

The Washington Star

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 11, 1977

Academia looks at politics

Politics is to Washington, D.C., what automobiles are to Detroit — a company town's product, too important to be taken lightly, too familiar not to be. Which is why it's agreeable to be reminded that there are those for whom politics has the somewhat more remote dignities of a science and an art.

Several thousand members of the American Political Science Association, gathered here for their annual meeting last week, shed some light on the way politics looks today from the perspectives of Academe. People come to APSA meetings as they do to gatherings of any other such professional organization, to job-hunt, to see how each other's books are doing, to check up on new ideas in their fields. But there's always more going on than career maneuvering. This is an intellectual discipline where professors' theories are closer to the mainstream of real life than they are in most. The scholarly papers and the discussions they stimulate don't merely develop abstractions; they define a good many frontiers of practical thinking about political problems as well.

It is striking how often the latest thing in problems can turn out to be age-old dilemmas in new clothes. Thus the APSA analysts of foreign governments are preoccupied now, as they have been in past years, with the tensions in a Communist state, European or Asian, peasant-oriented like China or focused on the industrial worker like the Soviet Union, between the ideal of equality and such other goods as economic productivity and individual liberty.

It's the issue as the political scientists consider the prospects of Eurocommunism. It's the issue as they try to understand what has happened and what is likely to happen in Cuba, Yugoslavia and post-Mao China. And it still comes out rich in evidence of the irreconcilability of either/ors.

The harder a revolutionary state tries to keep from losing its radical elan via the growth of a bureaucracy, the more bureaucracy it takes to police the populace. See China. The abundance that seems to be promised when the rich are stripped of their property is nowhere to be found when, as the Chinese experience has also shown with special vividness, enforcing equality means keeping people from going to universities to become scientists and technologists.

The Yugoslavs' factory self-management system is in trouble because you can't stick by a central economic plan when workers in local plants make real operating decisions. The Cubans, even with Soviet money behind them, have found they cannot supply all citizen needs free and get workers to produce. As one APSA paper noted, the Cubans have gone back to charging interest on loans, making people pay rent and collecting fees for children's day care. A panel representing half a dozen academic centers brought out the magnitude of post-Mao China's pendulum swing away from Communist purity and toward such bourgeois desiderata as bicycles and watches, with more of the consumer goodies going to the productive.

But the observers of foreign governments were by no means the only ones for whom the questions worth pondering seemed to be the ones that have been around a long time. The APSA members concerned with American government and politics are still wrestling with some questions that have been on the agenda since the authors of the *Federalist* took up their quills: for example, such hardy perennials as the problems of power distribution in a democratic federal structure. The strengths and weaknesses of political parties as devices for mobilizing the will of the people also remain a live issue for political scientists, even though, for many of them, the current judgment is that American political parties are in serious decline.

Perhaps as significant as the staying power of such classic issues among professional students of politics was the comparatively scant attention fashionable media topics got from them in this year's program. While APSA has its women's caucus and its black caucus, the 1977 panels featured little related to the militant side of their cause. And the word "Watergate" might never have entered political vocabularies.

Does this mean the ivory tower has no windows on the world as it really is? Or that the view from this particular academic elevation, buttressed on the one side with historical imagination, on the other with empirical data, can be an illuminating one, with or without cries of havoc?

We'll take the latter interpretation.

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