

REVIEW

The Voice of Michael Oakeshott in the Conversation of Politics

Suvi Soininen 2005. *From a 'Necessary Evil' to the Art of Contingency. Michael Oakeshott's Conception of Political Activity.* Imprint-Academic. Exeter UK/Charlottesville, VA, USA.

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It has been argued that a peculiarity of the twentieth century has been its failure to produce much in the way of genuine political philosophy. There is no twentieth century Hegel, Machiavelli, Marx, or Hobbes. This accusation has often been made by those under the influence, in varying degrees, of political thinkers such as Hannah Arendt or Leo Strauss. Given the amount of political philosophy written during the last century and its much-heralded rebirth in the work of John Rawls this might sound like an odd charge. Those who have made this accusation generally meant that although it is true that there was no shortage of philosophical writing on politics it cannot be denied that the dominant style was and remains one of politicised philosophical writing rather than one of serious political philosophy. This dominant style, it is argued, is generally constructed from the politicised extension of concepts that are drawn from a philosophical context that has no direct interest in political topics.¹

If the above observations are correct does the work of Michael Oakeshott offer an important and interesting exception? Oakeshott is, perhaps, still best-known for his famous depiction of political activity as sailing “a boundless and bottomless sea where there is neither a harbour for shelter nor a floor for anchorage, neither starting-place nor appointed destination. The enterprise is to keep afloat on an even keel; the sea is both friend and enemy; and the seamanship consists in using the resources of a traditional manner of behaviour in order to make a friend of every hostile occasion”.² This influential and controversial vision is usually invoked by those who seek to make sense of Oakeshott’s contribution to political thought. This has been either rejected or celebrated on the basis of an initial understanding of the message that Oakeshott was assumed to be delivering. However, it is clear that Oakeshott’s political thought cannot be understood if that famous quote is taken out of context. Anyone who wishes to get an informed understanding of Oakeshott’s contribution to political philosophy cannot afford to ignore his intellectual development and the wider context.

Suvi Soininen offers an interpretation of Oakeshott that takes as its central topic his conception of politics. In fact, it is her central claim that it is a mistake to give too much importance to Oakeshott’s famous metaphor as if he had essentially nothing else to say. To do so has the effect of obscuring the changing nature of his conception of the nature of politics and of political thought. As soon as he proposed this metaphor Oakeshott realised that it would be open to a range of conflicting interpretations. It has been taken, for example, to be a straightforward assertion of the author’s conservatism, an endorsement of progressive anti-foundationalism, the end of ideology, and a politics of conversation. In Soininen’s view these accounts are all unsatisfactory if taken as the last word. The point, she argues, is to see that while there is some truth in all of these characterisations it is necessary to explore the transformations that took place in Oakeshott’s idea of politics.

There is, in reality, no such thing as Oakeshott’s concept of politics; we ought to think, instead, of a range of conceptions. Indeed, if one compares Oakeshott’s early pre-war writing with his later work it is clear that a major transformation in his understanding of politics and of its place in the world had taken place. A clear indication of this can be seen by comparing his claim made in 1939 that “political action involves mental vulgarity” with his statement made in 1975 that politics has become “a mode of human relationship” that is “as

rare as it is excellent". Clearly, some major changes had occurred in Oakeshott's thinking during the intervening period.

As far as the question of context is concerned Soininen's aim is to understand Oakeshott against the background of what she refers to as "British post-war political thought". This is to be distinguished from a broader context of "Anglophone political thought" that would, obviously, have to include the American contribution. Oakeshott, it is claimed, was an "inherently British" political thinker. This attempt to situate Oakeshott within something called "British post-war political thought" is understandable but not as straightforward as it might appear. One could argue, for example, that there is "something slightly artificial about it".³ One problem here is that it is hard to deny that there is something about Oakeshott's political thought that defies easy categorisation. Always a controversial figure among British intellectuals, it appears that among the best reviews that he received were those in the obituaries that appeared in the British press. Oakeshott, hailed now as "perhaps the most original academic political philosopher of this (20th) century", had often been dismissed during his lifetime as a cynical reactionary who had failed to offer coherent arguments in defence of his political ideas.

Oakeshott spent the major part of his academic life thinking about the problems of interpretation and understanding in the study of political ideas. Although no methodologist in the conventional sense he articulated a way of reading political texts that also paid attention to their appropriate contexts. The problem here is, of course, to decide what those contexts are and how they relate to the text in question. As we now are only too aware this question has generated an enormous amount of heat but, in the view of many, not the same amount of light. In the introduction to his edition of Hobbes' "Leviathan" Oakeshott argued that the appropriate context for such a masterpiece can be nothing less than the history of European political philosophy as a whole. Furthermore, he argued that genuine philosophical thought about politics is "marked by a sombre view of the human situation"; political philosophers, according to this account, "deal in darkness".⁴ Life appears as a "predicament" and political thought, at this level, is concerned with "the link between politics and eternity" and 'the deliverance of mankind'. At the same time, however, according to Oakeshott, masterpieces of political philosophy generally speaking are written as responses to specific political predicaments. It ought not to be surprising, therefore, that there is an essential contingency in the inspiration of political philosophy. Oakeshott spoke of "three

great traditions of thought".⁵ Political thought in Europe, he argued, had developed in terms of three sets of concepts: Reason and Nature; Will and Artifice; and the Rational Will. Oakeshott, we must assume, thought about his own work in these terms. Soininen, however, initially places Oakeshott in the ideological context of post-war British political thought rather than within these grander traditions. Here she points to a "typically British" idea of politics that dominates his political thought in the immediate post-war period up to the 1970's. This understanding draws upon the traditional view of the importance of parliamentary debates combined with a preference for statesmen over politicians. However, with the appearance of *On Human Conduct* in 1975 a transformation in Oakeshott's thought had clearly taken place. There is now a distinct focus upon the creative role of political activity in the contingent associations of "the civil condition". This, in Soininen's view attests to the duality of political philosophy; it is born from a concern with the problems of the day and from a dialogue carried on within distinct traditions of political thought.

The question of both the appropriate immediate and more general intellectual context is never straightforward for an innovatory thinker such as Oakeshott. The methodological debates of the last few decades have not, and nor could they, arrive at conclusions acceptable to all. If anything, they have illustrated the diversity of legitimate responses to this problem. For example, Perry Anderson has argued that Oakeshott ought to be placed in a European rather than specifically British context of "the intransigent right".⁶ Unlike Soininen who wants to argue for Oakeshott's "Britishness" (or should that be "Englishness"?) Anderson puts him in the company of Leo Strauss, Carl Schmitt, and Friedrich von Hayek. For Anderson Oakeshott is best portrayed as the major English representative of a kind of right wing international. Rather than being taken, as he often is, as 'the wayward voice of an archetypical English conservatism' Oakeshott ought to be placed in this his 'real context'. If we do so then it would appear that he was 'one of the quartet of outstanding European theorists of the intransigent Right whose ideas now shape....a large part of ...Western politics'.⁷ Similarly, Paul Franco argues that we ought to think of Oakeshott as belonging to a generation of European political thinkers that includes Leo Strauss, Hannah Arendt, Friedrich von Hayek, Raymond Aron, and Isaiah Berlin. This generation came of age between the wars and was formed by that intellectual and political context. Most importantly, it is argued, that despite

their differences all of these thinkers shared a distinctive historical and philosophical depth that is absent in most current work in political theory.⁸

The major part of Soininen's study is concerned with the question of Oakeshott's 'changing conception of politics'. However, before doing so she embarks upon an exploration of the relationship between Oakeshott's thought and the 'isms' with which he is usually identified. She examines claims concerning the putative relationship between Oakeshott's thought and liberalism, conservatism, and idealism. All such claims are found wanting. For example, Soininen argues that Oakeshott's relationship to liberalism which one assumes was a central component of post-war British political thought is complex. Although liberalism is a term that can have many distinct meanings there is a sense in which 'nearly all British political philosophers, theorists, and politicians share a basis in the liberal tradition in terms of their views on parliamentary institutions and the rights of the individual'. In particular, Oakeshott, in order to clarify this relationship is compared with Berlin, Raz, and Rorty which is slightly odd.

If Oakeshott was associated with any particular political ideology during his own lifetime then it was usually, without question, conservatism. The idea of Oakeshott as a liberal thinker or as a contributor to liberalism is relatively new and controversial. Soininen, however, sees Oakeshott's relationship to conservatism as being, in fact, even more complex than his relationship to liberalism. In effect, the argument here favours a view of Oakeshott that sees him as a serious political thinker whose thought transcends partisan doctrines of this kind.

Soininen's approach is to look at the way in which some of his central concepts were shaped through their relationship to his changing conceptions of politics as an activity. Her attempt to relate this, in turn, to contemporary developments in British political thought is less convincing. The detailed description necessary to make this claim convincing is absent. It seems that Soininen sees herself as offering a 'political' reading of Oakeshott's thought. On the face of it this would appear to be a distinctly unOakeshottian way of looking at political thought. Nevertheless, Soininen does agree with Oakeshott's view of the plural character of political thinking. This approach is fused with an account of political concept-formation that is more 'Weberian' in inspiration. This more 'perspectivist' and 'political' account claims to allow for a more flexible relationship between context and text and is probably fairly consistent with the Oakeshottian way of reading

works of political thought. An important consequence of this account is a novel focus upon the concept of 'the politician'. This was not one of Oakeshott's central concepts and the value of this approach can only be judged insofar as it sheds light upon the development of his thought. At the same time this way of looking at Oakeshott tends to downgrade the significance of some of the concepts, such as the rule of law and of modes of understanding, that are usually taken to be of central importance in his work.

The longest chapter of this book is concerned with an analysis of "Oakeshott's changing conception of politics". The focus of attention here is upon his account of power, authority, ideology, and tradition. Here, Soininen argues that Oakeshott's writing in the immediate post-war period was no exception to the general air of introspection and reflection upon the effects of the war and the threat of totalitarianism. This is reflected in a negative understanding of power and the danger of its concentration in the hands of the state. The war had increased the threat of a rationalist politics that was, to a large degree, of continental European origin. However, by the time Oakeshott had completed *On Human Conduct* a more complex account of the character of the modern European state had emerged.

Soininen begins her study with the question: why Oakeshott? The question is not answered directly. However, over the course of this study one answer does emerge. This is that Oakeshott was without question an original thinker whose idea of the essential contingency of politics and of the civil condition offers an important insight into the character of the modern European state. In an age of depoliticised political theory Oakeshott is worth reading, whatever one's final verdict upon the value of his thought might be, as a representative figure in that small band of thinkers who have been sceptical about both the extravagant claims sometimes made for politics and of the illusion of a world without politics.

NOTES

1. See, for example, Pierre Manent, "The Return of Political Philosophy", *First Things*, 103, 2000, pp 15-22; Bernard Flynn, *The Philosophy of Claude Lefort. Interpreting the Political*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, Illinois, 2005
2. Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and other Essays*, Liberty Press, Indianapolis, 1991, p 60
3. Paul Franco, *Michael Oakeshott. An Introduction*. Yale University Press, New Haven, 2004, p 183
4. Michael Oakeshott, op cit, p 225
5. Oakeshott, op cit, p 227
6. Perry Anderson, 'The Intransigent Right at the End of the Century', in his *Spectrum. From Right to Left in the World of Ideas*, Verso, London, 1005, pp 3-28
7. Perry Anderson, p 4
8. Paul Franco, op cit, p 183