

# British Political Theory in the Twentieth Century

Edited by Paul Kelly



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# British Political Theory in the Twentieth Century



# Introduction

Paul Kelly

Since the study of politics emerged as a distinct activity in Britain in the early twentieth century it has been clear that one aspect of it in particular, what has come to be known as political theory, has maintained a leading role. Many of the most influential figures in British political science have been political theorists, and chairs in political theory remain among the most prestigious for professors of politics or political science to hold. It is therefore appropriate that as part of the celebration of the Political Studies Association's 60th Anniversary a book on *British Political Theory in the Twentieth Century* should be published. What I offer here is a book composed of selections from some of the greatest figures in political theory, who both shape the development of the study of politics in the United Kingdom and engage with concerns that can be woven into a distinct British tradition, albeit that many have also gone on to hold significant international reputations.

By presenting such a collection I obviously court controversy and invite challenge. All such selections are in some sense arbitrary and all canons or traditions invite contest and subversion. I fully expect that my selection is both arbitrary and contestable, and most political theorists or students of British politics or British political history will have some favourite contributor that I have ignored or deliberately excluded. Taking all that as given, let me offer some justifications for the criteria of inclusion and identify some important areas that I have had consciously to exclude in order to produce a manageable volume.

My list of contributors is confined to a relatively new profession of academic political theorists. Many have held prestigious chairs, such as the Chichele Professorship of Social and Political Theory at Oxford (Cole, Berlin); the Chair of Political Science at Cambridge (Barker); or the Graham Wallas Chair of Political Science at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) (Laski, Oakeshott and Barry). In making this choice I am conscious of excluding some of the most interesting political thinking produced in Britain in the twentieth century. Political activists and reflective politicians such as C. A. R. Crosland do indeed count

as political thinkers. Others such as George Orwell or the main contributors of the great ideological traditions of British party politics might have been included and in many ways their contribution to politics and the interest of their ideas are certainly more important than the academic theorising of those included in this book. A book about political ideas in Britain in the twentieth century, or about British political ideologies or even the history of British political philosophy would be a very different book. A fascinating account of political thinking about Britain could have been assembled just by selecting poets such as Eliot, Yeats, Auden, MacNiece, Larkin and Heaney. For those who expect such a work, I can only counsel them either to look elsewhere or be patient with my own distinct enterprise.

In defence of my more narrow selection I have been guided by the important contribution that academic political theorists have made, not only to British political discourse, but also to the shaping of the discipline itself. Although somewhat drier and certainly further removed from the direct engagement with political power and influence, the story of the development and character of academic political theory in Britain is still important. Many thousands of students who have gone on to engage far more directly in British political life – as well as that of the wider world – have been shaped in part by the ideas that they will have encountered for the first time through their teachers or their teacher's teacher. Figures such as Bernard Bosanquet, Harold Laski, Ernest Barker, Isaiah Berlin and Michael Oakeshott have had a considerable impact on the real party and institutional politics of Britain and the wider world through the indirect impact they often still exert on subsequent students. It is very easy to underestimate just how influential the indirect impact of teaching and scholarship on institutional and professional politics can be; often it far exceeds the apparent impact of the more media-friendly academics who within a generation can disappear without trace. This book is intended to serve as a sourcebook for the study of the development of political theory in Britain, rather than a full survey of all the diverse strands of British political thinking.

Even within academic political theory I have had to be selective and am very conscious of having marginalised some extremely important scholarly debates. I have not, for example, included the responses to Peter Laslett's famous 1956 claim that political theory was dead. Nor have I included the hugely influential Cambridge School of the history of political thought associated with Quentin Skinner, John Dunn and J. G. A. Pocock, all of whom have shaped the study of political ideas for nearly half a century. A full defence of this exclusion would require a substantive essay, but one simple if crude reason is that they have been advocates of a reduction of political theory to history and therefore implicitly deny that there is a distinct activity of political theory. Feminist political thought gets no serious discussion and the inclusion of women is confined to Carole Pateman and Anne Phillips. Part of the reason for this exclusion is that for much of the twentieth century women played at best a limited role in British political studies of any form, although there were notable exceptions such as Phyllis Doyle, who wrote an important textbook on the history of political thought, and more recently Margaret Canovan, who has done much to introduce an Arendtian voice into British political theory. Pateman on the

other hand is no token addition, as she is one of the most influential and widely cited political scientists in the world. Of contemporary thinkers, her claim to inclusion is perhaps the strongest of all, so perhaps political theory is leading the way in British political science in terms of opening access to the finest women scholars and proving to be one of the fields in which an increasing number of women are making international reputations. Anne Phillips, currently at the LSE, is another influential international voice in political theory, whose approach to issues of democracy, equality and inclusion has been shaped directly and indirectly by the British tradition of political theory. Other voices excluded include the Marxist left. As with the exclusion of the Cambridge School, an adequate explanation of the absence of Marxist scholars is a complex story that is not easy to summarise. In part this absence is attributable to the preoccupation of Marxists with the work of other Marxists, but also to the absence of the kind of leftist tradition that one finds in France, Germany or Italy where the most interesting variants of Marxist theory have thrived in the twentieth century. It might also be a result of what Perry Anderson described as an insular indifference to high theory and the absence of a British tradition of state theory. There is something in this claim, but I will challenge its central assumptions in the interpretative introductory essay that follows (Chapter 1).

Enough of excuses for exclusion. The task was to construct a coherent narrative about a distinctively British approach to political theory. My selection of thinkers does that in a number of ways. Firstly, all of the thinkers contribute to a distinctively British tradition that focuses on one of three distinct questions at the heart of the understanding of politics. The first question concerns the site of politics or the groups among whom political relationships hold. The second question concerns the appropriate institutions of politics and the third question concerns 'who gets what, where, when and how?' All of these questions are interconnected but they can be answered in different ways in different political traditions. Also, to follow Michael Oakeshott, the study of political science is always in part the pursuit of the intimations of a tradition and that manifests itself in the way these different questions assume different orderings of priority at different times. The story I wish to tell through my selection is about that ordering.

In the first instance the debates at the heart of British politics concern the nature and claims of the state – the British state. This is defended in Bernard Bosanquet's idealist defence of the state as the actualisation of the ethical idea. Yet the whole tenor of British political thought and experience has been deeply ambivalent about the state and its importance. L. T. Hobhouse's new liberalism shows a way in which the power of the state can be steered towards the liberal egalitarian task of positive freedom and welfare. This statist discourse came to final dominance during the decades following the success of wartime mobilisation and the development of a successful welfare state in the post-war period. However, the statist discourse found in Bosanquet and Hobhouse was the subject of serious political challenges from an alternative pluralist discourse which is represented in the work of J. N. Figgis, Harold Laski and G. D. H. Cole and which also partly informs Ernest Barker's writings on nationality and national identity. Political pluralism and its associated ideas

of corporate freedom, local democracy, subsidiarity and even devolution have had a profound impact on British attitudes to the state and the nature and locus of state power. The traditions of thinking about the state as the primary site of politics are precisely what are being challenged by pluralism in the early twentieth century. The collection concludes with a number of contemporary thinkers who indirectly resurrect some of those debates, as their own political theories engage with the political currents of the British state. I have in mind especially Paul Hirst, David Miller, Anne Phillips and Bhikhu Parekh. Parekh's Report of the Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain and his work as a theorist of multiculturalism has raised many of the issues of group self-governance and the limited role of the centralised state that were dominant in the early part of the century. Although the debate about multiculturalism might itself be on the wane, the issues raised by Parekh remain of fundamental significance for the future of British politics. Hirst used the idea of political pluralism or associationalism as a way of thinking beyond the welfare state in the 1980s and 1990s. He wished to recover a leftist pluralist discourse that could be used to respond to the challenge to a centralised welfare state that grew up with neoliberalism in the 1980s. Miller challenges the fragmentation of the polity that he found in multiculturalism and asserts the need for a common national identity to sustain the redistributive project of modern social democracy. Miller's work on nationality has drawn fire from a number of his left liberal colleagues, but his impact on the study of social justice and his concern with the preconditions of citizenship echo similar concerns from idealists such as Bosanquet or idealist-influenced progressives such as Barker. The nature of the state and its relationship with other candidate political communities or associations is a central part of the argument of Chapter 1 of this book. Yet even by departing from the statist or communitarian strands of British political theory, Miller's work is still related to this broad problem about the identity of the political community.

The second broad theme that is related to the question of the nature and site of political power is the idea of political liberty as it has developed in Britain. This theme is illustrated in the work of a number of philosophical liberals, although many would not identify themselves as liberals in politics. This theme is controversially divided into what Berlin described as negative and positive liberty. The first part of the book concerns positive libertarians such as Bosanquet and Hobhouse. Alongside these we can include the pluralists such as Figgis, Laski and Cole, all of whom drew on elements of a positive view of freedom and an account of political liberty that depends on the relationship between different forms of association and the dominant site of political power – usually the state. R. H. Tawney's defence of equality as a constitutive part of the concept of freedom as a moral status also forms part of this complex British tradition of positive liberty. Berlin's famous lecture of 1958 marked a restatement of a negative libertarian tradition. I have not chosen to include Berlin's lecture as it is widely reproduced, but the same themes are found in the shorter defence of a negative libertarianism and liberal pluralism, 'The Pursuit of the Ideal'. Berlin is often accused of being a Cold War liberal, but the debate he engages with is precisely the debate about the modern welfare state

as a centralised state and its impact upon the liberty of groups and individuals. This emphasis on the nature of freedom is also reflected in the philosophical liberalism of H. L. A. Hart and Brian Barry, who partly shape the agenda of modern political philosophy until John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice* in 1971. Hart and Barry are both in the intellectual tradition of J. S. Mill despite their lack of sympathy for his utilitarianism. Their critically supportive attitude to the Rawlsian revolution in political philosophy is based on a shared concern to save the liberal agenda from utilitarianism and retain an egalitarian strand in progressive political ideas which is sympathetic to individual liberty without being wholly sceptical about the state. Barry's early and influential paper on 'The Public Interest' provides an influential starting point for a tradition of liberal egalitarian thought with a distinctively British character which draws together the issues of democracy and social justice.

A final theme that runs through the selection concerns the nature of the activity of political theory itself. Almost all the thinkers covered have something important to contribute to the question of 'what is political theory?' and how it is to be conducted. Drawing on philosophy, history, economics, sociology, law or a combination of all of these, the contributors to this volume shape the study of the field. Great figures such as Laski and Oakeshott tried to shape the study of political theory in the image of their own work. The same can be said of earlier figures such as Barker, although his once-significant position in the profession is difficult fully to comprehend. Others such as Barry have done so less directly but, like Oakeshott, Barry was equally concerned with the relationship between political theory and political science and with fundamental questions about the nature and place of political theory on the intellectual map. Although two more different thinkers could hardly be imagined, the institutional experience of arriving at the LSE, a school of the social sciences (and a place where both Oakeshott and Barry had their greatest impacts as scholars and teachers), from the very different intellectual worlds of Cambridge and Oxford, respectively, encouraged both thinkers to engage with the interconnections between political philosophy and political science that mark the distinctiveness of political theory.

More recently, Pateman, Phillips and Parekh have challenged some of the pre-suppositions of this synthesis of political philosophy and political science, and in Phillips', Miller's and Parekh's cases have also exposed the importance of identity in political theory: an idea that we can see in Bosanquet and Barker at the beginning of the twentieth century.

That political theory should still be concerned with its own nature after a century of institutionalisation and professionalisation might for some indicate an activity that is either deeply flawed or an intellectual dead end. Perhaps the predominance of political theory within British political science is a sign that the process of professionalisation into a 'normal' social science is incomplete, and that returning to the history a hundred years hence might reveal a very different story. For what it is worth I would be highly sceptical about any such conclusion. The emergence of political science is an unfinished project, but whatever form it takes in the future there will remain a special role for political theory, because the latter continues to

challenge our perceptions of the object of inquiry – the nature of the activity, institutions and values – that are manifested through political power and activity. However much methodological uniformity might be achieved, political theorists will continue to challenge the attempts at normalisation that follow from disciplinary specialisation. And just as there remain distinctive political communities, there will remain distinctive ways of theorising those political relationships. The subtly differing patterns of that activity will also remain of as much interest to students of politics as any of the other ways in which politics manifests itself.

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# Chapter 1

## British Political Theory in the Twentieth Century

Paul Kelly

Throughout the twentieth century the study of politics in Britain has produced a long and distinguished list of theorists, from Bernard Bosanquet and Henry Sidgwick at the beginning of the century, followed by the likes of L. T. Hobhouse, R. H. Tawney, Harold Laski and G. D. H. Cole, until during the third quarter of the century we saw the remarkable efflorescence of liberal theory with the likes of Isaiah Berlin, H. L. A. Hart, Brian Barry and arguably Michael Oakeshott,<sup>1</sup> all of whom still shape the subject. The question that lies behind this essay is whether there is anything more distinctive to be said about British political theory in the twentieth century than could be found by producing a list of notable but perhaps disconnected figures who engage in a generic activity of political theory. The task of this essay is to explore the ways in which the diversity of British political theory can still be given an overall structure and to examine the ways in which it follows the contours of change and development in British politics.

This of course raises a further question about why one might focus on a national tradition. If place of birth and first language is all that matters then we can identify national 'traditions' of political theory just as we can of chemistry or any other natural science where the question of national origin is purely a side issue of only biographical interest. Naturalistic political scientists are, perhaps rightly, suspicious of claims to national distinctiveness in their field of study precisely because such a claim in relation to any particular phenomenon is the outcome of an inquiry and not its presupposition. It may well be true that electorates or legislatures follow distinct patterns of behaviour in different political systems, but if they do and if national distinctiveness has anything to do with the explanation, then that is a conclusion and not a premise, and it is certainly not a matter that concerns the identity of the inquirer. Naturalistic political scientists also attempt to apply methods of inquiry that are generic across political systems: there are no national methods of inquiry. There is no reason, for instance, why the greatest or most qualified students of British or American politics should be British or American. Many

contemporary philosophers adopt a similar attitude to their discipline. The point of view of philosophy is universal and non-contingent, and its methods, such as logico-linguistic analysis, are also generic and universal. If political theory is a philosophical activity, then again the place of Britishness appears at best biographical and ancillary to the real work of the discipline.

Yet there is an alternative view. Critics of a naturalistic science of politics assert the contingency and historical particularity of political experience. Only at the most abstract and therefore uninteresting level of experience can we speak about generic phenomena of politics. All that is interesting is located within political traditions and therefore the task of the student of politics is to comprehend the precise and distinctive contours of those political traditions. On this view the study of politics is a hermeneutic activity, concerned with understanding the internal coherence of such traditions rather than, as the naturalists claim, seeing these as merely manifestations of universal mechanisms. This hermeneutic approach to political inquiry reflects a similar approach to the activity of politics itself, as the 'pursuit of intimations' of a distinct political tradition.<sup>2</sup> Political theorists and philosophers have been particularly attracted to this hermeneutic or historicist approach, on the grounds that it reflects the historical contingency and fleetingness of much political and philosophical discourse. Ideas and concepts that once seemed dominant quickly fall from favour or disappear altogether. This fact makes political theorists equally cautious about making claims for their own methods and approaches, which are equally fleeting, as the history of philosophy shows (see Collingwood, 1993). It is precisely in this context of variety and contingency that the idea of national traditions of political theory flourishes, especially among those historians who focus on language and conceptual change.<sup>3</sup> This historicist and hermeneutic approach to political theory has yielded rich results, but raises an important problem that is central to my concern with the character of British political thought in the twentieth century. Most inquiries into traditions of political theory either make generalisations that are not peculiar to distinct national traditions (see Pocock, 2009) or else they collapse into the ideas of individual thinkers with the result that national traditions disappear into incoherence (Gray, 1993; 2000).

Mindful of the risk of providing an account of a tradition that is not distinctively British or reducing the idea of such a tradition to a mere collection of particular instances, I will focus on delineating an object of inquiry itself. This constructivist task<sup>4</sup> combines a number of different theorists' work and traces connections and discontinuities between them, but it does not claim that prior connections must already exist between these theorists, nor does it assume that only the narrative connection that I identify holds between these thinkers. In short, I do not claim that the conception of British political theory that I present and analyse is the only one possible, or that it is the only useful story that can be told. It is the task of the historian of political thought to sift between such constructed narratives, but it is one of the political theorist's tasks to construct them in the first place, as that involves sociological, ethical and philosophical considerations which fall outside the remit of history narrowly conceived but which do not fall outside the remit of a

hybrid activity such as political theory. Indeed one of the main claims that I intend to exemplify in this essay is that the study of political ideas should not be subsumed into history, narrowly conceived, albeit that it might deploy the skills and techniques of the historian.<sup>5</sup>

One further point that distinguishes the approach in this essay from that of a historical approach to political theory is that I will also link the changing structure of political theory to changes in British politics; historians are generally cautious about making what appear to be causal claims. Yet in so doing the essay will not make any precise claims about the causal relationship between political forces and ideological or conceptual change or about the priority of ideas over events. The role of this essay is merely (though importantly) to suggest patterns and similarities between the structure of British politics and of British political theory which can then be fleshed out by more precise historical, empirical or philosophical studies.

### Political Theory and Political Thought

Political thought takes many distinct forms and is a central component of politics under any possible understanding of that much contested term. Politicians argue in legislatures and cabinet rooms; they argue with each other in the public realm, on television and in the street. Ordinary citizens, rebels, marginalised groups and those denied citizenship or political rights, argue and complain about public matters, and defend and support their preferred political parties and agendas. Alongside this, serious commentators write histories, policy platforms and theoretical defences of principles and values. Novelists, playwrights and poets also have their say. Given the centrality of thought and discourse to the practice of politics, the study of political thought and political discourse must be an essential component of any conception of the study of politics. Indeed, political thought in all its diversity, including ballads and scripture, was the subject of the first recognisable history of political thought published in Britain in 1855.<sup>6</sup> The phenomenon of political thought considered in this most general sense can be categorised in a number of ways. Students of politics and political scientists have argued extensively over how that categorisation is made, and whether in making it one should attach priority or special weight to some forms of political thinking over others. Is the demotic thought and writings of participants in politics of lesser value and interest than the high theory of Plato, Hobbes and Hegel? This is sometimes presented as the distinction between political ideology and political philosophy: the subject of a debate that raged widely in British and American political science and theory in the 1950s and 1960s. However, as intellectual historians are quick to remind us, Hobbes and Locke were also engaged in practical, indeed in Locke's case, revolutionary politics (see Ashcraft, 1986). Others have warned about the need to distinguish philosophy and history from the practical mode of experience, as the latter is always a deliberately partial and engaged form of understanding (Oakeshott, 1962, *passim*). One can also argue about the distinctiveness of these categorisations. Is there a

distinction between political theory and political philosophy?<sup>7</sup> Are both of these really only different manifestations of political ideology?

As this essay wishes to narrow its focus to British political theory as opposed to political thought more generally, it is perhaps useful to distinguish political theory from other forms of political thought.

The issue of the nature of political theory and its distinction from philosophy or ideology is a deeply contested matter, the roots of which are to be found in the emergence of the study of politics as an academic subject in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Political philosophy is an ancient subject that goes back at least to Plato and Aristotle; however if one considers the tradition of political philosophy from the Greeks to the nineteenth century one can see a complex narrative that combines many different activities, methods of inquiry and objects of study. It is clear that the 'great tradition' does not give anything remotely like a disciplinary identity or a single object of inquiry. The modern study of politics can be traced to the rise of new literatures within the broad subject of moral science, a field of inquiry that included what are now modern disciplines such as economics and law. It also has its roots in the political transformations of mass politics that developed throughout the nineteenth century, leading to political mobilisation, the rise of bureaucracies and a professional civil service, and the consequent reform of university curricula, away from a primary focus on clerical training and towards the cultivation of specialist scholarship and the education of governing elites. From this process of social transformation emerged a number of institutional changes that were to impact heavily on the activity of political theory and the debates that surround its nature and content. At Oxford, the university reforms of Benjamin Jowett and T. H. Green were reflected in the new subject of 'Greats' (philosophy and classical literature) that was to spawn both the British Idealist tradition in political philosophy, but also many of the key figures who were to transform the study of politics and the social sciences in the early twentieth century (see Wokler, 2001) including Idealist philosophers such as Bernard Bosanquet, as well as L.T. Hobhouse, the first professor of sociology in Britain, Graham Wallas, the first professor of political science in Britain and Sir Ernest Barker, the first holder of the Chair in Political Science at Cambridge. Cambridge's own contribution to the emergence of political science and political theory is equally important. Here the key figures are Sir John Seeley, Henry Sidgwick and Alfred Marshall: Seeley in particular, as he developed the History tripos within which political science and political theory is still taught.<sup>8</sup> This tradition produced figures such as J. N. Figgis, the historian of political thought and theorist of pluralism, and later still, Michael Oakeshott. The third institution of note was the establishment of the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) in 1895. This institution was deliberately intended to break away from the indigenous traditions of the ancient universities and to produce the future bureaucrats and governing class of the Fabian Utopia dreamed of by Sidney Webb and his associates.

The institutional factors at Oxford and Cambridge are particularly important in establishing the identity of political theory. The early products of the Oxford 'Greats'

tradition tended to characterise their activity as political philosophy, given the importance of 'philosophy' as a formal part of their training. Cambridge students educated under the History tripos would have confronted the study of politics and political thought and ideas as a historical activity. Consequently, they would be less inclined to describe themselves as political philosophers, and in so far as they were political theorists or political scientists, these latter activities were seen as historical. For this reason, it is not wholly misleading to see the nomenclature of political theory or political philosophy as following institutional or even departmental histories. So we might say that political philosophy is theory conducted in philosophy departments whereas political theory is political philosophy conducted in government or political science departments. Those individuals such as Wallas, Barker, Laski and Cole who were responsible for developing the subject in the early twentieth century tended to allow their own institutional experience to characterise the way they described the activity that was passed down to their students. Thus a figure such as Wallas, who rejected the 'Greats' tradition of his youth, was more comfortable with the idea of political science, whereas Barker, who moved towards a greater sympathy with the Cambridge historical approach, became increasingly uncomfortable with the idea of political science, at least if this was to indicate a naturalistic mode of inquiry. For Barker and those influenced by him, political theory was a far more congenial term as it indicated an object of inquiry, namely systematic thought about politics that could be studied with the methods of the Cambridge historian.

A full institutional history of the growth and development of British political theory and political science should extend beyond these three important institutions as they influenced the development of other great departments for the study of politics in an expanding British university system. Yet those who were to develop departments at, for example, Manchester, or who were instrumental in the renewal of political science at Oxford with the establishment of Nuffield College, drew on traditions and training received at Oxford, Cambridge or the LSE.

These historical and institutional factors lend support to a practice-based account of political theory as the activity conducted by certain figures holding identifiable institutional roles, in this case within universities. In short, political theory is what is done by a series of important professors and by those who worked under them or who were influenced by them in their professional capacities. There is much to be said for this practice-based account as it enables us to identify who is a political theorist and who is not: George Orwell is not a political theorist whereas Harold Laski is. The practice-based account allows us to draw distinctions within the realm of political thought, between theorists and non-theorists, and for the purposes of this essay to delimit the object of inquiry.

However, while the practice-based account of political theory is useful it is not a sufficient account of political theory as it makes no substantive claims about what these practitioners do. Is everything written and said by a political theorist on this practice-based account political theory? One reason why we might be concerned not to concede this is illustrated by the figure of Harold Laski or that of his