

political theory today: political innovation and the management of structural change

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We are living at a time of great unrest, conflict and doubt about our political frames of reference – of confusion regarding the present and disorientation regarding the future. The rapid changes in disciplinary boundaries that we have witnessed in recent years are giving rise to new scenarios and perspectives. Inquiring into how we should approach these new contexts thus seems imperative as far as the innovative potential of the discipline itself is concerned. Increasingly, there is a widely held view that theoretical reflection and the political decisions that are made *here and now* are of vital importance, since the design of the political society of the future is at stake. This view provides political theory (PT), as a critical activity, with more fertile terrain than has hitherto been available to it. The challenge before PT is to define its function in relation to society and political practice. In other words, PT must decide whether it should be strictly interpretative, or whether it should also entail application – both through theoretical criticism and normative prescription,

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and through influence exerted directly on social and political reality and on the 'decision-makers'.

In order to investigate PT today, we have to clarify the implicit confusion that exists between the object and the context in which the activity is carried out. It tends to be taken for granted that PT is reflection *on* democracy and liberalism. Using the language of Michael Walzer, we can say that PT is closely linked to the way of life of a particular community, and that its function consists in articulating that community's self-understanding (Walzer, 1989). If we take the 'community' to mean the liberal democratic system, we will have a solid contextual argument for stating

that PT today is basically theory *of* and *on* democracy and liberalism. In today's world, it is this very field of reference that is the direct object of reflection. The purpose of this article is to consider these issues, focusing in particular on the widening gap between the democratic values our societies proclaim, and the solutions that (with a degree of hypocrisy) they adopt to confront new political situations.

POLITICAL THEORY IN TIMES OF TURBULENCE

PT is an activity, a condition and an attitude, that always exists on a secondary level. It attempts to give meaning to political actions, and it is this search for meaning that characterises its practice. Almost all the authors that practise it and reflect on 'what they do'² would share the opinion that this critical activity is difficult to delimit properly.

I believe that the best way to go about this is to try to devise some sort of 'PT Practitioner's Guide'. What elements would we highlight as being necessary? Initially, I would divide this hypothetical 'Guide' into at least three sections: (i) the type of activity involved; (ii) the epistemological premises (or convictions) on which any theoretical activity must be based; and lastly, but no less importantly, (iii) the context in which this activity is carried out.

(i) PT is an eminently analytical secondary-level activity. This means at least three things. First, its task is to question that which is taken for granted and/or to force an explicit definition on that which is implicit, whether this is done with a view to supporting arguments or to legitimising activities and institutions. Second, practising PT always means

seeking out the system of 'prejudices' (in the sense given to the word by Gadamer, 1992) that accompanies political reality and guides its activity (Parekh, 1968). Third, and by way of corollary, PT as an activity always has a *mirror effect*. This means that when we practise PT it is essential always to take into account the frame of reference within which argumentation and/or political activity is carried on. In short, as an analytical activity, it is the result of the 'linguistic turn' given to political reflection. Basically, this means that political theorists must be constantly aware of the language used in politics and of the politics of language (Pocock, 1981), of its usage and semantic changes.

(ii) It follows that epistemologically the practice of PT involves a twofold abandonment: the pretension to objectivity in the behaviourist sense (Taylor, 1985), and the tendency to perceive reality and propositions in terms of truth or falsehood, in the positivist sense. In Gadamer's language, we would say that one who practises PT must be aware that they cannot escape the 'hermeneutic circle', and that their own propositions and language can (and must) also be an object of analysis. In this framework, the principal task is to 'demythologise' concepts or established ideas: to separate effectively, and also to see the to-and-fro movement between ideas and beliefs, to paraphrase Ortega y Gasset (1976); to recognise that the concepts that we use always depend on our values, and are therefore essentially contested.

(iii) Lastly, it is intrinsic to PT to reflect on how the relationship between political concepts and the changing structure of society is articulated. This explains why the ideal contextual framework for practising PT is periods of crisis; moments of



doubt about the status quo; times of social change – deep social change, such as we are witnessing today. In Kuhnian terms, we could say that PT grows fastest in ‘revolutionary’ periods, that is, at historic moments in which the traditional paradigms that make up the prevailing conceptions of the world and limit any process of political legitimation first begin to show their ‘incoherences’. Inverting the argument, when the development of society and politics is ‘normal’ (in the Kuhnian sense) there is no overwhelming need for PT. As a corollary, it follows that PT takes on real meaning when a gap appears between the vocabulary and the reality one is attempting to describe, in other words, when the conceptual resources to legitimate a context of crisis and practical disorientation are no longer to be found. From this point of view, PT is an activity that seeks to give meaning and orientation in times of confusion. But furthermore it performs an *innovative function* in that it seeks

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new concepts and practical orientation in a period that is forced to abandon part of what it had believed in up until then.² Still drawing on the contributions of Kuhn, the context of PT can be described as a context with abundant ‘situations of incommensurability and incoherences’.³ PT always seeks paradoxes, incongruencies, inconsistencies between theory and practice, between frames of reference and activities. To put it differently, PT is not only devoted to identifying problems, challenges and threats that call into question the frame of reference within which political activity is legitimated, but moreover its work would be incomplete if it

did not offer channels for possible solutions (this is its applied function, which we will discuss below).

The conclusion we can draw from all of the above is that PT cannot escape its context. The first *iron law*, in this respect, is that there is a close link between the practice of PT and the context of conflict and instability that it seeks to analyse. *Without conflict there are no problems, without problems there are no questions, and without questions we are missing the first main ingredient for the task of political theory.* PT is not merely method, it is not merely the construction of theory and reflection on concepts. Above all, it is guided by *problems* and *conflicts*.

In order to carry out this activity, PT makes use, either separately or in combination, of the instruments at its disposal: arguments, values, concepts, principles and criteria, traditions. A glance at the contents page of any book on PT tells us that most of the elements that articulate its universe are discussions about values and principles (justice, equality, freedom, human rights), concepts (power, authority, obligation, social control) and traditions (Marxism, republicanism, communitarianism, liberalism).

These resources can fulfil two basic objectives: to interpret and/or act and intervene in reality and participate in the process of social and political change. These two basic objectives illustrate two conceptions that are held of PT: to interpret and understand political reality, and/or to intervene in it, as applied PT. I have already made my position clear with regard to this disjunction in the introduction. I will now go on to describe in greater detail what each of these objectives comprises, and I will

attempt to combine them rather than taking them separately or as independent tasks. I will call the first objective the *hermeneutic conception* of the activity of PT, and the second objective, the *applied conception*. I will also propose that hermeneutic activity implies the defence of *theoretical principles*, whereas the applied conception is guided by *practical principles*.

The *hermeneutic conception* tells us that the inherent aim of PT is basically to interpret, in an attempt to unravel facts from the values that surround them: to identify systems of beliefs and assumptions, but without stepping beyond descriptive and explanatory analysis. It is based on the supposition that neutral interpretation is not possible; rather, that all interpretation is tied to values, ideologies and traditions, and that the task of interpretation is in itself an inevitable attitude.⁴ Its ultimate objective is to enumerate a series of *theoretical principles* that serve to understand and/or evaluate the political reality, and guide and/or criticise practice.

The *applied conception* is based on the conviction that a good political theorist should always attempt to have an impact on reality, altering it and improving on it. To paraphrase the words of del Águila in his introduction to the special issue of the *Revista Española de Ciencia Política* on Political Theory, it is not (and really never has been) the vocation of political theory to live apart from the world, but to intervene in it (2000: 8).⁵ The argument is as follows: if we admit that its hermeneutic activity occurs primarily in contexts of 'turbulence', this interpretation only acquires meaning if it helps to guide this change and takes part in it. In this sense, the principles resulting

from its activity must be *practical*. According to this approach, PT seeks to provide frames of reference for political actions and decisions: to offer conceptual schema to legitimate institutions and practical principles for political actors (politicians, associations, parties, etc.). In his introduction to a special issue of the journal, *Dissent*, on the state of the art of PT, Michael Walzer writes that were it not for this vocation to have a *practical impact*, PT would become 'endless refinement, esoteric jargon, romantic posturing, and fierce intramural polemic' (Walzer, 1989: 337). The same stance is adopted by Taylor, for whom PT cannot be divorced from *political action* (Taylor, 1983).

The essence of PT is to know how to combine these two conceptions. *The hermeneutic conception lacks meaning unless it offers instruments for application, and the applied conception lacks orientation unless it has a firm interpretative basis*. Thus, after an interpretative analysis focusing on theoretical principles, the function of PT should be to provide recommendations by means of practical principles. The task of 'translating' *theoretical principles* into *practical principles* is one of the epicentres of PT as I understand it. Ultimately, the political theorist is no more than an interpreter and translator.

THE PT AGENDA TODAY: QUESTIONING OUR LIBERAL AND DEMOCRATIC FRAMES OF REFERENCE

Although in the 1980s and 1990s the PT debate revolved mainly around liberal democratic citizenship and justice, it was not until the mid 1990s (following the events of 1989 and the end of the Cold War) that a new issue was directly

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incorporated into the PT agenda: multiculturalism and its impact on the legitimating principles of democracy and liberalism. This new research programme plays the part of the dominant perspective, in a similar way to the debate on citizenship.⁶ Although we regard citizenship and multiculturalism as the two dominant analytical perspectives, there is an assumed backdrop that the PT of the beginning of the new century should start to discuss.⁷ This backdrop consists of two elements:

- 1. The triumph of liberalism, or liberalism as the new iron cage,** hegemonic in the Gramscian sense, and the absolute standard for evaluation. In the language I have been using up to now, we could say that liberalism acts as the dominant sphere, as it is the context, the object and the frame of reference for PT. This omnipresence is such that it not possible to practise PT outside this 'understanding circle', to use a Gadamerian expression. Parekh states that liberalism has become a meta-language which is at the same time a language like the rest, the arbiter of how all the other languages must address each other, that is, a sort of measure that is the measure of all currencies. In economic terms we would say that liberalism has become the gold standard. Liberalism is the main element that *alienates* the PT debate.
- 2. Ethnocentrism.** It is a highly ethnocentric, 'provincial' PT, inasmuch as

it has rejected 'the other' (i.e., non-Western) options. It is also very paternalistic, as it believes that the values it uses for its arguments are applicable to other contexts. Debates tend to be carried on with a set of assumed values that are deeply rooted in our illustrated tradition, which tends to perceive heterogeneity and diversity in terms of 'anomaly' and conflict. Thus, PT today questions our own historical course.

In this framework, we could say that in these opening years of the new century, although citizenship and multiculturalism continue to be the dominant analytical perspectives, the type of analysis that is forthcoming tends to shun the prevailing deductive and universalistic methods, and regards inference as one of the most suitable methodological resources to guide arguments and build theories. This practical recourse to inference has two mainstays: the pluralistic approach and the contextualist approach. Both are undoubtedly contributing new research lines within the dominant programmes of citizenship and multiculturalism. The *pluralistic approach* questions the argument that homogeneity is normal and heterogeneity abnormal, an argument that is strongly consolidated in many of our politicians' discourses; the *contextualist approach* also stresses that arguments cannot be valid unless they take contextual frameworks into account. It is the context that gives meaning to the main concepts and arguments. The boundaries of this context must be fixed by the political theorist himself. It acts as a frame of reference and a constant generator of meanings. This context can be a geographical region, a historical period or a particular situation.

POLITICAL THEORY AS THE MANAGER OF THE DESIDERATA OF SOCIETY

The distinguishing feature of PT is its normative and institutional approach. It corresponds to the conception of an *activity with its own ends*.

PT is articulated primarily through *values, principles and criteria*, and through the institutions that promote, protect and distribute them. The normative approach assumes the indivisibility of facts and values. Its grammar and the logic it follows are therefore very different from behaviourist language. Indeed, one of its tasks is to infer from facts all their implicit values. This methodological recourse to inference is one of its differentiating characteristics. It attempts to extract a system of justifications from each fact, action or institution. This system can be used descriptively and/or for explanation, but mostly it is used prescriptively and for evaluation. This explains why normative PT is at its most pertinent when it enters the terrain of *what ought to be*, of the desirable. The chief task of PT is to manage the *desiderata* of society.

If we take a closer look at this approach, we note that all normative theories rest on particular conceptions of the person (anthropology), and that they attempt to propose institutional mechanisms that are congruent with such conceptions. In fact, I consider that the relationship between the anthropological conception and the proposal for institutional arrangements may be one of the epicentres that endow this normative approach with meaning. In this respect, normative theory is governed by the *principle of congruence* between the conception of the person and how society and politics

are articulated. In its reflections on procedures and institutions, it is interested above all in analysing the principles (justice, equality, freedom, human needs, human rights, etc.) that justify their existence and legitimate their activity. Thus it is concerned basically with the criteria for the legitimation of institutions.

Perhaps this normative approach is best summed up by the following words from Plamenatz: 'By political theory I do not mean explanations of how governments function; I mean systematic thinking about the purposes of government' (1960: 37). This means that PT is eminently goal seeking, and that its attention is focused on the ultimate values that legitimate any political activity. Its task is therefore evaluative rather than strictly explanatory. As we all know, Rawls was one of the first to undertake this sort of analysis, and to open up an important debate on compatibility between the principles of freedom and equality, of justice and impartiality in political decisions, and so on. All these issues are what today make up the normative debate.

Continuing with this normative slant, we can divide the normative approach into reflection on principles (freedom, equality, rights, etc.) and reflection on the institutional arrangements that are put in place in order to apply these principles. In this case, the normative approach is based not on principles but on institutions. Thus *normative PT is also an institutional reflection*. It is concerned with facts, with that which exists. It treats institutions as dependent variables. From the perspective of institutions, it is concerned with inferring the general principles that justify the existence of these facts and institutions, and their

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activities through public decisions and policies. It is also interested in highlighting the key concepts and principles that legitimate institutions and guide their activities. Therefore, this approach would include both the legitimising analysis of institutions and the theoretical analysis of public policies.

So far we can infer that PT is primarily an analytical and conceptual task linked directly to political and social reality.⁸ It addresses the 'complex issues', the topics of high priority on the political and social agenda, attempting to untangle elements that appear linked or mixed in practice. Its main interpretative task is, therefore, to try to give meaning and clarity to practical events or facts that confuse and disorient. In order to carry out its activity it brings into play, as we have seen, arguments, values, principles, foundations and concepts, and applies them to the reality it is seeking to analyse on a secondary level, tackling that which is taken for granted, received ideas, the system of beliefs and 'myths' that articulates our society. In this sense, its task could be described as *desanctifying, disenchanting* in Weberian terms. Alongside this hermeneutic activity, its function is also prescriptive, inasmuch as it assumes that it is possible to pass from *what is* to *what ought to be*. In

this case, *what ought to be* enables it to formulate criticisms of *what is*, and give it recommendations. The political theorist should be able to move with ease between *what is* and *what ought to be*. We can say that *what is* constrains *what ought to be*, and *what ought to be* enables the theorist to criticise and alter *what is*. Without this dialectical motion, PT would lose a large part of its potential as a 'generator of innovation'.

THE INNOVATIVE POTENTIAL OF PT AS LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

I often do an exercise in class that leads to a reflection on the problems that concern PT today. First we write on the blackboard the current problems that face society and politics. The whole class joins in to determine the main concepts (e.g., freedom) and relationships between concepts (e.g., the relationship between freedom and security, especially in the wake of 11 September 2001), and then we proceed to classify and organise these categories. In recent years we have almost always reached the same conclusion. Almost all the basic issues of our times have to do with the various aspects of multiculturalism and distributive justice. It is also found that the solutions to most problems cannot be left in the hands of a few States, but must be the result of interaction between States. These are the issues that PT addresses, the problems and conflicts that cast doubt on our liberal and democratic foundations, that directly affect the stability of society and call into question the capacity to deal with these new issues without violating liberal and democratic principles. In short, one of the greatest challenges for PT is that of

identifying and denouncing contradictions between democratic and liberal values, based on human rights, and the practices of those States that constantly violate these rights precisely in the name of these values. In this framework, it is becoming increasingly clear that the function of PT is to highlight the occurrence of paradoxes (White, 2002: 474), contradictions, incoherences and incommensurabilities (Kuhn, 1962; 2000) between practice and principles.

Thus, I would be inclined to say that, according to the conception I am defending, the challenges of PT are those of political society today. But turning for a moment to PT as a discipline, it is clear that most research programmes at present are based on the following triangle, regarded as the dominant analytical context: citizenship / multiculturalism / liberal democracy. Each of the components of this relationship must be considered in all its dimensions and levels of analysis. Within this context, and indeed generally, most of the theoretical literature formulates arguments to consolidate and/or criticise the modern paradigm centred on the unbreakable link between the State, the nation and citizenship (Zapata-Berrero, 2001a; 2001b). Discussions are now beginning to consider cultural diversity and pluralism as the rule rather than the exception.⁹ Most of the theoretical literature had assumed the need for society to be homogeneous in order to justify and support political structures (Parekh, 2001). Nowadays, this assumption is undergoing direct and thorough revision. After the events of 11 September 2001 and the rise of populist options with discourses that focus on the link between immigration and insecurity, some now herald the

end of the Age of Multiculturalism (the 1990s) and the beginning of a new 'conservative' phase (Lloyd, 2002).

New research lines will consolidate precisely these debates, analytically clarifying certain current points of confusion, for example that implicit in the management of cultural pluralism and the management of religious pluralism. New lines will also be traced to connect existing dimensions in each of their components. One example would be the connection between multinationality, immigration, democracy, human rights, liberalism and security.

From the viewpoint of methodological 'innovation', approaches based on inference will be reinforced, in an attempt to work from specific contexts and to draw from them as many categories and as much information as possible in the form of principles, concepts and values, and so proceed to normative and institutional reflection.¹⁰ In this framework, the pluralistic (Parekh, 2000) and contextualist (Carens, 2000) perspectives have only just begun to yield their first results. Both of these new approaches share the Rortian conviction that it is not possible to find an 'Archimedes' Point' that would enable us to position ourselves outside specific contexts and at the same time evaluate political systems or mediate between conflicting values (Rorty, 1989). In short, it is clear that the rapid social changes we are experiencing are confronting political theorists with new contexts that demand (indeed, demand of us) either completely new methodologies or a closer look at existing ones such as the inductive strategy. Instead of working from theories and proving them empirically, PT is becoming consolidated as *local knowledge* (Geertz, 1994).

I would also like to say that I share

the diagnosis set forth by White in the August 2002 issue of *Political Theory*, where we are reminded of the following urgent topics, among others: the liberal commitment to pluralism, taking into account its new forms; the planetary penetration of capitalism, generating anti-globalisation movements as a reaction; the difficulties that democracy and the creation of democratic public spaces are encountering (2002: 475-6). I would add a fourth element to the list, one repeatedly discussed by Parekh (see e.g., 2001: 742-6): a serious attempt to construct *an alternative language*. This discourse would take root not only in opposition to the reigning universalism (especially because it entails cultural homogeneity in its planetary application or in culturally diverse contexts) but also against any monocultural way of conceiving the world.

CONCLUDING REMARKS: THE 'MOMENT' OF POLITICAL THEORY

As we have seen, PT goes against the flow somewhat, in the sense that vitality and expansion in this discipline occur in times of crisis and conflict. For PT, conflict is not only the main object of study, but its area is always to be found on the edge of the liberal democratic system. So much so that we can state that PT is a permanent reflection on liberal and democratic theory, our conscience as a society and a way of organising ourselves politically. It is particularly interested in *strong conflicts*, rather than the *weak conflicts* that can be sorted out by the system itself and do not cast doubt on its consistence or coherence, its stability and permanence through time. Thus it is the task of PT to

analyse the causal elements of society, and of changes of paradigm. Moreover, PT consists not only in identifying these deep conflicts but also expresses an awareness that the solution to these conflicts must involve structural change, social and political transformations.

Thus, it is interested in describing and analysing revolutionary change as opposed to normal change; strong change such as that described by Kuhn – in other words, those aspects that involve changes in parameters, concepts and notions, since the old parameters are of little use for the purposes of explaining the new reality; the fact of being in a state of tension between *traditional conceptual resources* and *new problems*, which poses hitherto unformulated questions. Thus, research programmes develop as elements of structural change appear. In Pocock's terms, we can also say that PT seeks to locate the elements that shape historic 'moments'. The interesting feature of the present 'moment' is that it adds question marks to facts, concepts and beliefs that we took for granted only a few years ago; it poses questions that former generations could not even have imagined. Capturing these 'moments' is one of the most important tasks of PT. Following this line, we can say that innovation in PT today has two channels to explore: it can pose new questions, or it can ask itself old questions but come up with new answers.

From the contextual viewpoint, it is also worthy of reflection that the PT debate is being Europeanised, in two senses of the word, i.e., the language is more European and the issues are those that affect Europe most directly. We must therefore try to reflect on

the need to construct not only a *European PT* but also a *PT on Europe*. It is a fact that PT, like so many other areas, is dominated by American academia. This is not negative in itself. Nevertheless, we should at least stop to think about the confusion that arises in language precisely because of attempts to apply the results of reflections taking place in Europe using an American contextual framework. However, that is an issue for another paper.



Notes

1 There are a number of disperse reflections, but nothing we could regard as a 'reference work'. Writers who come close include D. Miller and L. Siedentop (1983). We would also mention work by D. Held (1991), R. Bellamy (1993), A. Vincent (1997), T. Ball (1995), N. P. Barry (1995), P. Pettit (1991) and K. von Beyne (1994), among others.

2 This is one of the differences between 'normal' and 'revolutionary' development according to Kuhn. See, in particular, Kuhn (1962), and, for an example, Kuhn (2000: 121).

3 For Kuhn, 'incoherences' are indicators of revolutionary change (2000: 41), incommensurability, an extreme situation in which a radical divorce occurs between concepts and language, on the one hand, and the reality that gives them meaning, on the other (see, for example, Kuhn, 2000: ch. 2).

4 Note, in this regard, Ball's suggestive statement: 'the decision to interpret or not to interpret is not an option open to human beings' (1995: 7).

5 See, among others, the works of the Spanish political theorists Vallespín (1992-1995) and Máiz (2001).

6 This would explain the influence still exerted by the works of Kymlicka (1995), who succeeded in linking the two main forces driving the PT debate in the 1980s and 1990s.

7 I base my arguments in part on Parekh (2001: 739-41).

8 This is the main perspective on PT provided by Miller and Siedentop (1983).

9 In this respect, the various works of Requejo are suggestive material. See, among others, his latest edited book (2001).

10 Some first reflections on these issues have been made by A. Favell and T. Modood (2003), on applied political theory and multiculturalism.

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