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Editorial

Theorizing Practices – Practicing Theories

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How do Political Thinkers, Feminist Theorists, or Conceptual Historians learn? According to the view of traditional mainstream Positivism, learning processes happen through the exchange of arguments in – sometimes bitter – debates and controversies. According the view of traditional Critical Theory, all political terms, *Begriffe*, or theories have to be read as linguistic embodiments of social power structures. Other approaches including Popper, Kuhn or Habermas, are situated somewhere between the radical internalist and the radical externalist perspectives of Positivism and Critical Theory.

But even if we are able to situate our analytical focus somewhere between these two ideal-typical poles, we may realize that we only have come to the point at which another fundamental question arises: what does qualify as "learning" with respect to Political Thought, Feminist Theory or Conceptual History? Does "learning" really fit as a descriptive term to characterize the change of interest and of content in the work of authors like Reinhard Koselleck, Martha Nussbaum, Quentin Skinner, Kari Palonen, or Judith Butler? Is it possible to qualify every deliberate change in their thinking from a position (a) to a position (b) with the evolutionist vocabulary of a "learning process"? In some cases, as in Thomas Mann's political thought, the answer is straightforwardly in the affirmative. In others, Plato's changing view of political institutions from his *Politeia* to the *Nomoi* comes to mind, the issue remains controversial. And in still others, as the ongoing debates over the concept of alienation in the work of the young and the late Marx or on Heidegger's *Kehre* illustrate, we may even have to speak of a decline of theoretical substance, as a process of "de-learning". And what about changes which have the structure of (a) to (b) to (c), like the developments in Georg Lukacs' social theory from his early studies on literary classics to his theory of reification and finally to his late ontology? And what about a case of from (a) to (b) to (c), in which (c) is similar to (a) (one may think of the political implications of Herbert Marcuse's aesthetic theory)?

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In trying to answer these questions we may refer to some kind of external criteria. But here we open a new can of worms since we may not agree about such criteria: are more logical consistency, the innovation of a new vocabulary, the inclusion of a broader range of empirical phenomena, or a closer connection to political practice, to mention just a few possibilities, sufficient external criteria? All our attempts to answer this question only add another layer of debates in the epistemology of the humanities and the social sciences.

But skipping the problem of appropriate external criteria altogether and shifting back to the internal view of authors is no possible way back. In doing so, we are confronted with a diversity of autobiographical reports which may still not clear the matter. Some authors like Augustine in his *Confessions* – or Rousseau reporting his vision before he wrote the *First Discourse* – claim that some external energy, a god or a guardian of dreams, basically forced them to think in new ways. Other authors like Judith Shklar or Isiaah Berlin point their fingers at their own personal experiences in totalitarian dictatorships, whereas authors like John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas insist to have been convinced for making changes in their theories exclusively by the pure force of the better argument from other academics. Some testify in their autobiographical notes that they experienced something like a jump, whereas others describe their learning process as a slow development. Or think about John St. Mill, who in his *Autobiography* presents a mix of all these explanations? To what extent do these different self-descriptions help us to understand what their theories are intended to tell us? And how we properly interpret these kind of self-interpretations?

So let us switch the level of abstraction for a moment and turn to ourselves as persons with a strong interest and *engagement* in Political Thought, Conceptual History or Feminist Theory. When we ask ourselves about the reasons for changes in our own political thought we probably come at some point to confess that our own political experiences – be it in one way or the other as political active citizens or merely as persons who follow the daily political horror shows in the news – strongly influence our theoretical orientations. The eminent success of right wing populist parties all over Europe and in the United States, the rise of authoritarian governments in Turkey or Venezuela, and the stabilization of authoritarian regimes in Russia and China has reawakened the interest in the merits of classical liberal political institutions like parliamentary democracy, an independent judiciary, or freedom of the press. At the same time the current political developments have made us much more aware to what extent the particular institutional setting of liberal democracy already has come under attack even in EU member states like Hungary, Poland and probably soon in Austria and Czech Republic too. It will be interesting to see, how proponents of a "left-wing populism" like Chantal Mouffe will react to the current events in the future. Will they experience the current events as just

another indicator for the necessity of their radical counter-strategy or will they turn to defend liberal democracy as something more than just a battle ground for their neo-socialist (if not to say retro-socialist) project?

The role of experiencing political practice – as a source of experience for theoretical change as well as means for making the arguments – is less in the focus of Political Thought, Feminist Theory or Conceptual History than it deserves. The three main articles in this issue of *Redescriptions* all deal in one way or the other with aspects of this topic; the role of political practice as crucial source for learning in Political Thought constitutes a kind of hidden curriculum for this issue of our journal.

Philipp Erbentraut in his article about "English and French influences on German Party Theory before 1848" discusses the long-standing image of a general anti-party sentiment in 19th century German political thought. Hannah Arendt was among the numerous authors who wrote that political parties were hated in Germany and that even the term "party" had a negative sound in German language throughout the 19th century (see Arendt, 1973: 250–252). According to this view, no political or social grouping wanted to call itself a party because they were perceived as an articulation of special interests against the common good. And unsurprisingly constitutional theorists had also dealt only rudimentarily and with a negative attitude with the phenomenon of the political party. This verdict has become dominant already in the 1920s. Both defenders of the party system like Max Weber and its radical critics like Carl Schmitt shared this historical image (see Anter, 2016; Palonen, 2017). Today, it has become part of the narrative of a German *Sonderweg* expounded by a broad majority of historians and political scientists that this negative view of political parties in the 19th century was one of the main obstacles for political modernization and democratization in Germany and finally contributed to the collapse of the Weimar Republic in 1933. Against this dominant view Erbentraut gives the relevant historical sources of the early phase of party formation in Germany in the years between 1815 and 1848 a new reading. This epoch is called *Vormärz* (pre-March) due to the fact that the revolution of 1848 in Germany broke out in March.

Erbentraut's analysis leads him to a revisionist interpretation of the material. His findings are based on a textual analysis on more than 250 sources written in the *Vormärz* period. According to the sources presented in his article, the influence of French and English constitutional practices had led many political thinkers of the *Vormärz* period to elaborate positive theories of political parties already two decades before the revolution broke out in 1848. These theories were based on a realistic perception of the role of political parties for political decision making in France and Great Britain. They dealt in particular with the necessity of an organized opposition in politics, with the productive function of competition between political parties, and with the benefits of

party organizations for governments. In all these dimensions of the potential positive and constructive role of political parties, the authors of the *Vormärz* period based their view on what they understood as experiences form political practice in both Great Britain and France. Thus experiences – in this case: second- or even third-hand experiences – did more for the "learning" process about political parties than pure speculative thought or the reading of classics in Political Thought. Even influential contributions to political parties like Edmund Burke's famous essay of 1770 (see Burke, 1770) are best understood in their concrete experimental context in which they emerged.

In his piece called "Flying Spark of Fire. Thinking (and) Action in Hannah Arendt" Eno Trimçev focuses on the space between the ontological and historical dimensions of Arendt's political thought. Both dimensions have led to different conceptions of action. The ontological dimension emphasizes the miracle of new beginnings whereas the historical emphasizes the mode of associative acting in concert. According to Trimçev, these two concepts of action form two poles in the rich literature on Arendt to which existentialist and hemerneutic readings of her work correspond. Trimçev argues that the tensions between existentialist and hermeneutic readings can be negotiated by rethinking Arendt's divide between action and thinking. The author interprets both thinking and action as human experiences in and of the world which are kept in a mutually complimentary relationship. "Experience" becomes crucial for Trimçev's reading of Arendt: against her intentions (but within her thought) he gives up her clear divide between action and thinking by understanding both modes as instances of human experience. In her essay "Philosophy and Politics", published posthumously in 1990, Arendt uses the metaphor of "the flying spark of fire between two flintstones" (Arendt, 1990: 101) in order to illustrate the non-appearing measures that emerge in thinking and that makes one's solitary thinking intelligible to others. That this aspect of thinking is also shared by action can be shown by the interplay between the *Zweck, Ziel, Sinn* and *Prinzip* of action in the late fragmentary text "Introduction into Politics". The "flying spark of fire" to which thinking tends, is immanent to very moment in the world which Arendt described as politics.

Trimçev's suggestion for Arendtians to find a way out of this dilemma is to move further with Arendt's basic intuitions and to recover a language of experience whose terms gain meaning only in relation to one another. The deep divide between action and thinking misses a crucial element of action's contextuality towards the world through actions non appearing measures Thus Trimçev's attempt to go beyond her explicit intention to keep thinking apart from action in order to shield the former from the demands of the latter puts both experience and politics – certain forms of practice – into the center of the attempt to overcome the interpretive divide of the existentialist and hemerneutic readings of Hannah Arendt's work.

The role of experience and practice is emphasized in a different way by Rob Goodman in his piece "The Advisor: Counsel, Concealment, and Machiavelli's Voice". Already Max Weber noticed that professional political advisors emerged in different places of Europe the 15th and 16th century as a distinct social class (see Weber, 1919). Until today, Niccolò Machiavelli is seen as a role-model for political advisers. Michael Oakeshott once noticed that the inexperience of new princes created the demand for advising literature like *The Prince* and coined Machiavelli as the theorist of the new prince and the new republic (see Oakeshott, 1962: 247). According to Goodman, Machiavelli must also be seen as the theorist of the advisory institutions that grew alongside them. Goodman takes a close look to the attention that Machiavelli paid in his writings to advisory language and practice. According to him, they should not be treated as a mere by-product of Machiavelli's professional career but as a crucial element of his political theory of advice giving. Thus we are invited to follow Goodman in his close look at the practice of advising by Machiavelli in his books *The Prince* and the *Discourses on Livy*. He calls our attention in particular to the ways in which these two works by Machiavelli can be read not only as attempts to shape a model of princely behavior, but even more as demonstrations of a model of advisory behavior.

Thus Machiavelli's writings appear to be not simply collections of advices, but as certain performances of advice-giving. The central feature of this behavior is concealment and indirection in argument. In political practice, any advice-giving happens in a rhetorical situation and the influence of the advisor is limited to the rhetorical situation itself. Once the audience of a presentation of a political advice is accustomed to its practice and rhetorical elements, it puts every performance of advice-giving under suspicion. An audience which is used to look *at* advice performance easily learns to look *through* it with a skeptical eye to the ways the advice is presented and with a resistance to persuasion. Thus, learning to deal with advice by the audience forces advice-givers who want to stay in an influential position to come up with all sorts of rhetorical techniques of concealment and strategies of framing. Examples are a mask of dispassion, a scientistic way of describing the political world, a dilemmatic habit of speech, or arguments by implication. In doing so, Machiavelli positions the counselor as an entirely subsidiary actor, as an instrument in the hands of the prince – a political actor who gains his influence by ways of pretending to have no influence and decisive power.

The book review essays in this issue also deal with practical experiences and their impact on Political Thought. Arda Güçler in her review of Lasse Thomassen's book about British Muliticulturalism emphasizes the importance to discuss empirical cases and practical examples in order to develop an appropriate normative concept of recognition and political representation in modern multicultural societies. Rosario López, who demonstrates in her book the multiple

ways in which methodological, historical, and political views are interconnected in John Stuart Mill's work also puts her finger on the role of experience for progress in Political Thought. At the same time, as Hubertus Buchstein in his review argues, some of Mill's suggestions for political reform (like the introduction of public voting) ought to be seen today as a warning sign against the possible pitfalls of a scientistic methodology in the social sciences.

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