The Terms of Political Discourse

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Preface to the Third Edition (1993)

When this book was written, at the beginning of the 1970s, the prevailing conception of rationality in Anglo-American social sciences was becoming an object of critical examination. Rationality had been understood within these circles to require a sharp distinction between analytic and synthetic statements, a clear delineation between descriptive and normative statements, and a neutral method of discrimination (such as falsification or some principle of confirmation) through which scientific (testable) theories could be distinguished from un- or extrascientific doctrines. A series of divisions between rational and irrational, science and ideology, open and closed, testable and untestable, empirical theory and normative theory, realism and utopianism, and so on, was bound up with this conception of rational practice. These standards were widely invoked in debates over the adequacy of key concepts, the promise of alternative theories, and the clarity of thought of young scholars up for tenure or advancement.

It seemed advisable to me, in 1974, to challenge this conception of rationality as a prelude to advancing a set of themes about the theory-embedded character of political concepts, the contestability of key political concepts, the normative implications of conceptual decisions in empirical inquiry, and the primacy of interpretation over law-like explanation. Otherwise, it seemed, my arguments on these fronts would be rejected out of hand by many because they were thought not to correspond to minimal, universal standards of rationality.

But these same standards of rational practice are today no longer shared so widely or self-confidently. Many remain committed to the sufficiency of rationality, but few are foolhardy enough to insist that these particular standards must form its core. Some are committed to some of them; many are opposed to many of them; but almost nobody thinks it is simply irrational to reject any of them. The academic terms of debate over the practice of rationality have changed significantly. It is doubtful that anyone advancing the theme of this book today would feel pressed to begin it as I did in 1974.

Still, some tendencies have persisted. Most practitioners believe the practice of rationality is bound up with the law of noncontradiction; many either assume or contend that rationality is a sufficient condition of responsible inquiry; many believe that any convincing argument that shows the insufficiency of a particular practice of rationality must be followed by an inquiry that will render rationality itself sufficient. It is still only a minority of dissident practitioners who contend, first, that rationality is both indispensable and problematical in every practice of political inquiry, and, second, that folding acceptance of this condition into the terms of academic debate and the practices of democratic politics is a precondition of a viable democratic ethos. "Rationality" has not become widely activated as an essentially contested concept, at least within the operational codes of most practicing social scientists, even though almost everybody would concur upon reflection that the prevailing practices of rationality in academic discourse today vary from those of the early 1960s.

Practices of rationality in political thought are essentially contestable, but these practices have still not become active objects of contestation. The recurrent acknowledgment of the insufficient and problematic qualities of local practices of rationality needs to be converted into debates over possible limits attached to any project that aspires to a sufficient concept of rationality. Deconstruction and genealogy are the best candidates through which this aspiration to the sufficiency of rationality can be engaged critically today, since they strive to enable practitioners to glimpse contingencies, remainders, resistances, and excesses in their own practices. These critical practices might encourage more theorists to engage a paradox arguably installed in rationality itself: namely that practices of rationality are both indispensable to political reflection and highly problematical in their claims to self-sufficiency. The scholarly division of labor in political and social theory today, however, does not encourage such reflection. For while a host of theorists now practice the arts of deconstruction and genealogy, very few rationalists have yet to consider the possible relation of these practices to their own enterprise and aspirations.

Rather than responding to each new exposure of the insufficiency of a particular practice of rationality with a renewed effort to restore closure, more practitioners might strive to come to terms with the ethically productive effects of treating this effect as a persistent, regular feature of the human condition. Rather than treating retrospective recognition of the insufficiency of each particular practice of rationality as simply a lack, loss, or defect to be lamented and repaired—thereby generating pressures to conceal, repress, redress, or, at the very least, whine about this effect—it might be timely to address the productive role "essentially contestable concepts" can play in ethical and political life. For it is possible that extending contestation more actively into established practices of rationality might create more social space for difference.

A positive response to the essential contestability of each concept of rationality might become an avenue through which the political minimalism of liberalism/individualism and the consensual idealism of communitarianism/civic republicanism are challenged. Such a response would prize the element of conflict in politics and cultivate agonistic respect among rivals as a means to foster freedom, generosity, and creativity within the incorrigible disputes of political life. For the most serious threats to the promise of such a mutual appreciation of limits between rivals flows not from irrationalists who refuse to recognize rational limits but from interlocking patterns of aggressive conventionality, closed rationality, and dogmatic faith entrenched in prevailing practices. The problem of evil in politics resides more in closed practices of rationality than it does in the refusal by irrationalists to conform to established practices of rationality.

We might, then, seek to loosen the grip the imperative to "reason" has on our souls in the interests of cultivating generosity in political contestation. We can come thus to appreciate how multiple practices of rationality are simultaneously indispensable and problematical. No argument could force anyone to reach such a conclusion, nor could it compel one to go in the other direction. Political discourse, on the model presented here, possesses a highly limited capacity to reach necessary conclusions through rational compulsion or entailment. Its conclusions acquire the appearance of necessity mostly by covert strategies that draw upon institutional power to secure the universality or sufficiency of particular practices of rationality. Critical engagements with prevailing practices of rationality can make a difference in the presumptions, predispositions, and moods through which practitioners engage political issues. These engagements can enhance reciprocal generosity and forbearance in political debates and struggles.

Chapter six, which was added to the second edition of this book, pursues some of these issues, defending "essential contestability" against a familiar set of objections, pointing to the role genealogy can play in appreciating the persistence and productivity of conflicts in these domains, and reconsidering presumptions about the rational, responsible agent that provided the backdrop to the definitions and contestations offered in the first edition. In the remainder of this preface I will pursue the implications of this perspective for an orientation to ethics and a conception of democracy. I will try to move "contestability" more actively into the domains of ethics and democracy.

Suppose one thinks, as I do, that a persistent problem of evil resides in the paradoxical relation of identity to difference.[1] An identity consolidates and stabilizes itself by distinguishing itself from different modes of being. I am pagan; you are Christian or nontheistic. I am feminine; you are masculine or androgynous. I am gay; you are straight. I am conventional and raucous; you are adventurous and reserved. I am rational; you are irrational or mystical. But the bearers of the differences through which an identity consolidates itself contain their own drives to identity, and these may well take a form that will destabilize, disturb, and disrupt the security of the identity I seek. These alter-drives, then, are required for the stabilization of an identity, but they can also emerge as threats to that same identity.

When these pressures intensify, one or both of the parties involved may move to consolidate its identity by defining a range of differences as evil, irrational, perverse, abnormal, or heretical. Identity requires difference, but difference also threatens to destabilize identity. Evil, as undeserved suffering of the other, grows out of the multiple pressures to conceal or repress the paradoxical character of this relationship by converting a range of differences into a single, totemic otherness that deserves to be conquered, converted, reformed, or reconstituted.

There are two points that connect these comments to those about rationality: first, the recurrent experience of the insufficiency of rationality is one of the signs of the paradoxical element in the logic of identity claims; and, second, the modern problem of evil resides more in the rationalization of prevailing conventions through the regular constitution of difference as otherness than it does in willful, gratuitous acts of evil by evil agents.

If a problem of evil resides in the paradoxical relation of identity to difference, we might strive to relieve its effects by emphasizing the constructed, contestable, contingent, and relational character of established identities, encouraging negotiations of identity and difference to proceed with a more refined sensibility of the limits of claims to self-sufficiency. Some moralists, however, will insist (predictably) that such a strategy is self-defeating. They will adopt the same perspective on this project that critics of essential contestability have done in more restricted zones. They will say: "It fosters nihilism" or, "it is parasitical upon the foundations of morality it opposes" or, "it issues in a relativism that disables it from opposing on moral grounds any response to the very paradox it purports to recognize."

Such replies are familiar. Their familiarity signals either a persistent blindness by those replying or a stubborn unwillingness to face up to the contradictory character of this enterprise on the part of those who press the contingency of identity and the contestability of established practices for ethical reasons.

From my perspective those who offer objections of the above sort implicitly demand ratification of the universal superiority of their own identity. This is detectable in the strong language used to characterize opponents. What can be done, anyway, with a parasite, a nihilist, or an irrationalist if you take these terms seriously and if you have enough power to act upon their implications? To use Nietzsche's language, the carriers of this message are saying "I am morality itself and nothing besides is morality." They insist that they are what morality requires, and they bolster that claim less by affirmative demonstrations and more by trying to show how any perspective that breaks with such an equation falls to pieces. They deploy morality to consolidate the self-certainty and intrinsic superiority of their own identity.

In the first edition of this book I endorsed a loosened version of such a position myself, treating the responsible agent as the ground of morality who would lapse into a pragmatic self-contradiction if it denied this status to itself. It now seems not only that this conclusion was exaggerated (as the addition of chapter six to the second edition indicates), but also that it may be possible to articulate an alternative orientation to ethical life that provides a more positive alternative to prevailing moral imperatives.

One line of response might be to challenge theories of intrinsic *moral order* with a competing *ethical sensibility,* and to open a little space between "morality" and "ethics"—with appropriate apologies to Hegel—so that the latter can become a more active competitor of the former. Conceptions of moral order can take several forms. One type accentuates the verb "to order," treating morality as obedience to an ultimate order or command issued by a god, nature, the dictates of reason, or a categorical imperative. Another type accentuates the noun "order," treating moral order as an inherent, harmonious design of being with which humans can enter into closer communion by practicing the right arts in the proper spirit of piety. Moral order, then, becomes an inherent command, a harmonious purpose, or, very often in the Western tradition, both of those modalities in some unstable combination.

The sensibility I am reaching for challenges both conceptions of moral order, whether they are explicitly defended or, as they often emerge today, implicitly installed in narratives that do not defend them explicitly. The implicit versions, for instance, are often signified through the application of pejoratives of parasitism or heresy to their opponents through terms that presuppose access to an intrinsic moral order founded on truth, attunement to a higher direction, a transcendental imperative, or universal reason.

Perhaps it is useful to open this distance between morality and ethics by considering some points of contact between one of the two moral conceptions summarized above and the orientation to ethics supported here. There may be discrete points of convergence between a teleological morality (the second type noted above) and the "post-Nietzschean" ethical sensibility I am developing, despite the more fundamental divergence between them. Both, first, challenge authoritarian tendencies in command moralities. Both, second, construe the self to be a microsocial structure of voices, replete with foreign relations, implicated in complex relations with the macrosocial structure in which it participates; both thereby deny "the self" as a sufficient ground of ethics or politics. And both, third, are ethics of cultivation rather than command. That is, both draw sustenance—to appropriate the recent words of Charles Taylor—from sources that exceed any settled identity and are irreducible to unfettered translation.[2]

A teleological morality might strive to commune with intrinsic purposes lodged in the embodied self, the language of a community, or the love of a purposeful god. In the Nietzschean tradition, such fugitive, nonpurposive sources might be "life," "will to power," "bodies," "earth," "fundamental difference," "*différance*," or "untruth." A teleologist might anchor his morality ambiguously in the realization of a deep identity and in communion with a higher design exceeding that identity's powers of articulation. A post-Nietzschean might draw her sensibility ambiguously from a contingent identity that incorporates agonistic respect for some of the differences that help to define it and from an "abundance of life" exceeding any particular set of identity\difference relations.

In Nietzsche's work, as I read it, "life" (as with other nonconcepts of its type) is an indispensable, nonfixable marker, challenging every attempt to treat a concept, settlement, or principle as complete, without excess, remainders, or resistances. This projection functions only through contrast and contestation with those concepts that project a commanding god, a designing god, an intrinsic purpose, or the sufficiency of reason into moral and ethical discourse.

A post-Nietzschean ethical sensibility, then, might strive first to expose artifice in hegemonic identities and in the definitions of otherness that help to sustain their self-certainty; second, to destabilize codes of moral order within which prevailing identities are set, when doing so crystallizes the element of resentment in their definitions of difference; third, to pursue generosity—that is, a pathos of distance—in the indispensable rivalries between moral/ethical perspectives by emphasizing the problematical character of each contending position (including one's own) and the unavoidability of such contestations; and, fourth, to counter political visions that suppress the paradox of difference with alternatives that go some distance in specifying the positive vision that inspires them. Since I have so far separated this ethical sensibility from the name "Nietzsche" only by a prefix and that all-important hyphen, let me offer a pertinent quotation from the divine source (or madman) himself:

> Thus I deny morality as I deny alchemy, that is, I deny their premises: but I do *not* deny that there have been alchemists who believed in these premises and acted in accordance with them.—I also deny immorality; *not* that countless people *feel* themselves to be immoral, but that there is any *true* reason so to feel. It goes without saying that I do not deny—unless I am a fool—that many actions called immoral ought to be avoided and resisted, or that many called moral ought to be done and encouraged—but I think the one should be encouraged and the other avoided *for other reasons than hitherto*. We have to *learn to think differently*—in order at last, perhaps very late on, to attain more: *to feel differently*.[3]

The "we" in this quotation is a solicitation rather than a command, and Nietzsche's use of artful techniques to alter corporeal "feelings" functions as a replacement for teleological virtues. For a Nietzschean ethic to function, a revised set of sensibilities must become inscribed in the feelings through tactics applied by the self to itself. This sensibility subdues existential resentment against a world in which the quest for a moral command or a higher purpose constantly meets with rebuffs. To the extent it succeeds in this latter task, the Nietzschean ethic both affirms the relational and contingent character of its own identity and cultivates agonistic respect for those differences that threaten its self-reassurance.

A post-Nietzschean ethic is an ethic of cultivation rather than a morality of command; it cultivates an experience of excesses, resistances, and remainders that calls into question the closures and sufficiencies of established practices of rationality rather than a communion with a higher purpose inscribed in being; it promotes a greater generosity in those valuable relationships of interdependence and rivalry rather than a unified consensus to which everyone subscribes; it strives to come to terms politically with dilemmas posed by the social need to act in concert and the persistent absence of a sufficient rational basis on which to establish consensuality. The above slogans merely provide preliminary bearings for a sensibility that expresses itself through the interpretations of prevailing practices it offers rather than through a set of abstract principles it brings to the judgment of fixed conventions. The post-Nietzschean sensibility shares this last disposition, too, with the teleological tradition that it contests at the ontological level.

Such a post-Nietzschean sensibility might consolidate itself through the elaboration of a *timely* conception of democracy congruent with its basic ethical impulses. This task, obviously, must be an extremely post-Nietzschean enterprise, one that is as opposed to some dimensions of Nietzsche's thought as it is indebted to others, standing in antagonistic indebtedness to the name "Nietzsche."[4] The installation of agonistic respect into the strife and interdependence of identity and difference must occur in a democratic culture today if it is to occur anywhere at all. I will here merely list two dimensions in such a conception of democracy, illustrating how "democracy," as an essentially contestable concept, might become the object of a new and timely contestation.

First, within the territorial state: A viable democratic culture would embody a productive ambiguity at its very center. Its role as an instrument of governance and mobilizer of collective action would be balanced and countered by its logic as a medium for the periodic disruption and denaturalization of settled identities and conventions. Both dimensions are crucial to democratic life and both are bound up with institutions of electoral accountability. But if the second function were to disappear under the weight of the first, state mechanisms of electoral accountability would become conduits for the production of interior, internal, and external others against which moral wars would be waged in order to bolster an artificial consensus.

Second, the limits posed by the territorial state to a democratic ethos: We live during a time when an asymmetry between the globalization of life and the confinement of democracy to the territorial state itself often functions to intensify democratic state chauvinism.

The nostalgia in political theory (and the culture at large) for a "politics of place" in which territoriality, sovereignty, electoral accountability, and belonging all correspond to each other in one "political place" has the double effect today of depoliticizing global issues and weakening the ability to challenge state chauvinism. The collective desire to limit the scope of political discourse to topics and responses that correspond to the effective limits of state action can suppress crucial issues: the suppression within democratic states of discourse over the greenhouse effect merely symbolizes a more extensive tendency. And these issues are likely to return in ways that are statist and exclusivist in character. The return of the repressed is often ugly.

Under the circumstances of late-modern life, productive possibilities might be opened up by a creative disaggregation of the democratic imagination, paying attention, for instance, to how a democratic ethos might exceed the boundaries of particular states, even while institutions of electoral accountability remain confined within states. During a time when corporate organizations, financial institutions, intelligence networks, communication media, and criminal rings are increasingly global in character, and when, as a result, a whole host of dangerous contingencies has become global in character, democratic energies, while remaining active below and through the state, might also extend beyond these parameters to cross-national, nonstatist social movements. A new pluralization of identifications and spaces of action flowing over the boundaries of the state seems needed to compromise the state's ability to monopolize collective identity at key historical moments.

Such boundary-crossing democratic movements with respect to, say, green pressure, gay/lesbian rights, state responses to the international transmission of disease, exposure of international patterns of state secrecy and surveillance, and contestation of statist monopolies over the potent symbols of security and danger can be productive. They can address the interests in question, the democratic drive to have a hand in shaping events that affect people, and the ventilation of politics within states. As cross-national, nonstatist movements already in motion accelerate, they might extend the democratic ethos beyond state boundaries through a new pluralization of political spaces for identification and action. They might compromise the state as the highest or consummate site of collective identity by extending the spaces of democratic action.[5]

These thoughts carry the theme of contestability into regions not thought through in the previous editions by opening up the terms of contestation more actively in the intersecting domains of rationality, ethics, and democracy. Introducing this perspective into such domains might change or alter established terms of debate. The cultivation of such an ethical sensibility would challenge persistent elements in the moral tradition, and do so in a way that consolidates its own implications for democratic theory. Pursuing these questions would bring out the ethical significance of rendering fixed debates and practices more fluid and problematic.

The agenda is to develop an orientation that treats encounters with excess, resistance, and remainders in culture as prized souces of creativity and change, rather than simply lacks, deficiencies, and failures to be resolved. Doing so would cultivate a sensibility that prizes simultaneously the importance of political disturbance to ethical life and the importance of limits to political disturbance.

The path from "essentially contested concepts" to a "post-Nietzschean sensibility" is not that difficult to discern, once some of the underbrush has been cleared by a protean thinker like Foucault. The conception of politics elaborated in the first edition of this book, for instance, is remarkably close to the one I have pursued later. It was, nonetheless, difficult to anticipate this trajectory in the initial context of this study's formulation.

NOTES

1. This thesis is developed in *Identity\Difference: Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991), esp. chap. 3. The relation between that study and *The Terms of Political Discourse* can be stated fairly succinctly. While the first study emphasizes the instability and contestability of key concepts, the second emphasizes these same characteristics with respect to the identities

through which we are constituted. The orientation to politics is similar in both studies, though the position is pushed onto new territory in the latter one.

2. Taylor's "sources" reside in intimate relation to the culture in which they find expression and to more fugitive experiences that are susceptible to partial articulation but not to forthright representation as independent objects. "Moral sources empower. To come closer to them, to have a clearer view of them, to come to grasp what they involve, is for those who recognize them to be moved to love or respect them, and through this love/respect to be better enabled to live up to them." *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 96. Taylor does not quite see, as I read him, how nonpurposive, nondirectional sources can inform ethical life.
3. Nietzsche, *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality,* trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 103 n.103. Alan White considers this quotation in a parallel way in relation to ethics in *Within Nietzsche's Labyrinthe* (New York: Routledge, 1990), chap. 7. I agree with his reading, adding only that the discussion of "feelings" at the end of the quote is perhaps the most crucial part of it. I consider more extensively how the above quotation from Nietzsche illuminates the sensibilities of both Nietzsche and Foucault in "Beyond Good and Evil: The Ethical Sensibility of Michel Foucault," *Political Theory* 21 (1993).
4. I outline such a relation of "antagonistic indebtedness" in *Political Theory and Modernity* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), chap. 5.
5. This theme is developed more extensively in "Democracy and Territoriality," *Millennium* 20 (1991): 463–84.

Preface to the Second Edition

The urge to depoliticize emerges in theories about politics as well as in the political life about which we theorize. It finds implicit expression, for instance, in the wish to construct a neutral matrix for political discourse. While the sources of this urge are readily understandable, recurrent efforts to demonstrate that one particular scheme actually provides the neutral medium sought are constantly open to decomposition. Each attempt to provide a frame both rationally demonstrable and specific enough to guide practical judgment, opens itself to reasonable contestation. This thesis was explored in the first edition of this text by developing the idea of essentially contestable concepts and by pursuing its implications for understanding the terms of political discourse. The notion helps us to understand not only the discourse of politics but also the politics of discourse. It helps us to see how politics becomes submerged in political theories governed by a strong program of rationalism and how struggles over the grammar of crucial concepts plays a prominent role in political discourse.

Though there are changes I would now make in these arguments, I continue to endorse the major thesis itself, and I have thus not revised the original text. Rather I have written a new last chapter which responds to criticisms of my initial account of power and essential contestability, re-examines the role and limits of counter-examples in conceptual inquiry, and considers affinities and differences between the thesis of contestability and the more relentless theory of deconstruction.

William E. Connolly
April, 1983

Preface to the First Edition

The terms of political discourse set the frame within which political thought and action proceed. To examine that discourse is to translate tacit judgments embedded in the language of politics into explicit considerations more fully subject to critical assessment.

My purposes in this study are to explore a set of concepts whose meanings are subject to persistent contests and debates at strategic points, to illuminate the role that such conceptual contests play in political inquiry and political life, and to stake out positions on the contests themselves that, if generally adopted, would help to weave viable norms of responsibility more tightly into the fabric of political life.

In 1970 Felix Oppenheim and I decided to collaborate on a short study of political concepts. The stimulating debates that ensued, though seldom issuing in agreement, convinced me to undertake this study and helped me to identify the pertinent issues more clearly. Steven Lukes has read a preliminary draft of each chapter of this book. His insightful criticisms and suggestions have been immensely helpful in my preparation of the final product. Jean Elshtain, Glen Gordon, George Kateb, David Kettler, and Sanford Thatcher have each read selected chapters; I deeply appreciate their numerous suggestions, many of which have found their way into the final draft. It is clear enough to me that each of these colleagues shares a