

Why is political theory still relevant?

Written by Ryan Balot

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RYAN BALOT, APR 23 2011

I've been asked to explore two questions: Why is political theory still relevant? How can it help us to understand the world of today?

It can't be that everyone once considered political theory relevant and now finds it irrelevant, based on mysterious facts about today's world. Practical men and women have always favoured action over thought. Long ago, Aristotle said that political activists find philosophers contemptible. So these questions are hardly innocent: they put political theory on the defensive. How should political theorists respond?

Whether they react defensively or even offensively, political theorists will instinctively interrogate the questions. Not assuming that all questions are equal, they struggle to formulate good questions. Is political theory "relevant" ... to what or to whom? And why should we want to understand the world of today, as opposed to that of yesterday or tomorrow? Perhaps we are too self-absorbed. Should we then abandon "presentism" altogether? Maybe so, if we discover that political life is fundamentally unchanging – for example, if it is governed by permanent, natural laws. With its own questions in hand, political theory may prove to be tougher than the questioners believed. Conversely, practical politics may be more absurdly self-important than it had realized. Questions, as well as answers, are revealing.

Many political theorists react defensively and pose as legislators. Should prostitution be legal? Should the UN intervene in remote war-zones on humanitarian grounds? Should ideals of free speech protect neo-Nazi parades? There is no substitute for democratic deliberation on such questions. But to clarify the principles of deliberation is one reasonable task for political theory, and one that illustrates its "relevance" clearly. Few would sceptically challenge the effort to explain how different political arguments are consistent, or not, with justice in a free society. Helping us to be more self-consistent is admirable. Yet legislative political theory grants too readily the goodness or even inevitability of current ideas. Political theory hobbles itself by conceding that its cardinal importance is to be useful.

The picture is different with more overtly "critical" theory. Here we enter subversive terrain. Critical theorists inquire into the formation of existing beliefs about class, gender, race, ethnicity, and religion. Common opinion – the sphere of politics – is not a trustworthy guide to political life. Rather, according to these theorists, common opinion itself is a contingent product of the workings of power and influence (think of Marx), of limitless self-regard (think of Freud), and of hypocrisy (think of Nietzsche). Politics takes place within Plato's Cave, at three removes from anything true or worthy of respect. This is a pessimistic view. Critical theorists defend the priority of word to deed but also mistrust the innocence or purity of any words or deeds.

For example, most citizens would accept the legitimacy of private property, prisons, and national control of borders. But is our support based on thoughtless conventionality, or indeed dumb luck – the contingencies of being born in this place, at this time, in this socioeconomic class? Is it any surprise that the wealthiest 1% favour Laffer curves and "tax relief"? Is it merely on principle that unskilled workers tend to oppose open-door immigration policies? Critical theory shakes us from complacency and unmask the appearance of impartial political judgment; it calls on us to confront the issues honestly by forcing us to face ourselves.

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Hence, by proposing a “theory of error,” this theoretical approach invites us to embrace, not what is already our own, but what is good. And, for critical theory, what is good is justice; and political theory is a fight for social justice. But consider this: if you’re so interested in justice, why don’t you join Anti-Slavery International instead of fussing over Marx’s theory of alienation? Political theory may help to lay bare prejudicial ways of thinking. Yet, after all, it does not promote justice as effectively as civil or global activism. Perhaps political theory’s significance lies in something remote even from the useful work of pursuing justice. Political theorists should, as Stanley Fish might say, work for justice on their own time.

What if political theorists should remain silent when asked about their relevance? It’s not that they have nothing to say. Instead, political theory as a vocation has nothing to do with relevance. Political theory looks politics in the eye and interprets it, without transforming hard-edged reality into a mushy fantasy or a morality drama. To interpret political life accurately, political theorists have to address fundamental questions, without fear or malice; and they must return to those questions repeatedly. What is justice? Why is justice an essential component of a good human life? What is law or political power or courage or freedom, and why and how should we value them? What justifies governmental authority in the first place? What (if anything) does political activity contribute to a flourishing human existence? Unflinching commitment to every such question is the chief virtue of “Socratic” political theory.

We are likely to encounter many opinions on such questions. But Socratic political theorists strive to replace opinion with knowledge, in full awareness of humanity’s inherent limitations. Political theory may originate in a love of justice, but it matures into the pursuit of understanding for its own sake, as one of the highest human activities, if not the best of all. To maintain its integrity, political theory has to shun instrumentality and assert the self-sufficiency of theoretical speculation as a distinctive human goal. In its most confident and intransigent moments, political theory is subversive, even threatening: it challenges the claim of politics to be the most important human activity. If political activists have always regarded philosophers as lazy and cowardly, then political philosophers have discerned tyrannical impulses within all political men.

Socratic political theory is as much at odds with legislative political theory as with committed activism. Socratic political theorists do not pretend to guide practice, because their merciless self-questioning unsettles any apparent certainties or dearly held truths about equality, freedom, toleration, and justice. Their highest wisdom consists in knowing that human beings cannot know the “greatest things” – i.e., the nature and significance of virtue or excellence. To pretend otherwise would be a serious lapse of honesty. Yet, as committed searchers, Socratic theorists teach us to “live the questions” in a way that is utterly contrary to our utilitarian moralism. Their “relevance” is to model philosophy as a way of life. Ask them about today’s world, and they will answer you with questions.

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