

POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY AND THE PUBLIC SITUATION

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Political philosophy is a compound discipline, dependent for its structure and changing conclusions upon both the character of philosophy and the configuration of the public situation in any historical period. Hence, political philosophy is a fundamentally ambiguous enterprise, because it draws from two sources, neither of which can be assumed *a priori* to be reducible to one another: it is an unwarranted and dogmatic postulation to assume either that political philosophy structures the public situation or that it is an epiphenomenon or reflection of that situation.

Philosophy as such has been traditionally defined as a search for necessary and comprehensive knowledge about reality, including political reality. Until the nineteenth century philosophical knowledge was considered to be transhistorical, referring to the permanent structure and content of being. It was an attempt to cognize the universal and the absolute. The public situation, however, is historical and mutable. The Platonic heritage, which has formed Western political thought, reduces political change to a flux of appearances defined as deviations from an essential truth about the human condition. Nineteenth-century historicism reversed Platonism and found the structure of being exemplified in the dynamics of historical change: it made philosophy immanent to the public situation.

The fundamental problem of political philosophy, whenever it is undertaken, is to coordinate the search for necessary and comprehensive knowledge with historically specific developments within the public situation. Today political philosophy is in a state of crisis, because the two traditional solutions to its problem, making truth about the human condition transcendent over or immanent to the public situation, have failed.

The failure of traditional solutions can be explained both by the character of the philosophy that has emerged in the twentieth century, which has severed the subject of philosophy from the subject of politics, and by the public situation, which may be defined as a growing deprivation of experience. Philosophy has turned once again towards transhistorical universalism, but its universals are such that they cannot

be made regulative over political conduct and, in fact, imply the negation of politics. The public situation has been delivered to an unprincipled instrumentalism that makes human beings means to the abstract ends of conglomerate organizations, which are unified only by the pursuit of such extrinsic values as wealth, power, influence, and mobilization of allegiance. The situation of philosophy and the public situation are related to one another in a complex dialectic. The two situations are opposite in direction and antagonistic, because while philosophers such as James, Bergson, Heidegger, Jaspers, Unamuno, Ortega, and Berdyaeu, among many others, expanded the dimensions of human experience subject to philosophical inquiry, the public situation has developed as a deprivation and homogenization of that experience. Yet the situation of philosophy and the public situation are inextricably bound up with one another because the philosophical defense of experience is politically a rebellion against instrumentalism, while the abstractly organized public situation is an attempt to control diversity and heterogeneity.

The New Universal

At the turn of the twentieth century a profound revolution occurred in philosophy that marked a decisive break with the entire Western tradition. This revolution has not yet been assimilated by the intellectual community, not to speak of political leaders or the "general public," and perhaps it never will be fully appropriated. Nietzsche, Bergson, James, and Croce are only the most familiar names associated with this change, which was carried on throughout the world. Superficially their work was a revolt against absolute idealism and positivism, both of which were judged to be unfaithful to the structure of human experience. At a more fundamental level, however, the revolution outran mere opposition and instituted new concerns for philosophy. The radical shift undertaken by the new movement was a turning away from the world of objects and observable activities described by scientific or dialectical reason and back towards the dynamics of subjectivity.

The great discovery of early-twentieth-century philosophy was what Ortega called intra-subjectivity and what Unamuno called intra-consciousness. The book that best exemplifies the revolution is Bergson's first major work, *Time and Free Will*. Bergson broke with the Western rationalist tradition by basing his philosophy on "the method of inversion" that resulted in an intuition of pure duration and a consequent denial that practical activity disclosed reality. He found at the

POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

depths of experience a process of "creative evolution," in which heterogeneous contents are continuously synthesized into new totalities, which are in turn broken down and resynthesized. Bergson's intuitionism is significant for political philosophy for a number of reasons. His method is a breach with the "everyday" world, or what he called the "practical viewpoint," and so it both severs the subject of philosophy (experience-in-depth) from the subject of politics (practical conduct), and it alienates the philosopher, who has privileged or extraordinary experience, from the ordinary human being, who does not undertake the intuitive discipline. Further, and more importantly, Bergson split the self or human subject into a "conventional ego" that reflects social usages and a "fundamental self" that is radically unique and spontaneously creative, thereby ushering in the study of intra-subjectivity. Finally, Bergson located the universal within experience rather than within history or nature, both of which he defined as projections of the conventional ego.

Although Bergson's vitalistic metaphysics, the thesis that the absolute is a living process of creative evolution, was not followed by most major twentieth-century philosophers, his rejection of the practical viewpoint in favor of privileged experience, his attention to intra-subjectivity, and his location of the universal within the depths of experience have been the starting points for all serious contemporary philosophy that does not repeat earlier doctrines. James's splitting of the subject into material, social, and spiritual selves, Heidegger's distinction between authentic and inauthentic existence, Unamuno's tragic split between the "individual" (principle of spatial unity) and the "person" (principle of temporal continuity), Berdyaev's opposition between "subjectivity" (creative freedom) and "objectivization," and Marcel's defense of "mystery" against the "spirit of abstraction," just to note a few examples, all presuppose intra-subjectivity and holding practical, end-oriented, and conventional-normed-social action relative to a wider process of experience or existence that is not itself practical.

The major implication for political philosophy of inward or "depth" universalism is that the study of politics is dethroned from its position as the "master science" because its subject matter is considered to be superficial and less real than other human processes. This dethronement is accomplished in a number of ways, depending upon what the philosopher finds at the core of experience or existence. For example, Berdyaev condemned all political activity as the purest form of objectivization: the denial of creative freedom and care for the unique individual in favor of physical control in space. He argued that politics

were necessary because of the human being's fallen condition, but that they could not be rationalized so as to appear as the consummation of the good life. Other twentieth-century thinkers, such as Jaspers and Ortega, took a more moderate position, holding that political activity is a component of the good life, but could not satisfy the demand for solutions to the problem of comprehensive knowledge about human existence.

Behind the dethronement of politics is the principle that not only is political activity less real than other dimensions of existence, such as creative freedom, the encounter with one's mortality, the yearning for comprehensive knowledge of the whole, the mystery of one's destiny, the will to love and be loved, and personal responsibility for one's decisions, but that these other dimensions are more significant or valuable than the public situation. Bergson's splitting of the self into conventional ego and fundamental self was more than the result of an ontological inquiry; it also involved an axiology in which creativity, uniqueness, and love were valued more highly than control, common good, and justice. The new universalism did not merely deny that philosophy was immanent to history, thereby challenging Hegel, Comte, and Marx, but its transcendence-in-depth negated a Platonic essentialist politics based on justice or natural law or right in favor of an anti-politics constituted by opposition to any values capable of being formally organized.

Philosophers attending to intra-subjectivity have not been anarchists in the nineteenth-century sense. They have not believed, first of all, that the exercise of human reason would allow natural social laws to substitute for positive law. Even more fundamentally they have not believed that human nature is rational, but have tended to interpret reason instrumentally and to oppose to it extra-rational factors such as vitality, charity, imagination, creativity, authentic choosing, and faith. Their anti-political stance, then, has been a call to limit the scope of political activity, not usually a program for reconstituting the entirety of social life on non-political principles. Also, the original twentieth-century philosophers have not been traditionalists or classical liberals defending freedom of enterprise. Economic activity, for them, is as much a denial of the intra-subjectively revealed dimensions as politics, while particular traditions have been predominantly viewed as barriers to the new universalism. The philosophical revolution has been unable to articulate itself to any political ideology or to develop an ideology of its own (although its partisans have made a bewildering variety of transitory political commitments), primarily because the experiences that it

POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

has vindicated are revealed in opposition to the practical viewpoint of organized social action.

The discovery of intra-subjectivity was the result of a close examination of experience, accompanied by extraordinary conscious acts such as Bergson's "inversion" of the practical viewpoint. The defense of a philosophy based on intra-subjectivity was not, however, carried out by the initiators of the twentieth-century revolution, but was done by the succeeding generation. Marcel, perhaps, provided the most precise and cogent account of what makes intra-subjectivity possible through his notion of mystery. For Marcel, a mystery is defined as a problem, the data of which encroach upon that problem. From the standpoint of instrumentalism, or for that matter of any rationalist philosophy, the data are separate from the problem and either subject to manipulation while the problem is held constant, organizable by an independent reason, or present in their own intelligible unity. When the datum is human existence in its totality, however, and the problem is knowledge about that existence, the problem itself is a part of the datum. Reflection, then, is not independent of human existence, but one of its functions or expressions and, therefore, is incapable of grounding itself and supplying necessary and comprehensive knowledge about the object with which it is inextricably implicated. The human existent is reason, but human existence cannot be known to be rational. The claim that human existence is rational involves a reduction of the problem of existence to those data that can be rationalized. Such a reduction is performed in every philosophy that makes human existence an object of natural-scientific inquiry, but it appears as a presupposition even of those philosophies such as Marxism which postulate a unity of theory and practice, because such philosophies are based on a trans-historical and transpersonal reason that enables the thinker to contemplate the historical process as a whole and, thereby, to remain separate from it. From the viewpoint of mystery, the self is a problem to itself. Human beings attempt to know why and for what they exist, but they cannot, without falsification, make themselves objects to themselves in order to answer the question, because every act of objectivization presupposes separating the questioner who is being questioned from the question, the latter which is transformed into a series of characteristics, none of which can stand for the whole.

The notion of mystery provides a philosophical passport into intra-subjectivity. While it has no substantive consequences, it allows for the description of non-rationalizable dynamics, such as Bergson's "fundamental self" without the requirement that they be submitted to a

MICHAEL A. WEINSTEIN

rational system. Mystery, in the sense that it was defined by Marcel, can be used as a convenient concept to refer to those dimensions of experience that do not find a direct outlet into the practical viewpoint (those experiences that cannot be manipulated instrumentally or experimentally), above all the fundamental experience of self-interrogation, which is not undertaken with a finite purpose, but is, for those who undergo it, the infinite purpose to which all finite purposes are held relative.

Subordinate to the fundamental mystery of being in which the self becomes a problem to itself and defines itself, in Heidegger's terms, as a search for the "meaning of being," are all of the "existentials" (non-rationalizable and, therefore, non-political dimensions of experience or existence) that appear in intra-subjectivity. Among these "existentials" are the "hunger for immortality" expressed by Unamuno, the notion of insubstitutability of each individual insisted upon by Ortega, creative freedom, nihilistic despair, the yearning to overcome alienation and appropriate all being as one's own, the necessity of exclusive either/or choices, and the drive to appreciate the other as concrete subject (I-Thou relation). Neither these existentials nor the mystery of being which makes them possible subjects for philosophical inquiry can be accommodated to any political system or to any system of political philosophy defending a transcendent or immanent common good. At best, political regimes and philosophies can make pretenses at accommodating the existentials by offering myths of supernatural or historical salvation, any of which must deny the mystery of being. Present regimes and their supporting political philosophies in the West have eschewed such myths, substituting for them, using Marcuse's term, a one-dimensional order based on instrumental reason that is militantly ignorant of the existentials.

The crisis of political philosophy today becomes apparent merely in view of the situation of philosophy as such, leaving aside concurrent developments within the public situation. If the central concern of philosophy is the radically impractical, that which cannot, in principle, become a problem subject to rationalized or institutionalized solution through manipulation and control, then philosophy must at least have no direct relevance to politics and at most may adopt a hostile stance towards politics. What, then, becomes of political philosophy? The values that it has traditionally defended, justice, rights, the common good, the public interest, the rule of law, have all been removed to the conventional and inauthentic dimensions of existence, and have been supplanted by more intimate personal and inter-personal values such as

POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

self-interrogation and concern for the concrete other. The dialectic has been turned inward, splitting the self into contrasting and antagonistic attitudes towards existence, focusing on the conflict between relations that objectify the other person as a variable to be experimentally controlled or manipulated, and relations that preserve and enhance the uniqueness and integrity of the other person as one who bears the mystery of being. Regardless of the public situation, philosophy has made itself irrelevant to practical politics and political philosophy appears to be extinct. The new universal, intra-subjectivity and its philosophical presupposition of mystery, has the paradoxical consequence of enriching experience at the same time that it closes off any exit for that experience into the public situation.

A Deprived Public Situation

From a theoretical viewpoint, the contemporary crisis in political philosophy appears as a defect in systems of thought that provide no principles for guiding activities in the public situation, but which, instead, declare politics to be less real and less valuable than other dimensions of experience or existence. From the standpoint of the public situation, however, the crisis takes on a different and dialectically-opposed aspect: political developments in the twentieth-century have insured that no philosophy, in the traditional sense of the term, can be relevant to them. Hence, although a discussion of the contemporary philosophical revolution might seem to lead to the conclusion that theory is at fault for not directly engaging public issues, attention to the public situation discloses the possibility that an impractical philosophy might be the only one appropriate to current politics.

The great political achievement of the twentieth-century has been the perfection of complex organization, capable of creating not only enduring "secondary groups" with specialized and delimited functions, but of fusing any number of heterogeneous instrumental acts into abstract unities principled by measurable standards such as money, territory controlled, and membership. Conglomerate organizations, which are capable of assimilating conflicting and contradictory activities so long as these activities can be turned into profit or power, have increasingly appropriated space, time, resources, and, ultimately, experience itself. Concurrently, these conglomerates, whether super-powers, multinational corporations, pan-nationalist movements, or multiversities, have attempted to legitimize themselves by promoting nineteenth-century ideologies such as Marxism, liberalism, racialism, or

MICHAEL A. WEINSTEIN

nationalism. Such ideologies conceal the structural similarities that unite all conglomerates into what A. Kroker has called "the conglomerate of all conglomerates:" a world-wide system of relations with no formal center of control, but with a common context of action which requires each organized unit to engage, often to its own destruction, in the struggle for wealth, power, influence, and loyalty.

Ironically, at the same time that philosophers were consummating their project of broadening the range of experiences capable of disciplined scrutiny, Lenin, Mussolini, Hitler, Roosevelt, Rockefeller, Mellon, and Carnegie, among others, were narrowing the public situation to fit the requirements of abstract instrumental reason. The hallmark of an instrumental approach is to "problematize" everything, to eliminate mystery, unfinishedness, and "loose ends:" to separate the data (in this case human beings) from the problem (control). A perfect instrumental act is one in which the means are completely divorced from and heterogeneous to the ends. Such splitting is only possible when the ends are abstract, such as profit measured in money, and the means are concrete, such as human efforts that presuppose the manipulation of states of consciousness. The only limits upon instrumentalism are the degree of plasticity of the means and the presence of competitors. Hence, whatever discontinuities are still present within the public situation depend on the resistance of human beings, whether alone or in groups, to the mechanisms of social control and, more importantly, to the encroachments of conglomerates on one another's "turf," making it necessary for them to grant concessions, or islands of self-determination, to their subjects. Insofar as processes such as "detente" and cartelization are strengthened the most significant barrier to world-wide totalitarianism will be increasingly surmounted.

The reign of instrumental reason is made possible by making human beings and quasi-organized groups radically dependent for their continuance upon the conglomerate. Overt modes of control, such as terror, torture, concentration camps, and "police riots," are effective only within a context in which "everyday life" is already organized and reinforced by social insurance schemes, collective bargaining, planning agencies, and agreements controlling supplies. When conglomerates control access to the means to live and act, human beings cannot but practically support them whatever moral standards they may hold. In a totalitarian order "conscience" is not useful and the smallest acts of opposition appear to be heroic struggles in which, in a Kantian sense, moral imperatives clash with temptations to follow the inclination to "go along." Conscience tends to atrophy both because it is not socially

POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

supported and because it, along with all other aspects of experience, is eventually mobilized by countervailing power structures no different in essential features from the one being resisted. In order to win a battle against an organization, it is invariably necessary to appeal to another organization, thereby reinforcing the "conglomerate of all conglomerates."

The perfection of systems making people and groups radically dependent upon organizations eliminates the need for conglomerates to legitimize themselves with political philosophies. Legitimizing ideologies have, in A. Gouldner's terms, served the function of moralizing power. However, power need not be moralized when there is no exit for people from the structure through which it is exercised. Increasingly, the conglomerates appeal not to any utopia or ideology, but to their indispensability for maintaining the system of life support itself, whatever its quality. In the West, particularly, a system of "crisis politics" has arisen, in which the very conglomerates responsible for inflationary spirals, environmental pollution, unemployment, and resource shortages demand support and mobilization, involving further controls, to protect the "public" against disaster. The underlying strategy of crisis politics is to implant fear and suspicion so deeply that organizations will not be judged by any moral standards but only by their success in maintaining a semblance of "everyday life." Under the regime of crisis politics, then, political philosophy is an impediment to control because its function is to diffuse illusions of hope or nostalgia, not to cultivate fear, distrust, and resentment. The "end of ideology" does not, as its prophets and apologists supposed, come about as a result of the advent of the good life and economic security, but as a consequence of radical dependence and of organizationally created and managed crises. Marx believed that proletarians had "nothing to lose but their chains." Today they are aware, sometimes dimly and sometimes acutely, that they have nothing to lose by opposition but their lives.

The philosophers of intra-subjectivity, though lacking a political program, have taken cognizance of a deprived public situation through their exercise of critical reason. The problematizing tendency of conglomerate action is critiqued, particularly by existentialists, through such categories as Marcel's "spirit of abstraction" and Berdyaev's "objectivization." The "spirit of abstraction" refers to that type of thinking about human existence which takes some aspect of the totality of experience, idealizes it as a concept, and then makes it stand for the whole. "Objectivization" is the related process of thinking the results

MICHAEL A. WEINSTEIN

of an activity as the determinants of it. Hence, abstraction points to the deprivation of mystery, while objectivization points to the deprivation of creative freedom, which insures that mystery is not merely a static and formal category, but an ongoing process of interrogation and response involving integration of the experience of the other with one's own.

Both the spirit of abstraction and objectivization are presuppositions of the ability to organizationally problematize human existence. Abstraction functions in a variety of ways within the conglomerate, from the categorization of human beings according to the functions that they perform for it to their reduction to statistically-determined behaviors for the purposes of planning and their reduction to "cases" for the ends of efficient management. In all instances of abstraction, human beings are made constants or variables to be manipulated in organizational experiments. Objectivization also takes a variety of forms, ranging from exclusion or inclusion of human beings based on measures of performance or ascriptive criteria to exertion of "behavior modification" techniques presupposing objective truth about human capacities. Here again human beings are defined so as to fit the requirements of instrumental reason.

The critique of abstraction and objectivization, or of instrumentalism in general, is equivocal. On the one hand, it mirrors the operative principles of the conglomerate, which is a specific historical structure, while, on the other hand, it has global import, constituting a denunciation of any possible political system. This equivocation can be most favorably explained by the thesis that only in the contemporary era has the "rationalization" of social life proceeded to the point that mechanisms of social control are differentiated from the more intimate self-experiences that in the past engendered legitimating myths of utopia and ideology. The conglomerate, then, would not merely be a name for a new and historically relative organizational form, but, to put it paradoxically, the abstract universal made concrete. At one and the same time, the conglomerate appears as a pure facility or instrument to be shamelessly and guiltlessly used for any personal or group end, and as a totalitarian process depriving each human being and group of self-determination. Under this interpretation, the conglomerate would exemplify the purely "common," "herd," or "mass" dimensions of human existence, grounded in organic self-preservation, which have always been present in human existence, but which have in previous ages been confused with cosmic and historical myths binding personal yearnings to transpersonal or collective redemption. Behind the

POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

problematization of existence is the motive of control, based upon what F. Moreno calls "basic" or constitutive fear. Fear, in turn, however, has roots as deep in human existence as does its counterpart, hope, which underlies mystery and the motive of creative freedom and appreciative receptivity to experience. Fear is ultimately an expression of the self-destructive and nihilistic tendencies in human existence that appear as the will to isolation and the desire to control at all costs, even when the only possibility of control is through destruction. The phenomenology of the conglomerate reveals, at its "depth level," the irreducible structure of evil in human existence, springing from what A. Basave has called "ontological abandonment."

The claim that the public situation in the twentieth century is evil, not in a superficial sense of embodying harm, but in a constitutive and fundamental sense of exemplifying the triumph of death over life, of manipulation over love, of mechanism over appreciation, of convention over solidarity, of economy over charity, of *ressentiment* over resignation, of abandonment over plenitude of existence, is radical in its import. It is, perhaps, not even useful to anyone to make this claim, although it is the result of critical reflection. No political program can be deduced from it and there are armies of psychologists who would seize upon it as an instance of "projection" of the death instinct onto the public situation or of some other "defense mechanism." Yet during the twentieth-century human beings have confronted systematic terror to which they could respond by heroism or by "giving in," and have thereby had the opportunity to discover evil. The evil revealed has not so much been the external bestiality as the internal loss of nerve and consequent slide towards despair.

The terrible truth revealed by the conglomerate is that it is not merely an external imposition, but that it is sought, affirmed, and willed by one side of human life. The spirit of abstraction and objectivization are essential features of the public situation, not because of particular historical series, but because they are primordial human functions. Applying abstraction and objectivization in social relations is not a category mistake in which the thought patterns appropriate to physical reality are illicitly transferred to social reality. It is more likely, in fact, that these ways of thinking first appeared in a social context and only later were transferred to a "natural realm," which was only slowly separated from society. The gap between contemporary philosophy, which has no direct practical relevance to the public situation, and the public situation, which finds philosophy to be an impediment, may not be a passing historical phase, but a revelation of the tragic structure of

human existence, torn between the motives of control and appreciation, problem and mystery.

The total situation disclosed by relating philosophy to the public situation poses the question of whether it is possible to introduce into politics any of the "existentials" that appear in intra-subjectivity on some basis other than fabricating a myth that will only serve as an ideology for some conglomerate. An affirmative response to this question requires not a new ideology or the stirring proclamation of values, but a way of conceiving of political action.

Tragic Politics

Prior to any discussion of practice, a political philosopher must decide whether to take the viewpoint of the philosopher who is concerned to be as truthful as possible or of the ideologist who is concerned to promote some interest within the public situation. Minimally, this choice presupposes doubt that knowledge is virtue or, in more modern rationalist terms, that theory and practice are reciprocal. The grounds for doubting the equivalence of knowledge and virtue have been presented in the preceding discussion. Those who find the grounds adequate will be able to follow the remaining analysis, which is done from the philosophical standpoint. Those who remain within the Platonic or Hegelian traditions, broadly defined, will judge the concluding remarks to be untruthful and, perhaps, immoral.

Political philosophers neither create nor reflect the public situation, although they are implicated in it. Even if their truth is adverse to politics and politics are adverse to their truth, they are human beings and, therefore, constitutively political. In the current situation, as defined above, any political commitment made by a political philosopher sharing in the perspective defined by the twentieth-century intellectual revolution will be equivocal in that it will affirm values and support tendencies antithetical to mystery, creative freedom, and appreciation of the other person as subject. There is no way out of such equivocation. Waiting for a clear case of terror to appear before making a commitment leaves the field open for tendencies to evolve towards terrorism. Trying to turn oneself into a sincere supporter of any movement sacrifices truth. Standing for humane values against all factions makes one irrelevant to some and a tool of others. Engaging in continual criticism impedes decisive action. Political philosophers have little, if any, influence over the contemporary public situation. They do not formulate the demands that others articulate, but, at best, join a