

EDITORIAL

CONCEPTUAL HISTORY AS POLITICAL THEORY

In the contemporary discussion there is a tendency to distinguish between the “history of political thought” and “political theory”. This is especially upheld by those who understand “political theory” in a normative sense, as the search for a good order, and who tend to consider historical studies as purely “antiquarian”, having nothing to do with the problems of today.

My thesis is that the distinction between “political theory” and the “history of political thought” should be understood in more relative terms. In particular, “political theory” should not be monopolized by a certain fraction of theorizing. In addition, normative political theory clearly has a certain historical perspective of its own, often quite anachronistic from the viewpoint of the historians of political thought. Historical studies themselves have a contemporary reference and a *Wertbezug* in the Weberian sense, which enables them also to contribute indirectly to the theorization contemporary politics. If we, furthermore, accentuate the shift in the history of political thought from the history of ideas to the history of concepts, we can then claim that conceptual history subverts the very aim of normative political theory, the search for a good order. It is high time to do so.

“Political theory” is in a certain sense an *oxymoron*. One of its components refers to the *vita activa*, the other to the *vita contemplativa*,

and a “synthesis” of the two is hardly imaginable. Indeed, the title refers to two opposite possibilities of theorizing about politics: the perspectives of “theory” and “politics”. This conflict originated in ancient Greece between the Platonic and the Sophistic approaches, which is, in a sense, re-actualized in the contemporary discussion.

What is today referred to as normative political theory or “political philosophy” is still based upon Platonic assumptions. The contemporary praxis of politics is considered to be a dirty phenomenon, which should be purified by applying to politics the principles which are considered to be valid in the purer spheres of life. The guiding idea of the normative theory is that of the “application to politics” of some of the principles that are constructed outside of it. Furthermore, the notion of application relies on the consideration of politics as one “sphere” among many spheres, to which the principles can be “transferred” through certain purifying operations. In addition, one of the conditions of the operation is that “politics”, as is the case with other spheres, should have a limited number of unifying principles, which regulate and structure what is possible and what is allowed to do within this sphere.

This straw man picture of “normative political theory” has heuristic value insofar as it illustrates how secondary the fractional conflicts within this type of theorizing are. Viewed from outside, the quarrels between contractarians and communitarians are provincial, and the same holds for the question of whether the model for “politics” should be searched for in “morals”, “economy”, “law”, “society”, “religion” etc. Common to all of them is a finalistic perspective in which the good order – however it is understood – acts as a kind of end of history. Correspondingly, “political theory” is indeed a theory, at least in the sense of reducing the intrigues, quarrels and moves of politicking. The aim of a “political theory” of this type is, thus, the victory of “theory” over “politics”.

According to my thesis, the simple and seemingly harmless idea of politics-as-sphere already invites such a reglementation of politics. As opposed to it we can insist on politics-as-activity, as something that can neither be easily reglemented, nor conceptualized in terms of a “theory” that is in search of rules and regularities.

“Those who do politics and those who study it are different people” is a lucid formula posed by Ms. Tarja Halonen when questioned

as to why she thought she had been elected as the president of Finland in February 2000. Can politics be theorized at all “from within”? How is such theorization that does not reduce the contingency of politics possible?

One already classical answer was presented by Quentin Skinner in his *Foundations of Modern Political Thought* in 1978:

For I take it that the political life itself sets the main problems for the political theorist, causing a certain range of issues to appear problematic, and a corresponding range of questions to become the leading subjects of debate (vol. I, p. xi).

For my present purposes, the most important implication of this formula is to take the actions, situations, formulations and self-understandings of those acting politically as the point of departure in the theorization of politics. “Point of departure” refers not to a “basis”, but rather to something that can be taken as an initial approximation, which is then explicated, elucidated, interpreted, assessed etc. from different perspectives. As opposed to the Platonic style of theorizing, politics as activity is not devaluated or functionalized as a mere “indicator” or “symptom” of something else, but rather is taken quite seriously. “Political theory” can be understood as a second-order activity, but only if it upholds the lived reality of politics-as-activity as its point of departure.

Thus, we should, to use another oxymoronic formulation, take the games played by politicians seriously. In this sense, the “rational choice” theorists are also doing better than sociologically oriented theorists, but their seriousness is not extended to the analysis of the political agents’ own “words”, which they tend to disqualify as easily as the “functionalist” sociologists. The older “historians of ideas” were also all too eager to neglect the expressions and formulations in order to get to the “idea”. However, the point of politicking is to understand that formulating “an idea” differently is by no means only a matter of taste, but it can also indicate every politically significant difference. Understanding that the content of politics is not independent of vocabularies and of modes of using them also helps us, e.g., in transcending the nineteenth-century jargon of “isms”. Similarly, the political oratory should not be denounced as superficial or

misleading, but seen as an important source of especially democratized politics using the spoken and written word.

Why, then, it is wise to examine history when theorizing about politics? Why am I, for example, travelling around Europe and looking for pamphlets and revue articles written some 50 to 150 years ago, many of which nobody has read for decades? If I would be writing a *Wirkungsgeschichte* of the concept of politics, I would never look for such sources. The *Wertbezug* of the history of concepts of my style is, however, different: it consists of writing a “history of losers”, which means the recovery of unnoticed or unappreciated conceptualizations of politics, sometimes presented in passing remarks to which the authors themselves did not pay any special attention. As opposed to this, the ideal of a *Wirkungsgeschichte* remains within the framework of the traditional “history of winners”.

Even more important is that the history of concepts relies, as Reinhart Koselleck has repeatedly remarked, on a procedure resembling the *Verfremdungseffekt* in the Brechtian theatre theory. To gain a perspective on the understanding of an object – such as the speech of a politician – presupposes a certain distance to it. A kind of translation is needed, in order to get the point. The immediate “communication” with an audience is by no means the best source of understanding a political act. On the contrary, even contemporary speeches should be analyzed by means of a translation-like procedure making use of the *Verfremdungseffekt*.

Historical studies are, in a certain sense, intellectually superior to those using overly “familiar” contemporary sources. In particular, this is the case in terms of those keeping not only temporal, but also linguistic, cultural or intellectual distance. As a style of political theory, historical case studies are thus highly recommendable. Conceptual history as political theory also always aims at something other than basic historical research, when taking up – either as part of an historical interpretation or as a means of transcending it – more general questions, especially those highlighted in the contemporary discussion on political theory.

This distance also enables the historians of political thought to examine contemporary speech acts from a historical perspective. For example, one can do so by contributing to the debate as to whether the election of President Halonen signifies an end to the bourgeois-

socialist division as a key political watershed in Finland, while the existential questions of life-style and identity have gained importance.

The historical perspective also allows for the insistence of contingency and highlights the fragility of contemporary political arrangements and constellations. In this sense, studies of past situations of ruptures with conventions and traditions – or failed attempts to do so – can also be read as a questioning of the very idea of the creation of a stable order. A normative political theory could be renewed in the perspective of replacing the search for good order by a theory aiming at destabilizing any order. This also presupposes the rejection of the old prejudice that disorder is something less intelligible than order. Destabilization does not mean an apology of “creative destruction” but rather an analysis of situations of rupture or dissolution, as opportunities of both politicizing new aspects of human life and politicking with the newly opened aspects of the situation. All this is possible only by means of historical analyses of situations.

The opposition between the normative and the historical styles of political theory most dramatically concerns the attitudes toward concepts. In the Platonic style of theorizing the concepts are timeless: concepts transcend human agency; it is as if they are beyond history and above politics. It is from this perspective that contemporary normative political theories still seem to act as modern versions of advisers-to-princes literature, when intervening in the actual political debates.

Contractualism is a main variant of contemporary normative political theory. In contractualist theories concepts are understood to be constructs. Nonetheless the entire contract paradigm relies on the assumption of a consensus regarding the terms of the contract. Conflicts of interpretation become immediate threats to the conditions of upholding a contract and allowing for the possibility that concepts change when used, when the political constellation shifts. This does not prevent the contractualist theories from having a conceptual history of their own, but it is written in the narrow perspective of an increasing stabilization of concepts. To the outsider, however, it is quite evident that this aim remains hopeless, and it is precisely the failure of stabilization that makes the contractualist theories worth reading also from an historical perspective.

Max Weber already realized that concepts are instruments or tools of human actions. As such, their use is inherently contestable and liable to change. The historical and contestable character of political concepts can, conversely, be interpreted as a dimension of understanding political struggles and their shifting constellations. In conceptual matters, the common claim for introducing a consensus about the meanings as a condition of any debate appears as a hopeless and undesirable reduction of the range of political action. Concepts are neither outside frameworks nor preliminary distinctions, within which the “politics proper” would take place, but rather a central aspect of the very activity called politics.

Now we can finally present some implications of studies on conceptual changes for political agents. As opposed to the *Fürstenspiegel* tradition, the Weberian principle of *Wertfreiheit* relies on the autonomy of political agents: it is they who must invent decide upon the principles and practices themselves, and not to be regimented by theorists, as if they were the better politicians. Secondly, we should be conscious of the highly situational character of politics as activity, i.e. of the limited significance of such general principles as constitutions, and we do not want to act as apologists of regularity, which would easily extinguish political creativity. Furthermore, politicians should not rely uncritically on specialists, for there are no experts in judging the political significance of activities, but rather they should understand their responsibility for their own actions, even if they are unable to control their consequences. In short, conceptual historians should avoid denouncing politicians as dilettantes in conceptual matters and encourage them to suggest conceptual innovations of their own.

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After this volume the first editorial team of the *Finnish Yearbook of Political Thought* (Sisko Haikala, Jussi Kotkavirta and myself) is replaced by a new one from three disciplines (history, philosophy, political science). As editors we have remained amateurs who still make dilettantish errors and who still do not understand anything about the marketing of a Yearbook. Nonetheless, we are quite proud of the content and quality of the volumes, as well as of the formation of a

profile of our own. We would like to thank those who have made the volumes possible: the assistant editors (vol.1. Ari Turunen, vol. 2. Raija-Leena Luoma and vol. 3. and 4. Jouni Vauhkonen) the editor of SoPhi publications, Juha Virkki, as well as our financial supporters, with regard to volumes 3. and 4. especially Suomen Kulttuurirahasto.

The new team, led by Eerik Lagerspetz as editor-in-chief, and with Pasi Ihalainen and Tuija Parvikko as editors, has already contributed to the edition of the volume 4.

I wish the new team good luck.

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