

International Political Science

Political Theory in Contemporary France: Towards a Renaissance of Liberal Political Philosophy?

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These brief reflections flow from readings, observations, and conversations occasioned by a return, some years after an earlier sojourn as a student, to Paris this spring for a short period of lecturing at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en sciences sociales. I have unabashedly focused on scholars and developments that seem most promising or valuable to me, and I do not pretend to speak either authoritatively or comprehensively; but for colleagues in North America who wish to keep abreast of political developments in the remarkably influential intellectual life of Paris, my impressions may at least prove a stimulating complement to better-informed opinions and to more sustained study at a distance.

I will not try to assess or predict the fast-breaking current events on the French political scene, but the underlying spirit of contemporary French politics may perhaps best be characterized in terms like "normalization," "routinization," or even "banalization": we seem to be witnessing the long-delayed (and possibly only temporary or short-lived) maturing and acceptance of liberalism within France. The posing of grand alternatives and the evocation of world-historical themes, by the Marxists on the Left and the Gaullists on the Right, has given way (for the time being at least) to a preoccupation with more down-to-earth economic and legal or institutional problems. It is true that Le Pen and his followers, playing on the widespread unease

and the genuine dilemmas caused by the presence of a large immigrant and colonial Arab population, have injected the racial question into current debate; but thus far the potential for ugliness seems largely contained (compare Charlot, 1986). The vast majority of the electorate appears to desire an equilibrium among the parties that are heirs to Socialism and Gaullism. And those parties feel pressed to move toward and compete for the center, disencumbering themselves of their more radical or purist elements.

Foreign and defense policy continue to manifest the distinctive mark of De Gaulle—but of a Gaullism moderated and shorn of its posturing. I would venture to say that because France has chosen to pursue a role in the world that is at once more internationalist and more independent than that of perhaps any other member of the western alliance, she has been led to think more deeply about the nature of international relations. Accordingly, I think it is no accident that the most vital and substantial field of political science in France seems to be International Relations, where one finds the work of such notable scholars as Pierre Hassner and his colleagues at the Centre d'Etudes et de Recherches Internationales.¹ As for

¹"Political Science" as an established department or discipline within universities does not really exist in France. There is a School of Higher Studies, most of whose students are preparing for government careers, and there is the Fondation nationale des sciences politiques, which has research branches in economics (or political economy) and domestic French politics, as well as the international relations branch just mentioned. A number of scholars and professors in departments of law, philosophy, history, and the social sciences do offer courses and pursue studies that would in America be found in political science departments.

“public opinion” on foreign and defense policy, a strong consensus supports expenditure for an effective nuclear and conventional fighting force; there is considerable dismay at what is perceived by many to be Reagan’s slide in the direction of a “decoupling” of America’s commitment to Europe; and the Soviet Union is generally regarded with deep mistrust, a mistrust only slightly diminished by the Gorbachev initiatives.

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This prevailing attitude toward the Soviet Union is a direct reflection of the most remarkable new feature of the intellectual landscape: the dramatic eclipse of Marxism—the outlook which, in so many different guises, has dominated the Parisian intellectual scene since the end of World War II. The watershed was the reception given to Solzhenitsyn’s writings in the early 1970s. Those writings struck like moral lightning among souls shriveled tinder-dry by years of boredom and frustration with the sorts of obscurantism propagated by Althusser, Derrida, and Barthes. The horror and, yes, the guilt evoked by the at-last-unavoidable confrontation with Marxist totalitarianism gave a new and vibrant moral impetus to political thinking. That impetus was clarified and strengthened as the French watched, from front-row seats, the tragic unfolding of the epic Solidarity struggle (the best-seller in Paris this past summer was a translation of Lech Walesa’s memoirs, *Un Chemin d’espoir*).

One of the most thoughtful products of these shattering if vicarious experiences is the writing of the political theorist Claude Lefort, a Director of Studies at L’Ecole des Hautes Etudes en sciences sociales. Lefort’s thought builds on and grows out of, in surprising ways, the influence of Merleau-Ponty (see esp. Lefort, 1978b); a lesser but noteworthy

influence is Hannah Arendt. In a series of essays (see especially 1979, 1981, and 1986, as well as 1975) Lefort has attempted to reconstruct, in the vacuum left by Marxist, Existentialist, and “Deconstructivist” thinking, a twofold democratic theory: of vital citizenship or civic spirit within the limits and opportunities of modern liberal institutions, and of individual and group political affirmation against the specifically modern instruments of totalitarian oppression. At the foundation of Lefort’s reflections is an elaborate and provocative reexamination of the political thought of Machiavelli, conceived as a key to the modern political ethos in all its forms (1972; a central feature of this work is a lengthy critical dialogue with Strauss, 1958).

In the course of his intellectual evolution, Lefort rediscovered and exploited the richness of Tocqueville’s sympathetic diagnosis of the fundamental problems of modern mass democracy (see esp. 1978a, reprinted in Part Three of 1986). Lefort thus joined hands with others who, under the increasingly powerful influence of Raymond Aron’s teaching and writing, were disinterring the long-neglected lode of political wisdom to be found in the great French tradition of liberal political philosophy (e.g., Montesquieu, Sieyes, Constant, Guizot, Taine, and Aron himself).

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Especially important is the spur Tocqueville’s *Old Regime and the Revolution* has given to fresh study and evaluation of the French Revolution. The leader here is the historian Francois Furet (see esp. Furet, 1983, and also Part Two of Lefort, 1986, as well as Bergounioux and Manin, 1979): Furet was formerly head of the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en sciences sociales and has recently founded and now heads the Institute Raymond Aron of the same Ecole. One must bear in

mind the enormous and controversial role the Revolution and attitudes toward the Revolution have always played in French political and intellectual life. Nowadays it is becoming fashionable to quip that in the last ten years the French Revolution may have finally ended. What is meant by this is that the Revolution is being studied and discussed in an atmosphere largely free from both the revulsion of the conservatives (Maurras and his legacy), and the evocation (by Marxists = "Robespierreans" and Gaullists = "Bonapartists") of supposedly unfulfilled and betrayed promises. The Revolution has come to be viewed somewhat less as a cataclysmic and portentous break with the past, and more as a complex and ambiguous (if admittedly momentous) stage in the rather erratic and problematic emergence of a modern democratic state and society in France. To put the point another way: the Revolution is less and less seen as containing hidden within it either the sources of or the solutions to France's gravest problems.

What *is* increasingly sought, in order to fathom and ameliorate the genuine problematic of modern democracy, is the kind of historical and philosophical analysis found in Max Weber and, above all, in Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*. These thinkers ground their democratic theories in a subtle moral comparison between modern democracy and various pre-modern, aristocratic forms of society; their analyses do not simply take for granted the ethical or civic presuppositions of the modern democratic spirit,

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and therefore transcend the blinders egalitarianism imposes once it takes on the form of closed prejudice and dogma. A truly illuminating guide to Tocqueville as theorist of democracy in this sense is Pierre Manent's *Tocqueville et la nature de la démocratie* (1982)—perhaps the best book ever written on Tocqueville, and surely one of the highpoints of what

is sometimes called the "neo-Tocquevillianism" of the past decade (Manent is a professor at the Collège de France and editor of the journal *Commentaire*, founded by Raymond Aron).

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A central focus of those who have followed Tocqueville's or Weber's lead is the relation between religion and politics in modern liberalism.² This theme is a leit-motif in Manent's more recent explorations of the roots of liberal political philosophy (1986, 1987; see also Lefort's "Permanence du théologico-politique?" in Part Four of 1986; and Manent, 1977). There are obvious resemblances here to the preoccupations of American "neo-conservatives"—and of some American "neo-liberals." But the French are on the whole better grounded in a rich theological-political tradition (from Pascal to Peguy and Walter Benjamin) and in the more idealistic branches of the continental liberal tradition (e.g., Spinoza, Kant, Constant). In the cast of Manent at least, the issues are approached with a singularly keen awareness of the deep opposition between religious thinking and the Enlightenment foundations of modern liberal theory. Still, in this last crucial respect Manent is exceptional rather than representative. In France as in America there prevails—even or especially among "sensible" neo-conservatives

²To some extent, the treatment of the theologico-political question is part of a broader investigation into the potential sources for, and the endemic dangers to, spiritual elevation and genuinely reflective thought within modern democracy. This past spring three best-selling books provoked intense discussion of the collapse of higher humane education in France and in the Western democracies generally: Bloom, 1987b (a translation of about two-thirds of *The Closing of the American Mind*); Finkelkraut, 1987; and Levy, 1987.

and neo-liberals—a strong wish to deny or avoid a searching confrontation with the almost immeasurable depths and

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consequences of the religious question as it manifests itself within, and not only within, liberalism. These days one hears on all sides that religion is useful, perhaps necessary—perhaps, ultimately, the only granite foundation for the “work ethic” (Weber), or for Lockean contract and rights theory (John Dunn, Francois Furet), or for firm attachment to the principles of the American Constitution (John Patrick Diggins, Irving Kristol), or for vital civic community (Voegelin, Walzer, Wildavsky, Nozick)—*but is religion true?* Here the discussion fades.

There are other important respects in which the return to Weber and Tocqueville is only partial. The “neo” in “neo-Tocquevillian” bespeaks a reluctance to embrace what are seen as the excessively aristocratic or even elitist leanings, and the consequent pessimistic withdrawal, of Tocqueville. To the extent that Aron followed Max Weber, he downplayed Weber’s own tragic, quasi-Nietzschean, despair at the “iron cage” of modern democracy and bureaucracy. The outlook Aron exemplified—a perspective continued, in worthy fashion, by such heirs as Jean-Claude Casanova (Professor at the Institute d’Etudes Politiques and columnist for *L’Express*) and Alain Besancon (Director of Studies at L’Ecole des Hautes Etudes and columnist for *L’Express*)—rests on a more sober or resigned endorsement of rationalism, the rule of law, human rights, a higher civil service, and an informed democratic electorate. In particular, Aron’s lifelong posture towards DeGaulle showed how far Aron stood from Weber’s politically naive fascination with “charismatic” leadership.

Still, Aron did follow Weber (and Schumpeter) in stressing the need for informing

political analysis with rigorous attention to the principles of modern economics. This insistence not only set Aron at an opposite pole from the irresponsible fulminations of Sartreans and Marxists; it induced in his followers and, through them, in the current French intellectual milieu, a healthy openness to Anglo-American, as well as Austrian (Hayek, Von Mises) and older French (Jean-Baptiste Say, Frederic Bastiat), traditions of political economy. The renaissance of liberal political theory has thus naturally led to an interest in Rawls’s *Theory of Justice*, which appeared this spring in a French translation (1987) and is being widely read. But the discussion is not confined to what in America are regarded as the orthodox lines of argument. Soon after the publication of the translation of Rawls, Allan Bloom’s critique of Rawls, which appeared originally in the *APSR* (1975), was translated and published in Aron’s journal *Commentaire* (Bloom, 197a), setting the terms of a vigorous debate that would have pleased Aron.

For Aron’s insistence on economic literacy by no means entailed an endorsement of political theorizing derived from current moral philosophy and economic

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thinking and modeling. He in fact leveled against such theory some very severe reservations and criticisms. Self-serving and self-indulgent libertarianism; bloodless and narrow utilitarianism; scientific thinking that was at once reductionist and abstractly universal; a so-called Kantianism that encouraged liberal softness and doctrinaire moralism: each of these powerful contemporary tendencies

had the effect, in Aron's eyes, of extinguishing appreciation for the irreducibly political dimension of human existence—that core of unmoralistic statesmanship and citizenship which (Aron stressed) had been most sympathetically and lucidly delineated by Aristotle, Montesquieu, Burke, and Tocqueville. Like Bertrand de Jouvenel, Aron called for and promoted a *philosophic* reflection on past and present political practice. He had in mind studies that would not try to distort sound practice by forcing it into abstract theoretical models, but that would instead attempt to clarify such practice in a respectful, appreciative, but also philosophically critical spirit. A crucial aspect of Aron's legacy has consequently been a renewed quest to clarify the obscured but essential core of political life, on the basis of fruitful dialogues with major figures in the history of political philosophy (see, e.g., Bergounioux and Manin, 1979; Manin, 1985; Pasquino, 1987). The effort has proceeded through the restoration of such categories of *praxis* as "deliberation," "judgment," "prudence," "political rhetoric," "tradition," and "character"—as a counter to theories of "decision-making," "public choice," "commitment," "image-building," "historical process," "the original position," and "personality."

Obviously, the tendencies of contemporary French thinking that I have highlighted are directly opposed to the most powerful currents in the American political science profession. Precisely for that reason, I am willing to let myself hope that these still-fragile developments in France may contribute to the rediscovery of a humanistic and politic liberal rationalism.

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IPSA XIVth World Congress, Washington, D.C., 1988

The Congress will begin Sunday, August 28, 1988 and end Thursday, September 1. The World Congress will overlap with the APSA Annual Meeting on Thursday. The APSA meeting will continue until Sunday, September 4.

Upcoming Conferences and Calls for Papers

The theme of the Congress will be "Towards a Global Political Science." There will be a plenary session, eight mini-plenary sections (each with approximately two sessions), and ten subfield sections (each with approximately five sessions) that will specifically explore the issues raised by the theme.

Mini-Plenary Sections

The eight mini-plenary sections, their convenors, and co-convenors are as follows:

1. Political Science Methodology and Epistemology: Pierre Allan (Universite de Geneve); Adam Przeworski (South University-Chicago).
2. The Pluralization of Political Science: Asher Arian (Tel Aviv University); Claude Ake (Port Harcourt University).
3. The Synchronic and Diachronic Approaches: Ergun Ozbudun (Ankara University); Guillermo O'Donnel (CEBRAP).
4. A Global Political Theory?: Carol Pateman (Sydney University); Bhikhu Parekh (Hull University).
5. Communications and Political Science: Itzhak Galnoor (Hebrew University); and Jay G. Blumer (University of Leeds).
6. Policy Sciences and Beyond: Bjorn Wittrock (University of Stockholm); and Simon Schwartzman (IUPERJ).
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8. The Institutionalization of Comparative Research: Seymour Martin Lipset (Stanford University); and Mattei Dogan (Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique).

Subfield Sections

The ten subfield sections will have a substantive focus, but will also explicitly devote attention to the issues involved in making political science global. The topics are:

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2. Political Theory: Russell Hardin (Chicago University); and Yasunori Sone (Keio University).
3. International Political Economy: Dani Nabudore (International Peoples' College); Vinod Aggarwal (University of California, Berkeley); and Tamas Szentes (Karl Marx University).
4. International Security Issues: Joseph S. Nye (Harvard University); and Georgii Shakhnazarov (Institute of State and Law).
5. Formal Modes of International Politics: Takashi Inoguchi (Tokyo University); and Teren Gvinshiani (Institute for Systems Studies).
6. Comparative National Institutions: Jerzy Wiatr (Warsaw University); and Ezra Suleiman (Princeton University).
7. Comparative National Political Processes: Karl-Heinz Roder (Academy of Sciences, GDR); and Juan Linz (Yale University).
8. Comparative Political Attitudes and Participation: Ada Finifter (Michigan State University); and Max Kaase (Mannheim University).
9. Comparative Sub-National Studies: Francesco Kjellberg (Oslo University); and Renata Siemienska (Warsaw University).
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In addition to the sessions organized by the convenors and co-convenors of mini-plenary and subfield sections, approximately 50 sessions will be organized as Special Meetings. Special Meetings should concern topics of significant interest cross-nationally to active political scientists. Each session should include several papers reflecting international standards of scholarship. Collectively, the Special Meetings are meant to provide representation for scholars not working in the fields emphasized by the theme of the Congress. □

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