

# The Relevance of Political Theory to International Relations

Written by Edward Andrew

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Political theory is relevant today, not only (as John Rawls thought) to make explicit the implicit assumptions comprising life in liberal or capitalist democracies, but also to criticize those assumptions from outside the shared conventions of the present and to safeguard political language from the incoherence and insignificance of contemporary speech. Politicians rarely talk about progress as if they had been infected by the postmodern critique of Enlightenment but they do talk about “moving forward” without any indication of the meaning of forward or backward. Political theory attempts to clarify the reasons conservatives wish to conserve some practice or institution and radicals wish to reform some practices and “move forward.”

The history of political thought can help to illuminate some of the complexity of contemporary international relations. Machiavelli's *Discourses on Livy* indicates why expansionary or imperialist republics, such as Rome, must keep its plebeians poor so that they will be hungry for land and conquest abroad. Seventeenth and eighteenth-century neo-Machiavellian thinkers, such as Harrington, Sydney, Trenchard, Gordon, Montesquieu, Madison and Hamilton, repeated Machiavelli's view that advocates of agrarian equality should be murdered by the senate, and deprecated Athens' suppression of its senate (Areopagus), as the grounds whereby Rome was a successful imperialist and Athens was not.

While Wilkinson and Pickett's *The Spirit Level* (2009) convincingly shows that egalitarian societies enjoy better mental and physical health and have more social mobility than inegalitarian societies, they do not show why the Anglo-American world has led the world into increasing inequality in recent decades. If, as Hobbes thought, nations are in a constant state of preparing for war, recruitment of soldiers is a problem for liberal societies based on an ethic of self-preservation and commodious living. Since conscription was abolished in the United States in the early 1970s, volunteers enter the army to get education and health benefits they otherwise cannot afford. Overseas ventures do not have the opposition of wealthy and educated conscripts as was the case in the Vietnam War.

Machiavelli wrote that successful imperialism is to be praised and unsuccessful imperialism is to be deprecated. Indeed, successful imperialism is no longer considered imperialist but is nation-building or continental expansion; few people in Burgundy and Brittany consider themselves subject to French imperialism, and only a minority of Welsh and Scots identify as victims of English imperialism, as distinct from the Irish. One cannot predict if complaints about Yankee imperialism will be heard north and south of the American border in a century's time. Machiavelli praised the Romans for successfully integrating subjugated peoples into the Roman Empire.

While political theorists have usually viewed themselves as independent thinkers and autonomous agents, the recent scandal at my *alma mater*, the London School of Economics, for accepting money from the Gaddafi family highlighted the fact that scholars and thinkers are rarely independently wealthy and require support from patrons.

As my *Patrons of Enlightenment* (2006) demonstrated, the major thinkers of the eighteenth century depended upon either royal or aristocratic patronage, while insisting on their intellectual autonomy. Hypocrisy is not unknown today. As Benjamin Barber, one of the recipients of Gaddafi largesse, pointed out, most American and Canadian universities receive money from Saudi Arabia and no one denounces them as supporting autocracy and Wahabi or

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“puritan” forms of Islam that tend to be anti-Western. The corporate sponsorship of North American universities also introduces an oligarchic bias into the republic of letters and it is quite possible that such sponsorship portends the direction of British universities. Academics cannot achieve the intellectual independence of the Enlightenment ideal but they can understand their economic situation and attempt to construct multiple dependencies to attempt to preserve some semblance of academic freedom. The history of political thought facilitates self-understanding.

Whereas Machiavellian prudence is largely concerned with methods of achieving and augmenting power, Aristotelian prudence is concerned with balancing means and ends—the ends of peace and freedom (or the leisure to engage in politics and philosophy). Aristotelian prudence is not a rule-based Kantian or Rawlsian doctrine but alerts thinkers to particularity and complexity. International relations is more like history, which teaches that there are few universal rules, than Rawlsian political theory. There may be reasons, and not just Machiavellian ones, for western intervention in Libya but yet not in Yemen, Saudi Arabia, and Syria. That being said, one would want to know more about the composition and aims of the Libyan opposition before siding with it in the emerging Libyan civil war.

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For more on this subject see a companion piece by Ronald Beiner