

Politics and The Political in the “Berkeley School” of Political Theory

Tracy B. Strong, *University of Southampton (United Kingdom) and University of California, San Diego*

“It was a splendid population...”

—Mark Twain, on California, in *Roughing It*

Although none of my degrees is from Berkeley, Berkeley was in the air that gave me intellectual life. One of my teachers at Oberlin College was Carey McWilliams, a Wolin/Schaar student. Sheldon himself had graduated from Oberlin (a student of J. D. Lewis, another of my teachers) and had taught there briefly. So I approached coming of age in a definite atmosphere. Later, I would send my own students on to study at Princeton and Berkeley.

What does one inhale from the Berkeley political-theory air? The air in and of Berkeley can be breathtakingly clear and head-clearing. Ideas there can become as clear to one as a clear Berkeley day can be: Berkeley was important as a place. I doubt that what developed there from the last half of the 1950s until the early 1970s could have happened in any other place in America. Having a particular group of scholars in that particular place during a particular period of American history was central to what they achieved—and achieving something was in the air, in the way that it might not have to have been in institutions of a more secure reputation. As such, the thought that developed there seems to me to have three basic components.

First is what I once referred to as “Berkeley metaphysics” (I think I stole the term from Stephen Thomas). Politics most often is presented as a shared participation and conflict—by nature an amateur, nonprofessional activity. It is almost necessarily in tension with dominant “mainstream” forms of activity. (Thus, Berkeley events in the mid-1960s were characterized by Wolin and Schaar as a “rebellion.”) The concern with politics started from a reaction against the dulling gentleness of Eisenhower Era organizationalism through the rise of the civil rights movements to the anti-Vietnam War demonstrations. On the edge of the continent, Berkeley had the wind in its face and was for many at the forefront of change.

Second, there is a strong sense that the availability of the full meanings of “politics”—although not of “the political”—has changed over time, and not always for the good. “Politics” encompassed the day-to-day conflicts: elections, policy development, foreign adventures. During a 15-year period, there was a strong sense that this had become much less democratic, much more divorced from the concerns and participation of average citizens. From ever-more bureaucratic regulation, the

country seemed to be subject to an increasingly unresponsive executive in league with powerful economic interests. One feels the weight of this development in the classic chapter 10 of Wolin’s *Politics and Vision* and his elaboration of “inverted totalitarianism” in the second edition (Wolin 1960). “The political,” conversely, was a realm in which human beings confronted one another as human. One did not or could not always live there—for reasons like those Oscar Wilde gave against socialism, that it took “too many evenings”—but it was important to retain it as a touchstone that might return again and again. “Democracy,” with reference to this sense of “the political,” was not so much a form of government as an available form of life, a form that contemporary developments in politics made increasingly rare.

Third, the impact of ordinary language philosophy, of meaning what one said—whether or not more or less informed by Austin and or Wittgenstein—is strong, if most often quietly so. Here, the recognition is of language as an activity of human beings, not only as a tool but also constitutive of the world. Whereas this comes to most obvious prominence in the work of Hanna F. Pitkin, it is already present in many of the other scholars. (“The word ‘political’ means...”)

Incidentally, although there are important differences between the Berkeley School and Cambridge History, it is the case that the historical knowledge of the major players at UC Berkeley was extensive. As editor of *Political Theory*, I once sent a paper about Rousseau and Geneva to Wolin for review. (Malice was perhaps aforesight as Sheldon had negative things to say about Rousseau in *Politics and Vision*.) His two-page response was a detailed account of the political system in Geneva in the eighteenth century, pointing out where the author was right, what had not been taken into account, and where s/he was possibly off target.

All of this turned around a complex sense of a kind of tradition of thought, perhaps increasingly lost in the West, but definitive of the political realm—that realm that makes humans human. There often is a dark pessimism about the present and future state of affairs—Wolin later went so far as to say that democracy is at best “fugitive” and is not properly understood as a form of government.

What follows from this? The architecture of this approach makes the following five claims. First, language is not only the medium by which we describe politics; it also makes the political possible. Our “vision” (drawing on the title of Wolin’s 1960 book) of the world is understood as formulated in language.

Second, moral and political languages can and should be, to some degree, differentiated from one another. Generally, the Berkeley theorists did not think of political theory as a subset of moral discourse but rather as an autonomous realm—or at least as one that should be.

Third, because political language is the central medium of shared experience (i.e., the basis of what Wolin called “epic theory”), if two groups do not share the same concepts

All of this turned around a complex sense of a kind of tradition of thought, perhaps increasingly lost in the West, but definitive of the political realm—that realm that makes humans human.

(i.e., do not use them in the same way), they then most likely would have difficulty in fully understanding one another. Wolin thus adduced as important the Kuhnian notions of paradigms and potential incommensurability. Jacobson wonderfully asked what American political science would have been like had the Articles of Confederation remained the basis of the polity rather than the harder-hearted professionalized “realism” of the Constitution.

Fourth, the discourse of a period was seen as loosely defining (or setting boundaries) as to what can be thought and what might be future developments. Fifth, there thus is an acceptance of a type of historical relativism, without that conclusion entailing a nihilistic or postmoral stance. If one cannot jump over Rhodes, the task, perhaps, is to find another way to go.

Therefore, the categories in which the political world makes itself available to us are themselves mutable. If this is true, then the pursuit or assertion of instrumental constants (i.e., rationality, self-interest, community, and revealed preference) that might be taken to lie at or as the foundation of political life is not only impossible but also wrong. The foundation of any political theory (and, by extension, political science) is or should be change, not permanence. What something is not is not necessarily something it might not become. (All three negations in that sentence are necessary.)

To this, one may ask, “What is *not* here?” The first answer is a serious engagement with Leo Strauss. The notorious 25-page review in *American Political Science Review* by Schaar and Wolin (1963) of Storing’s (1962) *Essays on the Scientific Study of Politics* may have cost Wolin a job at Harvard and certainly prevented what might have been a more complex interaction. The political differences between Berkeley and Chicago are enormous; however, after or before that, both schools have a reverence for a set of texts, the greatness of which is that they can absorb whatever we bring to them critically. McWilliams did try to bridge this chasm.

A second lack comes in a more or less general passing over of postmodern and continental thought, at least in the published material. (Pitkin’s mountain-climber book on Wittgenstein is an exception.) Generally, however, figures such as Weber, Lenin, Freud, Schmitt, Heidegger, and even Arendt (except for a critical book by Pitkin) are not part of the story that they

make public (although articles on some of these figures were published separately). The chapters on Marx and Nietzsche in the second edition of *Politics and Vision* strike me as weak. Liberal political thought rarely gets more than the back of a hand, perhaps often deservedly so (?).

I write their names out for this article: Sheldon S. Wolin, John H. Schaar, Norman Jacobson, Michael P. Rogin, Hanna F. Pitkin—all, except for Hanna, are no longer with us of this

earth. Were they a school? Not in the sense that, on a Chicago model, they *required* disciples (although in one period, a number of smart graduate students suffered from the power of the presence of those major figures). One has only to look at the other scholars present in this symposium and add to them the names of Richard Ashcraft, J. Peter Euben, Wendy Brown, John Wallach, and many many others to find that these are not disciples—and that there is a family resemblance.

For a period of about 25 years, there was indeed a Berkeley School in place; it generated a few offshoots, now mostly withered, at Santa Cruz and Princeton. That family is now in diaspora; accordingly, there is no longer a place for and of “Berkeley political theory.” Try as one may, e-mail and Facebook do not compensate for the lack of a place, for the accidental encounters in hallways, for endless cups of coffee and other shared libations, for the immediate proximity of colleagues—that is, for the time to talk.

When a friend calls to me from the road
And slows his horse to a meaning walk,
I don’t stand still and look around
On all the hills I haven’t hoed,
And shout from where I am, “What is it?”
No, not as there is a time to talk.
I thrust my hoe in the mellow ground,
Blade-end up and five feet tall,
And plod: I go up to the stone wall
For a friendly visit.

(Robert Frost, 1920) ■

REFERENCES

- Frost, Robert. 1920. “A Time to Talk.” In *Mountain Interval*. New York: Henry Holt and Co.
- Schaar, John H. and Sheldon S. Wolin. 1963. “Review Essay: *Essays on the Scientific Study of Politics*: A Critique.” *American Political Science Review* 57 (March): 125–50.
- Storing, Herbert J. 1962. *Essays on the Scientific Study of Politics*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Wolin, Sheldon. 1969. “Political Theory as a Vocation.” *American Political Science Review* 63 (December): 1062–82.
- . 1960 (2004). *Politics and Vision*. Boston: Little-Brown.