

Chapter 1

Political Theory, Public Philosophy, and Pluralism

Nation-states are yielding their centrality to the global community, to the betterment (or detriment) of people everywhere.

National communities should open (or close) their borders to immigrants from other countries who seek citizenship.

The cultural norms that sustain strong and well-ordered political communities are becoming increasingly debased (or enriched).

Political life has greatly improved because democratic processes are becoming increasingly adopted globally (or is declining because democracy is eroding in the U.S. or elsewhere).

To protect and sustain our environment, governments must impose many regulations on economic activity and citizen behaviors (or should allow market forces to function freely and produce those profitable technical innovations that will protect our environment).

Rising economic inequality creates economic growth for the betterment of everyone (or social polarization that undermines community life).

We are experiencing increasingly disturbing social, economic, and political problems, so we need to return to our old ways of governing ourselves (or we need revolutionary political changes).

We have all heard such ideas, and most of us have uttered such ideas. To that extent, we are all familiar with political theory, and we all partake in political theory. Politics concerns how we live in community with others, how we cooperate to achieve

collective benefits, how we engage in conflict for greater shares of the things we value, and how people are governed. Political theory consists of general or abstract ideas about how politics works and how it should work. Such political ideas flood newspapers, television, radio, and the Internet. Libraries are full of books and journals containing such political ideas, even when they are located in places far removed from collections devoted to elections, legislatures, the law, and other obviously political subjects. Abstract political ideas are discussed not only in governmental forums, but also in classrooms, churches, and taverns. Given the sheer magnitude of political theory, the extent of ignorance and confusion about political life and political ideals is astonishing.ⁱ

While we are exposed to many theoretical ideas about politics, we seem to comprehend, assimilate, and appreciate few of them. Many such ideas are obviously conflicting, mere opinions of others that have no obvious validity. Many are expressed to serve the interests of others, and seem repugnant to our interests or the public interest. Many seem unrealistic – distortions of the politics we perceive, utopian fantasies containing unattainable goals, and paranoid expressions of others' fears. Many such ideas are simply incoherent - too abstract, too complex, or too removed from our own experiences and thinking to make much sense to us. Not surprisingly, people often turn away from political ideas.

But escaping from serious political reflection is dangerous, especially in democracies that proclaim that governance reflects the beliefs and values of their citizens, and even more in democracies where leaders have learned to pander to citizen emotions and mislead the public in order to pursue their own ideological agendas.ⁱⁱ Democracies

that are effective, that are oriented toward the public good, and that seek justice for all require citizens who are competent political thinkers.

Citizen competence no doubt begins with awareness of changing social, cultural, and economic conditions in our communities and with informed judgments about the effectiveness of our leaders and the programs and policies they have established to improve these conditions – or at least prevent their deterioration. Competent citizens must be able to choose effectively among political parties and candidates those that reflect their interests and aspirations and that offer the most promising solutions to social problems, and they must actively pursue their preferred policies between elections. But effective choices and actions presuppose that citizens have some sort of broad cognitive framework to help them choose and act. Citizens need maps that organize various understandings of political life and help them to choose among competing ideas, to judge the directions in which their communities are heading, and to evaluate and hold accountable those who lead them. For competent citizens, political theory is not just a mish-mash of conflicting, self-serving, utopian, paranoid, and distant ideas; rather, it provides them comprehensive and coherent maps of political life, helps them sort out valid from dubious ideas, and facilitates their making informed judgments and good political choices.

Four types of maps for organizing and understanding political ideas can be useful. The most general is merely a *conceptual matrix* that organizes ideas along two dimensions. On one axis are arrayed the major political issues (e.g., questions of citizenship, of rulers, of government authority, and of justice) and their philosophical foundations (questions of ontology, human nature, the nature of society, and

epistemology). On the other axis are alternative answers to these questions (e.g., as provided by competing ideologies or by different cultural traditions). Sorting political ideas on the basis of the major issues they address and the general perspectives they reflect is the beginning of making sense of political discourse and politics itself. This reader, like my accompanying text (*From Ideologies to Public Philosophies*), is organized on the basis of such a matrix. Chapters 2, 3, and 4 introduce major ideological perspectives. Chapters 5 through 15 provide a sample of readings from these perspectives (and other earlier political theorists not identified with any modern ideology) that provide alternative answers to the major philosophical and political issues developed at the beginning of each chapter. If you encounter a political idea and can place it within a conceptual framework according to the great issue(s) it addresses and the perspective(s) it represents, you will have made a significant step in removing confusion about the bewildering onslaught of political ideas that compete for your attention.

But competent citizens not only can place political ideas in such a matrix, they choose among alternative answers, developing philosophical assumptions and political principles to which they are allegiant. The political principles they adopt and the philosophical assumptions that are the basis of these principles and help provide support and justification for these principles comprise *individual public philosophies* enabling citizens to know where they stand on the concrete political issues that arise in their communities. Most citizens lack comprehensive and coherent political perspectives, while others have simply adopted those of their parents, friends, some charismatic political leader, or the cultures in which they are embedded. But some citizens develop their own political views by thinking long and hard about the alternative ideas on the

great issues, adopting those principles that they find most valid and justified. Sometimes these individual public philosophies closely match those of well-established ideologies, but they can also be unique personal constructions. The readings and the way they are organized here are intended to help you develop such a perspective.

Coherent sets of political principles should guide not just individual citizens; they should also guide political communities. A regime or dominant party that has articulated a set of ideas that most citizens have endorsed during elections can govern a polity on the basis of *a specific governing philosophy*. While we often imagine democratic communities as functioning in this way, the failure of candidates and parties to express and remain true to such a philosophy, the failure of citizens to choose among candidates and parties on the basis of their articulated philosophies, and electoral arrangements that make difficult ascertaining the dominant principles of citizens from electoral outcomes can result in our being governed more by pure power than by any governing philosophy.

Since particular regimes and parties have authority for specific time periods, the public philosophies by which they (ideally) govern are many and temporary. In the U.S., for example, Democrats governed on the basis of a brand of contemporary liberalism during much of the mid-twentieth century, only to give way to a form of contemporary conservatism during the Reagan and Republican years. Bill Clinton brought a somewhat different liberalism to national politics during the 1990s, while George W. Bush governed under another conservatism from 2000 to 2008. Now Barack Obama seeks to govern using a highly pragmatic and nondogmatic form of liberalism. But these variations and changes in governing philosophies should not obscure the existence of a broader public philosophy containing general political principles and (weak) philosophical assumptions

to which all these regimes subscribe and to which most Americans (and many leaders and citizens elsewhere) also subscribe. Thus, a fourth map of political theory that people can effectively understand and utilize is composed of these most general ideas that are widely held within political communities and that endure over time, even while different regimes apply their more particular governing philosophies. This most general map of political ideas – which I call *pluralist public philosophy* – helps those with more specific competing principles understand and appreciate their commonalities and thus helps provide a basis of resolving political conflicts in a democratic, civil, and peaceful manner.

While subsequent chapters will provide readings chosen to help you understand and appreciate these various kinds of maps, the readings in this chapter address the “map making” activity of political theorists. It provides some general accounts of what political theorists are trying to achieve and why their work is important. It discusses what political philosophers do, the role of ideologies in political theory, the public philosophies that political theorists have found and seek to promote, and introductions to pluralism as the most general public philosophy effecting politics today.

Our first selection by Leo Strauss (1899 – 1973) provides the classical statement about the meaning and importance of political philosophy. It was written in 1957, at a time when political philosophy was “in a state of decay and perhaps putrefaction.” Claiming that political philosophers had since Plato been engaged in the search for knowledge of “the nature of political things, and the right, or the good, political order,” Strauss discusses the limitations of the “social science positivism” that was ascendant in political science at the beginning of its behavioral revolution and that sought to

understand politics in a value-free manner. For Strauss, who taught for many years at the University of Chicago, Claremont College, and St. John's College in Annapolis and who influenced the education of a large group of political philosophers (the Straussians), efforts to understand politics without deep concern about moral and normative matters are incomplete, if not misguided.

Strauss believed that the true activity of a political philosopher was to help relieve the human suffering that occurs from ill-advised attempts to use political power in ways that assume greater understanding and control than humans can actually have; thus, he was not only hostile to the positivist quest for scientific certainty but to the various ideologies that had arisen since the French Revolution at the end of the eighteenth century. While ideologies are normally regarded as “any visionary and grandiose scheme of social reform,” Judith Shklar (1928 – 1992), who had a long and distinguished career as the first woman in Harvard's Department of Government, argues that ideologies are more precisely understood as specific “forms of untruth.” She points out that Karl Marx had used the term to reveal that classical liberalism (which was becoming a dominant public philosophy) did not contain universal truths about politics but was instead “a mask” used to obscure the fact that its principles supporting capitalism and representative democracy served the interest of the rising middle class (the bourgeoisie) at the expense of the working class (the proletariat). She also points out that subsequent students of ideology – most notably Karl Mannheim – claim that other public philosophies including democratic socialism, conservatism, communism, and fascism were also mere weapons that particular interests employed in their efforts to gain support and power, and thus succeed in political struggles. In short, Shklar and other students of ideology maintain

that none of these outlooks have any claim to providing superior understandings of political life.

Writing in the 1950s and 1960s, Strauss and Shklar lamented the decline of political philosophy. But stimulated by the work of John Rawls (1921-2001) and many others, there was a revival in political philosophy. While Rawls' seminal *A Theory of Justice*, published in 1971 was seen by some as yet another ideology, he subsequently argued in *Political Liberalism* (1993) that his work, like that of other political theorists, actually sought to articulate liberal pluralism as a public philosophy expressing an "overlapping consensus" at least within contemporary Western societies among those holding diverse moral and political doctrines. In Chapters 6, 8 and 14 of this reader, you will encounter some of Rawls most important ideas in this regard.

If Rawls intended his theory of justice to be a public philosophy, it was a more idealized articulation of political ideas in America than those that actually prevail, at least according to Theodore Lowi, who has been a professor of American Institutions at Cornell University since 1972. In *The End of Liberalism*, first published in 1969 but substantially revised and extended in a subsequent 1979 edition, Lowi argues that America's public philosophy has been transformed since the 1930s. Its old public philosophy was capitalism, understood as a version of classical liberalism that emphasized economic processes and "the sanctity of property and the binding morality of contract." However, its new public philosophy is "interest-group liberalism," in which national government has acquired an expansive role by giving all organized interests access to its authority. According to Lowi, Democrats and Republicans do not really pursue different principles but merely respond to different interests. Lowi can be

interpreted as arguing that this new interest-group liberalism is a deformed type of pluralist public philosophy. It must be criticized because its ideas encourage governments to minimize the use of their legitimate powers of coercion and to dispense with philosophically defended standards; instead, such governments merely pursue the sentiments of those who participate and have power.

Our final two selections look more directly at pluralist public philosophy. Avigail Eisenberg – a professor of political science at The University of Victoria (in British Columbia, Canada) – has sought to reconstruct political pluralism. Many political scientists still understand pluralism as either Lowi’s interest group liberalism or as a theory of democratic politics that focuses on the (relatively dispersed) distribution of power among many groups in society and that became the dominant paradigm in the discipline during the 1950s and 1960s. However, most political scientists abandoned pluralism when that formulation encountered many problems and criticisms (such as those suggested by Lowi). Eisenberg regards this understanding of pluralism as limited. Pluralism has a much longer historical legacy that provides a broad array of resources for a more adequate public philosophy – one that focuses on individual moral development as well as the distribution of power and one that not only depicts existing society but also can help transform political life.

William E. Connolly, a professor of political science at Johns Hopkins University, addresses these themes in his recent book entitled *Pluralism*, from which our final extract in this chapter is taken. Connolly takes up the question of whether pluralism – with its uncertainty and relativism, its recognition of the legitimacy of diverse viewpoints and interests, and its commitments to negotiation and compromise among interests - is “a

philosophy for wimps.” He endorses pluralism because those committed to it “expose and resist such dark resonance machines” that deny and oppress alternative voices. He endorses pluralism, because it permits people to have a “bicameral orientation,” a commitment not only to pluralism but also to another “faith, creed, ideology, or philosophy” that enables one to participate as a committed partisan in the public realm. While pluralism has too often been equated with a resignation to politics as it is currently practiced, Connolly proclaims the possibility of being both a pluralist and a person with commitments to radical changes that reduce the deep inequalities that pervade pluralist societies.

In sum, the readings in this chapter invite us to think more clearly about the general modalities of political theory. Political philosophy is not the quest for political certainty, but a search for political understanding in light of human limitations. Political ideologies do not provide clear guidance for political programs and policies, but rather are perspectives that justify the goals of particular interests. Public philosophies are not singular perspectives that demand universal allegiances, but are instead diverse sets of political principles and philosophical assumptions that should be arrived at through careful reflection by both individuals and collectivities. Pluralism is not a well-established paradigm that claims that power is widely and justly distributed in democratic societies, but rather is a general public philosophy that contains the most widely embraced political understandings that people have about the good life, a good society, and good government in a world where most such understandings are highly contested. As such a public philosophy, pluralism remains a work in progress. As such, the voices of all citizens and students can contribute significantly to its articulation and future development.

Endnotes

ⁱ Michael X. Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter, *What Americans Know About Politics and Why It Matters* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).

ⁱⁱ Alan Wolfe, *Does American Democracy Still Work?* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).