

that was coming apart, providing a sense of philosophical order amid disorder—a ground for a new liberal consensus and a novel accommodationist politics.

In the Shadow explores how, in this context, Rawls's thought gave rise to novel liberal frameworks for political analysis. It charts how liberal philosophers engaged with political problems through the conceptual apparatus of liberal egalitarianism and the lens of the philosophy of "public affairs." Rawlsians conceived the domain of politics in terms of social institutions and distributive justice, and of political action in terms of individual moral responsibility. In the aftermath of the Vietnam War and Warren Court, what counted as a public affair was shaped by liberal commitments about what made a political event worthy of philosophical study. Politics came to mean problems of institutional regulation, constitutional questions in the courts, and issues that could be analyzed under the cover of "applied ethics."

This resignification of the political had a range of effects. Over the course of the late twentieth century, political philosophers justified incremental change and institutional adaptation from a baseline of postwar social liberalism, in which the institutions that mattered were the juridical-legislative institutions of the state. Consensual forms of democratic politics were prioritized, while more antagonistic forms were diffused or removed from consideration altogether. These priorities justified the exclusion of a wide variety of alternative political theories. Rawlsian liberalism therefore came to function as a constraint on the scope of political philosophy, limiting its focus and domesticating alternative political visions. Indeed, I argue that the distinctiveness and dominance of liberal egalitarianism should, in part, be understood in terms of its capaciousness, flexibility, and capacity to engage and domesticate its alternatives and rivals. It is the story of this distinctive form of philosophical liberalism—and what it has meant for the analysis of politics since its emergence—that *In the Shadow* seeks to explain.

The Specter of Liberal Egalitarianism

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In the Shadow of Justice explains how a particular approach to political philosophy—"liberal egalitarianism"—emerged in postwar England and

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the United States, consolidated over four decades as a coherent philosophical paradigm, and ultimately triumphed as a nearly hegemonic conception of political philosophy itself: a vision of how political philosophy “works” and “what it aims to do” (ix). Forrester meticulously attends to the broader political and economic contexts framing the problem spaces of liberal egalitarianism—from postwar antitotalitarianism to the civil rights movement, from global inequality to the market fundamentalism of the rising New Right—while also rigorously reconstructing the internal philosophical debates that animated this paradigm and propelled it forward into ever new areas of “public affairs.” One of the most provocative theses of this brilliant and provocative book proposes that as the political and economic contexts that gave birth to liberal egalitarianism disappeared—especially the postwar conditions of affluence and consensus liberalism—the paradigm itself continued to develop, but now disembedded from the historical conditions that gave it life. This is what Forrester means when she describes the book as a “ghost story”: a story about a theory that lives on and even triumphs as “a spectral presence long after the historical conditions that gave it life have disappeared” (xi).

At the heart of the argument is Rawls’s *A Theory of Justice* (1971), which Forrester describes as an “encyclopedia of postwar Anglophone thought, in which the ideas and techniques that came into prominence in those years—welfare economics, choice theory, game theory, theories of public finance, analytic jurisprudence, ethics, democratic theory, and the history of ideas—were deployed and tamed in the service of grand theory of justice” (106). In returning *A Theory of Justice* to its postwar context, Forrester dispels several still-prevalent assumptions about that work. One of these is the Rawls and the rebirth of political philosophy narrative. Another is the Great Society story, which reads *A Theory of Justice* as a retrospective philosophical justification of an expanded New Deal welfare state. On a more philosophically specific level, and focused on the development of Rawls’s own thinking, Forrester demonstrates the profound continuities between *A Theory of Justice* and *Political Liberalism* (published in 1993), showing that what is often taken to be the more historical and contextual focus of the latter was actually a central concern of Rawls’s from the start. Rawls’s philosophical trajectory goes from Wittgenstein and Hume to Kant rather than the other way around.

As Forrester situates the development and extensions of Rawls’s work in a dynamic and overlapping set of contexts, important continuities within the broader paradigm of liberal egalitarianism come clearly into view, most importantly its unwavering commitment to the idea that, deep down, democratic social life rests on the possibility of consensus and normative agreement. From Rawls’s early engagement with Wittgenstein’s account of rules and forms of life to his later idea of an overlapping consensus of reasonable comprehensive doctrines, at the heart of his thinking, and of liberal egalitarianism more broadly, was the commitment to a normative consensus underwriting social practices, and the idea that it was the task of political

philosophy to bring these latent norms to a principled articulation that could guide constitutional disagreements and adjudicate conflicts over questions of justice. The consensual core of Rawls's theory, Forrester demonstrates, was born from the idealization of midcentury American society as a coherent system of rule-governed practices or games. In developing this argument, Forrester follows critics of Rawls from the Left and Right—from Sheldon Wolin and Charles Mills, say, to Allan Bloom—who identified the ideological commitments animating the project of political liberalism itself, although nobody has demonstrated the source and persistence of these animating ideological commitments with the historical depth and detail found in *In the Shadow*.

There is so much to admire about this book, and I learned from every chapter and perhaps page. What I admire most is how *In the Shadow* models a way of doing intellectual history that is simultaneously a work of political theory in its own right. I do not mean only the impressive conceptual rigor of the book, the way it fluently reconstructs the central postwar debates in analytic political philosophy and the broader political contexts that animated them, from Rawls to Ronald Dworkin, from Brian Barry to Charles Beitz, from Thomas Scanlon to Thomas Nagel, and back again. Instead, I also mean the critical interrogation of liberal egalitarianism that hums through every chapter, and the broader questions this critique raises regarding the kind of politics and spheres of political contention enabled by liberal egalitarianism, and those it foreclosed.

Forrester's alternative conception of political theory is largely achieved negatively; it comes into view primarily through her sustained critique of liberal egalitarianism's limitations and blindspots, rather than being developed as a positively articulated counter paradigm. That said, the outlines of a coherent alternative can be reconstructed in the consistency of the critiques Forrester elaborates across the book's eight chapters, which revolve around the forms of political action and conflict precluded or obscured by liberal egalitarianism. *In the Shadow* points toward a political theory that engages more openly with those precluded dimensions—a political theory focused on group interest and collective action, for example, over reasoned debate and individual choice, one that prioritizes problems of control and legitimacy over legality and distribution, social conflict and crisis over reasonable pluralism and moral justification. Although it is not made wholly explicit, there is a pervasive affinity with the critiques of liberal egalitarianism generated by a more historically situated democratic realism and agonistic radicalism. It would be interesting to have Forrester elaborate on these affinities more explicitly than she is able to do in its epilogue.

At the heart of many of Forrester's critiques is the idea that liberal egalitarianism remains problematically committed to strategies of depoliticization and is insufficiently attentive to questions of history, domination, and power. Liberal egalitarianism consistently converts the political conflicts it confronts at every stage of its intellectual development into juridical problems. The political dilemmas that liberal egalitarianism was best suited to

handle, Forrester argues, with its focus on the justice of the basic structure, were preeminently constitutional, which contributed to a legal fetishism in political philosophy. In contrast, Forrester envisions a more political practice of political philosophy. The strategies of depoliticization she finds so prevalent in liberal egalitarianism are rooted in its basic premises and conceptual building blocks, and especially its commitment to the normative consensus animating the rule-based practices structuring social life. They determine how liberal egalitarians frame political conflicts and the philosophical path they set forth for resolving them: questions of economic inequality and injustice are approached ahistorically as questions of distribution and distributive justice rather than ownership and production. Questions of the legitimacy and the scope of political dissent are framed as questions of civil liberties. Investigations of the moral limits of war focus on individual agency rather than collective or corporate agents like the army, the bureaucracy, or the state. And questions of class and racial conflict are construed as reasonable disagreements between comprehensive moral doctrines.

The most powerful example of this broader dynamic is found in Forrester's discussion of Rawls's engagements with the civil rights movement, and his constitutionalization of the problem of civil disobedience. The book's second chapter investigates how the civil disobedience seemingly exemplified by the civil rights struggle of the fifties and sixties, as well as the antiwar movement, were interpreted by liberal egalitarians to make both movements expressive of the very consensus liberalism that was arguably shattered by them. Through Rawls's influence and that of other prominent members of the Society for Ethical and Legal Philosophy (SELF), a particular—and particularly problematic—understanding of the civil rights movement and of civil disobedience took shape, a civil libertarian approach that united the civil rights protester and the antiwar conscientious objector. It is an interpretation that figures legitimate civil disobedience as that which makes an appeal to the shared moral basis of public life. It was “disobedience to law within the limits of fidelity to the law;” as Forrester succinctly describes it (53). This approach to civil disobedience gave philosophical articulation to a romantic understanding of the civil rights movement and contained it within the premises of American exceptionalism; it celebrated the Black freedom struggle as a reconfirmation and extension of the American creed. Forrester provides a lucid account of the principled restrictions placed around legitimate dissent in this chapter, and doing so contributes to a broader reconsideration in contemporary political theory of the more explicitly political and radical dimensions of the civil rights movement and of civil disobedience than those articulated by Rawls and other liberal egalitarians.¹

In the Shadow ultimately makes a compelling case for getting out from under that shadow. Forrester does not share Rawls's faith that “indigenous

¹See, for example, Erin Pineda, *Seeing Like an Activist: Civil Disobedience and the Civil Rights Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

liberal traditions provide a reasoned basis for radical criticism of our existing institutions,” nor that “objections raised against present policies by radical critics can be defended on essentially liberal grounds” (126). It may be that the owl of Minerva flies at dusk, and as a constellation of thought comes into clear conceptual focus in the historian’s eyes, it has already begun to rigidify and grow cold, hardening as a relic more than a living body of thought. In historicizing a once-hegemonic paradigm of political philosophy, *In the Shadow* clears a space for thinking that allows us to more clearly delineate alternative paths forward. As postwar liberalism came undone as a political movement—first from the Left and then much more successfully and enduringly from the Right—its preeminent philosophical articulation marched along ghostlike into new arenas of “public affairs.” What is living and what is dead in liberal egalitarianism is an important philosophical and political question for our time, not only for philosophers and political theorists, but for those who seek a more egalitarian and emancipatory politics in a time of political crisis and resurgent authoritarianism. *In the Shadow* is an intellectual history of postwar philosophical liberalism written amid the ruins of liberalism. As such, it is a provocation to undertake once again the remaking of political philosophy, one more responsive to the full scope of the political crisis of our present.

What Else Could Political Thought Do?

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In the Shadow of Justice offers a superb history, at once meticulous and sweeping, of the Rawlsian liberal tradition in political philosophy, putting the period of its dominance in invaluable perspective as that era comes to a close. Although tightly focused on the work of John Rawls and his many and varied interlocutors—analytical Marxists, communitarians, libertarians—the book implicitly poses major questions for political theory in a transitional moment. In showing how these particular political philosophers construed political thought in the recent past, Forrester’s book prompts reflection on the broader question of what else political thought could, and should, do in the future.

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