



POLITICAL THEORY IN THE SEARCH
OF THE POLITICAL
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For six weeks in June–July 2006, I was again privileged to spend at the Wissenschaftskolleg and to enjoy its wonderful atmosphere and facilities, the discussions with other Fellows and the wonderful support of its staff, above all of Anja Walter. I concentrated on a short manuscript on “Political Theory in the Search of the Political”, whose purpose is to bring the concern with the political, with the nature of political formations, institutions, and contestations, back into the center of political theory. The starting point of my discussion is that, while such concern was indeed very closely connected with the normative problems of classical modern political theory, be it in the work of Montesquieu, in the Scottish Philosophy, or, in a different way, in Hegel, it disappeared to a large extent on the contemporary scene, especially from the end of the Second World War until the most recent period. The mainstream contemporary political theories – be it the liberal one or the major critics

thereof – have to a very large extent bracketed out the concern with “the political”, paradoxically giving rise to a political theory without the political.

Challenges to this bracketing out of the concern with the nature of the political in contemporary political theory have lately been voiced, especially by scholars on the left who claimed that it entails the neglect of power, of the agonistic and conflictual dimensions of political life and processes, and of the fact that any concrete institutional arrangements constitute and entail the establishment of hegemonic power.

In my work I aim to explore the major problems attendant on these development and discourses. First of all, I ask: Are these criticisms of mainstream political theory valid? Second, what is the nature of the “political” that has been bracketed out from the major considerations of political theory? Third, does this bracketing out matter? What – if anything – is lost by such bracketing out, what difference does it make to political theory and analysis? Of special importance in this context is the extent to which these contemporary approaches have contributed to the analysis or have explicated the theoretical implications of the major political contemporary institutions and processes, of important contemporary developments such as the “new” social movements, including religious fundamentalist movements, and of ethnic and national conflicts or the processes attendant on the breakdown of authoritarian and totalitarian regimes, especially on the demise of the Soviet Union.

In exploring these problems, I focus first on the analysis and exploration of the basic assumptions of the major contemporary schools of normative political theory – the liberal ones and their major critics – that became predominant after the Second World War, and I examine the validity of the major criticisms thereof, especially the claim that these approaches have bracketed out the problem of the political, of the analysis of political processes and struggles.

Second, I concentrate on the contrast between these approaches with some of the major developments in political theory in earlier periods – especially in the late nineteenth century and in the interwar period, above all but not only in Weimar Germany, where the problem of the nature of the political in modern society constituted a central focus, possibly *the* central focus of the controversies between conservative thinkers, above all Carl Schmitt, and liberal and social-democratic ones; I shall explore briefly some of the reasons for the almost total disappearance, at least till lately, of such concerns in contemporary political theory.

Third, I focus on the specification of the nature of the *political* in modern societies. I indicate that the crux thereof is the specification, through struggle and contestation, of the very definition of the realm of the political, i.e., of the legitimate range of political activities, of what constitutes the legitimate arena of political action. Such definitions are grounded in combinations of different conceptions of the common good, on the one hand, with the pursuance of interests of different individuals or groups, on the other. Such definitions of the realm of the political constituté, in Rousseau's term, a continual combination of different aspects of *volonte du tous* of different citizens, of their various discrete interests with the definition of *volonte generale*, and of the conceptions of the common good, of the good society, or of the proper social order; and they are closely related to the problematics of the definition of sovereignty in modern political regimes. The struggles or contestations around such definitions entail the specification of the rights and entitlements of the members of the community; of the range of public goods and the public distribution of private goods and access to them; of access by different sectors of society to the central frameworks of their respective societies or regimes; and of their empowerment within these centers. All such changes entail contestations about the distribution of power in society, about the range and criteria of inclusion and exclusion in the political community or communities, about the relations between different centers of power in the society, and about the constitution of boundaries between "society" and the state, between public and private realms.

Subsequently, I analyze the roots of this tendency to the continual reconstitution of the realm of the political in modern societies in the cultural and political programs of modernity and in the basic institutional characteristics of modern societies and of the modern political process; and I point out the central role of social movements as the carriers and promulgators of demands for the re-constitution of the realm of the political in modern societies and that the tendency to the reconstitution of the political is closely tied to the development and tribulations of modern civil society, as they develop in different modern societies of modern.

From the preceding analysis, I intend to draw some tentative conclusions for political theory, hoping they will bring together the analysis of the normative problems of political theory with comparative historical analyses.