EDITORIAL

IS POLITICAL THEORY POLITICALLY INTERESTING?

Is political theory useful in politics? Has it any relevance? In one sense, the question itself is an irrelevant one. Of course, says the professional political theorist, political theory is "useful". The task of political theory is to reflect politics, political institutions, concepts and traditions. And such a reflection is an inescable part of political activity. Thus, political theory is itself an indispensable element of politics. If we grasp the characters of politics, we also understand why political theory is needed.

In another sense, the question again appears as irrelevant. Unlike, say, applied genetics, or meteorology, or, allegedly, some branches of economics, political theory does not claim that it can either be used as a basis for manipulating our world or as a basis for forming practically utilisable expectations about the future. Such an aim, says the political theorist, would arise from a misconceived scientific ideal only. To think that political theory should be "useful" in this sense would entail either the acceptance a scientistic-technocratic ideal or a view that the task of political theory is to construct Utopian blueprints for the future. And all forms of Utopianism are potentially totalitarian. Political theory is and should be an interpretive rather than a legislative activity. Hence there is no obligation to prove its "usefulness". Its proper task is to help us to understand ourselves as political agents, as members of our polities.

But one may accept these replies and still insist in asking the question. Consider the European integration process and the recent debates on an European constitution, and, more generally, on the future development of the political institutions of the European Union. During the first forty years, the European institutions have developed more or less in a theoretical vacuum. The guiding philosophy of the European integration has been an apolitical functionalist view of society. The establishment of a common currency, for example, was generally seen as a purely economic matter; the only theoretical arguments for or against it presented in the discussion were economic ones. In truth, of course, the decision was highly political.

Generally, the discussion on the fate of the Union is still conducted in pragmatic terms, especially in the newcomer countries like Finland. And this, I think, constitutes a genuine problem. Instead of asking "Is political theory useful?" we may ask "Is political theory *interesting*?" Is it interesting, for example, in the sense that it is able to provide us interpretations that would help us Euro-citizens to orientate in this political maze called the Europe? True, there is a growing stock of empirical and legal studies on the political institutions of the Union. But do we have any interesting political *theory*?

Partly, the problem reflects the state-centered tradition of the European political theory. Our dominant political theories have had very little to say about politics that is not confined to the level of the sovereign nation state, about politics at the supra-national or sub-national levels. If the study of political thought is fundamentally (not exclusively), a historical discipline, it seems to be doomed to remain as a prisoner of this one-sidedness of its own past. (Economic theory, as a contrast, has transgressed the limits of the state from the start.) Nevertheless, some theoretical traditions have not exclusively limited themselves at the level of national politics. For example, the early "federalist" theory of Johannes Althusius, the French 19th century federalism, and the early British pluralisms of Figgis, Cole, and Laski focused on the "local" as well as on the "international"[1]. And there certainly are untapped resources in the political traditions of smaller European countries, e.g. in countries with federal traditions (like The Netherlands or Switzerland), or in countries where the formation of national identities has preceded the formation of state institutions (like Finland).

Or, take more specific problems like the majority rule, the nature of representation, the role of courts, or the role of the executive power in the European institutions. These issues are central in shaping the emerging constitutional structure of the Union – whether the outcome will be called a "federation" or not is a secondary matter. In all these issues, the European constitutional history provides us interesting precendents and parallels, and there are extensive discussions on these issues in the national political traditions. To take an example, one of the innovative attempts to conceptualize the future of the European union is Neil MacCormick's proposal that the heuristic model for the European constitution should be the 18th century idea of a "balanced constitution" rather than a democratic nation-state. Symptomatically, Professor MacCormick is not only a brilliant legal and political theorist but also a member of the European Parliament.[2]

Here, we may feel certain envy when watching the Americans. In the United States, we may say, the political theory *has* always been " interesting" in the sense that it has always been intimately connected with the constitutional development of the republic. The "more perfect Union" was created in philosophical debates, and the American political theory is largely an attempt to interprete the nature of it. Discussions which, only some ten years ago, looked as parochial from the European point of view, may have gained new relevance now. Still, in one sense the US-American theoretical discussion remains parochial. The leading contemporary American political theorists tend – with some exceptions – to share the presupposition made explicite by John Rawls: the public reason of a society is articulated by its Supreme Court. The US-American constitutional political theory is court-centered. Those who, like Jeremy Waldron, emphasize "the dignity of legislation" are a minority.

I may summarize my idea by saying that what we Euro-citizens need is new views, arguments, and theories about (NB. not the theo*ry* of) about representation and representative institutions. For me, it seems clear that our current notion of democracy, born and grown in the framework of the nation-state, is not directly applicable to supra-national units like the Union. For example, "global democracy" is a highly problematic notion. Paradoxically, a political theory which ignore these issues by sticking to the existing traditions actu-

ally betrays those traditions. For the core element of the European tradition of political thought has always been the conviction that traditions should be subjected to critical reflection. The European classical traditions, from Aristotle to Tocqueville, have always contained analytical, historical, and prescriptive or action-guiding elements. Those who refuse to ask the question about the polical relevance of their own theorizing should at least admit that they are doing something else than political theory in the tradition-bound sense of the term.

* * *

The present issue of *The Finnish Yearbook of Political Thought* includes reflections and "confessions" of some some leading historians of political thought. Their soul-searching provides us an interesting view to the historical revolution of the 70's and 80's. Clearly they have not refused to rise the question of relevance. Our Journal wants to encourage the students of political thought to continue the discussion on the role of political theory.

Notes

[1] See G. Duso, W. Krawietz and D. Weyduckel (eds.) *Konsens und Konsoziation in der politische Theorie des frühen Föderalismus. Rechtstheorie Beiheft 16.* Ducker & Humblot, Berlin 1997.

[2] Neil MacCormick, *Questioning Sovereignty. Law, State, and Nation in the European Commonwealth.* Oxford University Press, Oxford 1999.