

EDITORIAL

THE MODES OF POLITICAL THEORY

Political theory” is an ambiguous notion. At least in the contemporary academia, it refers to at least two distinguishable modes of activity. By doing political theory, we may try to formulate our own conception of political activity, or a good or just *polis*. Lacking a better term, I call this activity as ”normative.” Or then, we may study the conceptions of the others. I call this activity as ”historical.”

Coming from a department of Philosophy, I am (unlike the earlier Editors-in-chief) more at home in the normative political theory. Should I, then, be interested in the work done by my more historically-minded colleagues at the department of Politics? What is it for me, except, perhaps, an interesting additional pastime? I would answer by giving an example, the history of liberalism.

The history of liberalism is full of paradoxes. As an institutional arrangement and as an ideology, it has won a decisive victory. Never in the history of the human race has a single socio-political formation had such a hegemonic status. The academia faithfully reflects this new constellation of forces: after the demise of more orthodox forms of Marxism, there are no serious challengers of the liberal *institutional* solution. Almost no-one – at least inside the walls of the Western universities – seriously denies the value of the basic freedoms, or of general suffrage, or an independent judiciary, or the

constitutional mode of government. As compared with the intellectual struggles of the earlier centuries, our present disputes about the exact content and limits of the freedom of expression, or the proper range of the market mechanism, are but family quarrels. In this sense, we are all liberals now. In this intellectual environment, it is possible for some people to take seriously even such absurdities as the thesis about the "end of history."

At the same time, liberalism as an academic political theory is under a cross-fire. It is attacked from every possible angle: all theoretical newcomers define themselves as critics of liberalism. What is challenged is not liberalism as an institutional solution, but the (allegedly) liberal views about the nature of politics, of morality, and of human being. In this context, we can see the political relevance of the historically oriented study of politics. Most critics as well as supporters of the liberal world-view tend to agree on one point: there exists a well-defined strain of thought which can be traced back at least to the 17th century and which can be legitimately called as "liberal". Thus, Hobbes, Locke, Kant, the thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment, or the American Revolution are praised as liberals, and any critic worth of his salt has to discuss critically their views. Once again, history has become the battlefield of present struggles.

What is liberalism? According to *Petite Robert*, the term *liberal* acquired a political meaning in French ca. 1750, while *liberalisme* appeared as late as 1821. And according to *Oxford Dictionary*, "liberal" was at the first time contrasted to "conservative" in 1800. Only in 1820 it became an epithet of a party. As far as I know, the first organized political group calling themselves liberals were *los liberales* of the Spanish Cortes in 1812. In this sense, there were no liberals before the beginning of the 19th century. It is no wonder that some historians of ideas (e.g. Knut Haakonssen and Ghita Ionescu) have rejected the current practice of calling 17th and 18th century classics as liberals.

But, certainly, liberal ideas did exist before the coinage of the term? Yes, of course. Another powerful current in the academia – especially in the departments of philosophy – emphasizes discontinuities in our intellectual history. It tends to see the history of ideas as a series of Kuhnian revolutions or Foucaultian *ruptures*. Paradoxically, although both Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* and Foucault's *Les mots et les choses* were, in their times, invitations to

take certain neglected aspects of history seriously, the emphasis on discontinuity may also be used as an excuse to ignore the history. If the past has nothing in common with the present, we may simply choose to forget it. However, a more consistent historian position is that the differences between continuity and discontinuity, evolution and revolution are themselves perspectival matters. (For a modern student, the struggle between the Catholic and the Protestant world-views looks like a family quarrel, and the future students are bound to look our present disputes in the same way.) Quite often, it is more fruitful to search continuities and common themes than discontinuities and differences. The liberal idea of inviolable rights has grown out from the predominantly authoritarian tradition of the post-Renaissance Natural Law, while the modernist ideas of citizenship and of self-government are largely a product of the classically-oriented republicanism. The historians have done a great service to their normatively oriented colleagues by revealing the origins of those ideas we habitually call as "liberal." They have shown that there is no original essence of liberalism which could be distilled out from the works of, say, Locke, Smith, or Kant. "Liberalism" exists as an institutional solution; but there is no consistent liberal philosophy to be found from history. There are only themes which might be called "liberal". Given this, it is no wonder that the three distinguishably liberal commitments, the commitment to inviolable rights, the commitment to democratic self-government, and the commitment to welfare, may be conflictual with each other. (As Amartya Sen has shown, even the least -demanding formulations of these principles may lead to incompatibilities.)

In this sense "liberalism" is just a theoretical term which might be more or less fruitfully applied to different historical periods. By using it we do not mean that it refers to a well-defined entity. The recent studies of republicanism of the 17th and 18th centuries is a brilliant example of how historical research may render our concepts more useful by making them more precise. (At least in this sense, the history of ideas is a progressive science.) By seeing the classics – Locke, Montesquieu, Kant, the Founding Fathers – as late republicans rather than early liberals, we may, for example, understand why the concepts of liberty they used were not compatible with the "negative" conception famously defended by Sir Isaiah Ber-

lin in his inaugural lecture and reiterated in almost every textbook of political philosophy. One of the most fatal shortcomings of the recent disputes on liberalism among normative theorists is the shared belief that there exists a fundamental contrast between the negative and the positive concepts of liberty, and that a commitment to the negative concept – liberty as the absence of coercive constraints – is the distinguishing mark of "liberalism." The truth is that no political theorist before Bentham and Paley (who were not unambiguously proto-liberal thinkers) used the term "liberty" in this restricted sense. For the earlier classics (as well as for such proto-liberal contemporaries of the Utilitarians as Price or Priestley) at least one legitimate meaning of "liberty" was always "rational self-government." In our terminology, this is a "republican" rather than a "liberal" view of human freedom. Of course, the term "republicanism" is itself a nexus of similar problems as "liberalism." It is also a theoretical term which can be used in a more or less fruitful way. We should be aware of the possibility that in some contexts it may also conceal more than it reveals. The republicanism of Machiavelli is quite unlike the republicanism of the American Revolution. Again, the continuities and discontinuities are perspectival.

Although there is no direct route from "is" to "ought," nor a simple way to learn from history, I believe that the history of political thought is truly "political" in the sense that it may also be relevant to the normative theory. The example of liberalism illustrates this potential. Coming from a philosophical department, and having no systematic historical education, I consider cooperation with my more historically oriented colleagues an important and challenging task. In my view, there is no absolute contrast between the normative and the historical disciplines. But there is, and should be, a certain tension between the two. The role of the normative theorist is to discuss our present problems: not only the intellectual but also the institutional ones. But she cannot do this without referring to the past. Both the intellectual and the institutional hegemonies are legitimated through historical traditions. Here, she needs the help, but is also an object of critique of the historically oriented political theorists. The future issues of *The Yearbook* will, I hope, reflect this unavoidable but fruitful tension.

EERIK LAGERSPETZ