The Profession

Political Philosophy and the Policy Studies Organization[1]

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Recently, in the course of researching a book on the relationship between Western political philosophy and American public policy analysis, I examined the first twenty years of the Policy Studies Organization and discovered some disturbing trends. Early pledges made by the Organization that it would seek to integrate into its *Policy Studies Journal* ideas gained from the Western political tradition have been only partially fulfilled. One result of this unfortunate omission is that the contemporary study of American public policy issues remains essentially isolated from the history of Western political philosophy.

When the Policy Studies Organization published the inaugural issue of the *Policy Studies Journal* in 1972 students of the history of political philosophy reacted with guarded optimism. Political philosophy enjoyed a questionable status within the discipline of political science during the post World War II era. The efforts of behavioralists to equate political philosophy with antiquarianism and to deny the validity of qualitative analysis had convinced many political scientists that knowledge gained from studying the history of Western political thought was no longer relevant.

This hostile atmosphere was moderated somewhat when the post-behavioral revolution in political science arrived on the American scene, heralded by David Easton's 1969 call for a renewed emphasis on the ancient "humanist conception of the intellectual as the guardian of those civilized, humane values known to most men" (Easton, 1969: 1059). The subsequent formation of the Policy Studies Organization and open invitation by its *Policy Studies Journal* to research "regardless of methodology or ideology" ("Statement of Purpose," 1972: 2) seemed to promise a much more tolerant attitude. Political philosophers were encouraged to believe that the pages of the *Journal* would be free from the limits imposed by behavioralism.

It is apparent that the *Journal* has sought to live up to that promise. For twenty years there have been a number of notable essays and reviews published that are genuinely informed by the accumulated wisdom of the Western political tradition. John Ladd's "Policy Studies and Ethics" in 1973 included a thoughtful consideration of Plato and Aristotle as thinkers worthy of merit for policy studies. George Modelski's "Long Cycles and U.S. Strategic Policy" in 1979 discussed the ideas of Thucydides, Francis Bacon, Lord Bolingbroke, and David Hume. James Wiser's "exploring Liberal Norms" in 1983 applied the history of liberal thought to a critique of three books on contemporary American liberalism. Irirangi Bloomfield's "Managing Technology in the United States and Switzerland" in 1984 included an analysis of the Judeo-Christian heritage common to both societies. Paul Thompson's "Agriculture, Biotechnology, and the Political Evaluation of Risk" in 1988 applied the political views of Edmund Burke and Jeremy Bentham to an examination of the risks of new agricultural biotechnologies.

Although there have been other articles that have taken the Western political tradition seriously, more frequently different messages have been delivered. Too often the history of political philosophy has been relegated to a museum relic, displayed on the mantelpiece of the *Policy Studies Journal* but seldom utilized or consulted. Vincent Ostrom's "Human Fallibility, Political Theory, and the Environment" in 1973, for example, determined that:

> the problems of human fallibility and the environment take us back to fundamental issues in political theory where we share the concerns of many classical thinkers such as Thomas Hobbes, Jean Jacques Rousseau, John Locke, Alexander Hamilton, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, Alexis de Tocqueville, and a multitude of others (Ostrom, 1973: 208).

Yet Ostrom evidently did not consider it worthwhile to examine any of these thinkers' specific concerns or imagine some link between their general theories and current environmental dilemmas.

Having previously neglected Weber and Marx, G. David Garson's "From Policy Science to Policy Analysis: A Quarter Century of Progress" in 1981 concluded that "the future of policy analysis may lie in a closer examination of its past as represented by social theorists like Lasswell, Merriam, and even earlier, Weber and Marx" (Garson, 1980-81: 543). In 1988 Robert Lloyd inserted a quotation from Thomas Hobbes into his essay on "Alternative Dispute Resolutions in Federal Contracts" which otherwise was unenlightened by Hobbes.

Too often articles appearing in the *Policy Studies Journal* have contemplated a closer relationship between the history of Western political

https://doi.org/10.2307/419415 Published online by Cambridge University Press

philosophy and policy analysis while taking a rather narrow view of what that history represents. In 1981, for example, Stuart Nagel wrote that "if one were to establish a 'Policy Studies Honors List' . . . one would have to acknowledge a number of great political thinkers who dealt systematically with recommending policies for achieving given societal goals, such as Aristotle, Machiavelli, and Marx" (Nagel, 1981: 6).

Upon closer examination, however, Nagel's interest in the history of political philosophy has been concerned almost exclusively with that history's attention to the influence of values in scholarship and the decision making process. "The most important aspect of the relation between social values and public policy," Nagel observed in 1980:

> is probably the need for policy analysts to be constantly conscious of what goals they are seeking to maximize or achieve, including both substance and process goals. Political philosophy can contribute a greater awareness of alternative values that one might seek to maximize. Those values are generally not explicitly part of the more narrowly focused criteria used by policy analysts, although they may underlie the criteria that are used (Nagel, 1980: 812).

Sometimes authors writing for the *Journal* have been unabashedly antagonistic to the history of Western political philosophy, leading readers to believe that contemporary social issues can be studied without considering their underlying intellectual context. In 1973 Eugene Meehan wrote:

> With some relatively minor exceptions, those involved in the study of public policy will find little or nothing in philosophy, either substantive or procedural, that can be used productively in their work and much that is actually misleading and counterproductive. If it were not for the pretentions and prestige of philosophers, philosophy could simply be dismissed as a harmless but sterile amusement for learned men. . . . But most philosophers . . . ask to be taken seriously. Yet when the products of philosophy are measured against human needs, and particularly against the need for a body of cumulable, testable, transferable, and useful knowledge that can tell us when and how to go about changing the world—which is what policy studies *must* have—their irrelevance is unmistakable (Meehan, 1973: 43; Meehan's italics).

Unfortunately, the 1981 prediction of the Policy Studies Organization that the *Policy Studies Journal* would "represent a synthesizing force in bringing together (1) political and social scientists who have traditionally emphasized values and great issues, and (2) those who have been emphasizing quantitative methods but not applying them to policy problems" has not been fully realized" ("Statement," 1981: 954). Similarly, Stuart Nagel's position that:

> although public policy evaluation has been around since the dawn of social philosophy, new aspects have developed since the 1960s. The main new aspect is the idea of synthesizing the essentially normative philosophy (associated with policy evaluation from Plato through Marx and the anti-Marxists) and the scientific method (associated with such political scientists as Charles Merriam and Harold Lasswell) (Nagel, 1988: 219).

has proved to be overly optimistic.

What went wrong? Why hasn't the *Journal*'s attempt to integrate political philosophy and public policy analysis proceeded at its intended pace? In the first place the Policy Studies Organization apparently underestimated the theoretical obstacles to its goal. Historically, political philosophy has referred consciously to normative standards which simply cannot stand the test of positivistic objectivity still applied by many policy scientists. Among the substantive norms posited by Western political thinkers is a public interest, greater than the sum of individual interests, which conflicts with the popular assumption underlying much of contemporary American policy analysis about the primacy of self-gratification. Moreover, the visionary quality and comprehensive thinking about reality, human nature and politics which define political philosophy run counter to the technical orientation and incrementalist mentality which seem to characterize the current American policy field.

In the second place, the attitudes of policy analysts and political philosophers toward integration generally have been unreceptive. It seems that little has changed since the days of Harold Lasswell, often credited by policy analysts with establishing the epistemological foundations of their discipline, who described the history of political philosophy as "metaphysical speculation in terms of abstractions hopelessly removed from empirical observation and control" (Lasswell and Kaplan, 1950: x). As John McAdams wrote in the *Policy Studies Journal* in 1984, "policy analysts are social (and occasionally natural) scientists, and not philosophers" (McAdams, 1984: 91).

Those who study the history of political philosophy have been equally hostile to the policy sciences. There has been a tendency among political theorists to isolate themselves professionally from the pressing issues of contemporary American politics by concentrating exclusively on close textual exegeses of the great books. Many have become adept at splitting hairs over the interpretation of a sentence in Plato or Locke without explaining adequately why such endeavors are politically salient. Others have refined hair-splitting into esoteric modes of academic inquiry seemingly removed from concrete political phenomena. Admittedly, borrowing accurately from the Western political tradition is impossible unless accurate exegeses are available. Yet, taken to an extreme, an exclusive reliance on textual scrutiny can lead to the impression that studying the history of political philosophy is an "effete but pretentious activity," and may produce what John Gunnell has identified as the alienation of political philosophy from politics (Gunnell, 1986: ix).

Both disciplines are affected adversely by their mutual antagonism. Many policy scientists either are unaware of the accumulated wisdom of the history of political philosophy or consider it to be insignificant. In either case they are ill-advised. In 1972 the *Policy Studies Journal,* in order to avoid the errors of behavioralism, undertook to borrow from that wisdom. The Western political tradition, the Policy Studies Organization seemed to comprehend, has influenced not only the evolution of contemporary American social problems but the manner in which they are presently perceived.

Since 1972, however, the *Journal* periodically has neglected its original mandate and policy scientists need to be reminded once again that a Western political tradition exists that can be mined profitably for insights into our current predicaments. Since our "own private stock of reason . . . is small," Edmund Burke wrote, "individuals would do better to avail themselves of the general bank and capital of nations and ages" (Burke, 1955: 99). "When we stand upon the shoulders of those who have gone before us," John Hallowell has observed, paraphrasing Burke, "we increase our vision. . . . The newest is not necessarily the best nor the latest necessarily the truest" (Hallowell, 1950: 195-96).

Many political philosophers consider it to be somehow beneath their dignity to analyze public policy, preferring to concentrate solely on "getting the past straight" by "recovering its meaning in context" (Levy, 1988: 2). I cannot accept John Gunnell's rather jaded refusal to consider the possibility that the "classic texts from at least Plato to Marx constitute an actual historical tradition" (Gunnell, 1986: 2). But on this particular point Gunnell and other critics of political philosophy as it is currently studied and taught in the United States appear to be correct. In addition to reflecting on the great books, political philosophers need to work on "creating a usable past" (Levy, 1988: 3). Along with their exegeses, they need "to address living politics and focus on its continuing concerns, translating its insights in language comprehensible to participants" (Dobel, 1988: 43). The great political thinkers considered their ideas to be pertinent for all times and places. Contemporary students of these great thinkers need to reemphasize that pertinence.

What can be done? How can policy analysts be persuaded to consider Sheldon Wolin's perception that "the political order is articulated through its history: the past weighs on the present, shaping alternatives and pressing with a force of its own" (Wolin, 1969: 1077)? How can political philosophers be alerted to Benjamin Barber's observation that "the history of political thought is the history of politics, an engaged if critical perspective on the evolution of policy" (Barber, 1991: x)?

Fortunately, there is a means available in Aristotelianism by which the two disciplines can be effectively reconciled. Aristotle recognized different approaches to the search for political knowledge but cautioned against the impediments of overspecialization. His scholarly ideal was *paideia,* the erudition associated with classic liberal education. Narrowly trained specialists, he warned, could not possibly appreciate the complex interrelationship of ideas and behavior that defines politics.

Aristotelianism was once admired for its ability to transcend overspecialization in political science by combining theory with practice and value with facts. Today Aristotelianism is no longer acknowledged as an acceptable approach to policy analysis and, as twenty years of the *Policy Studies Journal* indicate, alternate perspectives have been unable to provide a workable intellectual rationale for reconciling the discipline of political philosophy with the policy sciences. Perhaps a revitalization of Aristotle's reasoning in Book VI of his *Ethics* is required.

There Aristotle distinguished between two types of reason, which he described as the theoretical and practical sciences, and the faculties these sciences employ. In contrast to theoretical science, which involves knowledge for its own sake and yields universal truths, Aristotle argued, practical science involves truths which are contingent and apply to only a majority of circumstances. In contrast to the intellectual faculties, which are learned in theory, he maintained, the moral faculties derive from life experiences.

Aristotle concluded that politics is the master practical science because it involves knowledge of the noblest human motives for the sake of noble action. It was his contention, moreover, that prudence is the archetypal moral faculty because it enables human beings to do the right thing at the right time to the right person. Within Aristotle's own original brand of policy analysis, therefore, facts were integrated with values and theory was synthesized with practice.

Classic practical science is illustrated by Aristotle's treatment of plutocracy in Book V of his *Politics.* Aristotle was unable to justify rule of the rich because he reasoned that the ability to govern well is not directly related to the acquisition of material possessions. He nevertheless realized that knowledge of plutocracy's inherent unreasonableness alone was inadequate to reform established plutocratic regimes. He thus devised a strategy to convince plutocrats that the maintenance of their rule would require the promotion of poorer citizens with leadership capabilities to positions of political power. In this fashion, Aristotle combined his theory of good government with the practice of existing regimes and mediated the political realities of greed and incompetence with his values of justice and reason.

J. Rogers Hollingsworth echoed Aristotle's opposition to academic overspecialization in a 1986 article for the *Policy Studies Journal* entitled "The Decline of Scientific Communication Within and Across Academic Disciplines." Scholars, Hollingsworth observed, have lost sight of "the real goal of science: the comprehension of the unity of things." One consequence of such academic myopia, he argued, is that "we are in danger of losing our intellectual traditions:"

> Obviously American society will continue to be faced with problems of providing better health for its citizens, containing health costs, controlling inflation, confronting the problems of lagging productivity, working on the energy problem, coping with family instability and the mental health of our population, and controlling the arms race. And if the citizenry make headway in solving these problems, they will be indebted to our universities. But not one of these problems can be solved by the findings of a single academic discipline. The problems are interdisciplinary in nature. Thus, a critical problem facing the modern university is whether it will confront these problems within an interdisciplinary setting or ignore them by continuing the pursuit of specialization and fragmentation (Hollingsworth, 1986: 427-28).

Alerting policy scientists to the

accumulated wisdom of the Western political tradition does not mean that the classics can offer specific policy panaceas for contemporary American social problems. Aristotle simply is unable to give Americans living at the end of the twentieth century detailed advice about health care. What he and other great Western political thinkers can furnish are the general approaches and perspectives which allow them to interpret complex political phenomena cogently and realistically. Our challenge is to attempt to adapt their perspectives to the unprecedented problems which threaten to jeopardize our well-being. jeopardize our well-being.

Twenty years ago the Policy Studies Organization claimed that it had learned from the mistakes of behavioralism and promised that it would open the pages of the *Policy Studies Journal* to give the history of Western political philosophy a fair hearing. Due to the resistance of policy scientists and political philosophers alike, that promise has not been completely fulfilled. As a result, overspecialization has been permitted to define most of the research published in the *Journal.*

More than two thousand years ago Aristotle taught seekers of political truth the nobility of broadly based scholarship. Aristotle's lesson continues to be ignored with unfortunate results for all parties concerned. By essentially ignoring the history of Western political philosophy in their examination of contemporary American social issues, policy scientists continue to risk triviality and the reinvention of the wheel. By contemplating the great books in isolation from pressing contemporary American social issues, political philosophers continue to risk abstracting themselves from political reality.

Notes

1. This article, printed by permission of Greenwood Press, is a revised version of my introduction to an anthology I have edited for Greenwood entitled *Public Policy and the Public Good.*

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