"Teaching as if Citizens Would Seek Their Counsel": Pedagogy in the Berkeley School

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My introduction to the Berkeley political science department, where I started graduate studies in 1983, was both unnerving and instructive. The department held an orientation right before classes began. It was one of those awkward events that academia seems to specialize in: no one knew anyone else, and students walked around a rather drab room, lukewarm white wine in hand, while a few notable professors sized us up, seemingly deciding whether we were worth the trouble to talk to. A well-known professor of American politics—who, we had been told, was responsible for job placements—shuffled up to me, clipboard in hand, and gruffly asked my name. Upon hearing it, his finger moved down the sheet listing our names and undergraduate institution. Arriving at my name and then working his way across to where Princeton was noted, he began to run through a list of eminent political scientists whom he identified as his friends and asked me whether I had studied with them. Embarrassed, I replied "no" to the litany of professors I had zealously avoided that taught courses in American politics, political behavior, and quantitative methods. In frustration, he finally blurted out, "Well, who in the hell did you study with?"

"Sheldon Wolin," I replied. At that, and without another word, he turned his back and walked away. Ah, welcome to Berkeley's political science department.

However, that jarring reception was soon countered by the warmth, kindness, and sense of inclusiveness I experienced from Norman Jacobson, Michael Rogin, and Hanna Pitkin. I had the sense that having studied with Wolin made me both suspect in the eyes of the mainstream political scientists at Berkeley and simultaneously invited me to experience further the pleasure and challenge of reading and discussing political and literary texts alongside brilliant, learned, and witty teachers and colleagues. This leads me to suggest that although the professors with whom I had the good fortune to study were extraordinarily distinctive thinkers, they shared significant continuities and commonalities sufficient to constitute a "school," broadly understood.

I use the expression "Berkeley School" aware that at least two of the alleged members of the school—Sheldon Wolin and Hanna Pitkin—expressed reservations as to its very existence (Pitkin and Rosenblum 2015; Xenos and Wolin 1992). My claim is not that the Berkeley School rivaled that of the Straussians. If by a "school of thought" one means there was one central figure surrounded by disciples; or that an orthodoxy existed as to the methods of inquiry or the central texts that must be studied; or even that the members' political ideologies or leanings on political issues of the day within and outside of the academy were a matter of dogma, then one can point to many discontinuities, disagreements, and tensions within the Berkeley circle. However, in rereading works by my former professors, reviewing a number of the syllabi they prepared, and reflecting on the education I received, I found notable continuities and commonalities. However, I admit that theirs was a "big tent" and the primary points I address do not apply equally to all of the figures noted.

To put my education in context, particularly in light of Emily Hauptmann's contribution to this Symposium describing the institutional conditions at Berkeley in the 1950s and 1960s—as well as the battles waged within the department, university, and discipline of political science in the 1960s—I was educated in the dusk of those battles. I was an undergraduate at Princeton in the late 1970s and started my graduate studies at Berkeley in 1983, the period on which I mainly focus my observations. My overall impression at the time was that political theory was a world unto itself; from my 18-year-old eyes, it seemed as if the politics department at Princeton respected Wolin but did not want to have much to do with him or his discipline. Moreover, although my initial greeting by the Berkeley political science department was a back being turned to me, I eventually understood the relationship between the theorists at Berkeley and the rest of the department as less combative and more one in which there was an unspoken agreement to coexist—albeit sharing little more than mundane concerns of the departmental apparatus. My intuition was that none of the theorists I studied with at Berkeley (i.e., Jacobson, Rogin, and Pitkin) had the stomach or the heart to return to battles presumably lost years ago.

Instead, in my experience, what seemed to occupy Wolin in the late 1970s at Princeton and through the early 1980s when he edited the journal *democracy,* and beyond, and then Jacobson, Rogin, and Pitkin at Berkeley, as well as John H. Schaar—who visited at Berkeley for a semester in the 1980s—was less transforming the discipline of political science or the academic institutions in which they were housed. However, when issues arose on campus that called for action, such as

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opposing union busting or supporting Divestment, they did act. Rather, their prime concerns were teaching, both undergraduate and graduate, and writing political theory—always with their audiences in mind as well as a reflective self-consciousness regarding the nature of the project of political theory.

In their different ways, they were all remarkable teachers. I would be remiss if I did not note how seriously they took their vocation as teachers. When asked by Nicholas Xenos in his oral interview about the existence of the Berkeley School, Wolin—in remarking on what he and his colleagues shared—said first that they all considered "teaching the most important thing" (Xenos and Wolin 1992). Schaar (1981), in the foreword to his book, *Legitimacy in the Modern State*, rhetorically asked, "Should not teachers of political theory proceed in their work—that is, their teaching—as if politicians and citizens would seek their counsel?" Schaar's question suggested the self-consciousness with which, in my experience, members of the Berkeley School entered the classroom. In the next paragraph of his foreword, he wrote that "the first duty of the *political theory* teacher's vocation is to be able to respond seriously and substantively to a student's question, 'Why study political theory?'" (Schaar 1981). They all took that question seriously, never assuming the value of political theory but instead aiming to persuade their students of its power and beauty and to convince them to assume responsibility as both students and citizens. From my current vantage point as a professor, the care they took in every lecture or graduate discussion session is humbling. Concerning their writing during this time—that is, from the late 1970s through the late 1980s—I understood their audience to be both narrowly conceived—that is, other academics and graduate students in the increasingly specialized world of political theory—and broadly conceived—especially in the pages of the journal *democracy*, published from January 1981 through Fall 1983. This article highlights a few commonalities in how they taught and wrote political theory during this period.

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First, in their teaching and writing, *the text*—the whole text—was central to their enterprise. In Xenos's oral interview (Xenos and Wolin 1992), Wolin recounted that when he had studied political theory and had first started to teach it, students typically used to read short "snippets" of texts. Wolin credits Leo Strauss with inspiring him to read and teach whole texts. The syllabi that Wolin, Pitkin, Jacobson, Rogin, and Schaar prepared during this time were full of complete texts. With the mention of Strauss, one has to wonder about the Jewish connection; four of the five figures mentioned (i.e., Wolin, Jacobson, Rogin, and Pitkin) had Jewish roots. Although Schaar was the outlier, he may have been the one most inspired by the Old Testament, as his loving attention in his teaching and writing to the Puritans suggests.

An appreciation for the whole text also was apparent—especially in the case of Jacobson, Schaar, and Rogin—in their routine inclusion of classic literary fiction in their teaching and writing: Camus and Melville sat alongside Hobbes and Lincoln; Faulkner alongside the Puritans; and James Baldwin as a counterpoint to Samuel Huntington. Textual excerpts that encapsulated key ideas could provide a starting point to interpretation. However, to be deeply understood, ideas had to be interpreted within the full text and the world, and only a close reading of the complete text could open up tensions, ambiguities, and contradictions—where they taught us to search for vivid insights. The inclusion of literature in their teaching and understanding of the project of political theory (see especially Jacobson 1978; Schaar 1981; and Rogin 1983) simultaneously points to their interdisciplinary approach to political theory (before it was in vogue) along with an old-fashioned humanism in much of their work. Theirs was not a pedantic humanism, in which classic works speak to timeless values, but rather a humanism that stands in opposition to what Jacobson and Schaar wrote of as the sterile, parched, and overly abstract conceptions of politics being taught in most other subdisciplines of political science at the time (Jacobson 1963; Schaar 1981). Literature attended to the inner life, allowing students and readers alike to see the connections between inner and outer worlds, and it presented an understanding of politics that brought home the embeddedness of the political within themselves and their local communities. Politics was not something "out there" but rather something within us and much closer to home than mainstream accounts of politics, which located politics as occurring in distant state institutions.

As significant a role as literature played in Jacobson's, Schaar's, and Rogin's teaching, history—especially American political history—was even more central to the Berkeley approach to theory. (Schaar and Rogin were originally hired to teach American politics.) The journal *democracy* that Wolin edited from January 1981 through the end of 1983—for which Pitkin served on the editorial board and for which Wolin, Pitkin, Schaar, and Rogin wrote—exemplifies the centrality of history to the Berkeley approach to theory. Wolin announced in the inaugural editorial that the journal's aim "will be to encourage the development of an historical and theoretical understanding around the concrete problems of the present." In the next paragraph, he pronounced that "radicals need to cultivate a remembrance of things past for in the capitalist civilization…memory is a subversive weapon" (Wolin 1981a).

In the early 1980s, Wolin refocused his attention on contemporary American politics, doing so in a decidedly historical manner in which the echoes of Jacobson and Schaar can be heard. In Wolin's lead article for *democracy*, "The People's Two Bodies," he wrote: "I want to suggest that in the American political tradition, the people has had 'two bodies,' with each standing for a different conception of collective identity, of power, and of the terms of power. In one of these bodies the people was conceived to be politically active, while in the other it was essentially, though not entirely, passive" (Wolin 1981b). Almost 20 years earlier, Jacobson wrote in his legendary 1963 *American Political Science Review* (*APSR)* essay, "Political Science and Political Education,": "Two varieties of political thought contended for the allegiance of the American people at the founding of the new nation. The two seem irreconcilable in certain crucial respects" (Jacobson 1963). Jacobson drew a sharp contrast between the Articles of Confederation and the Constitution, distinguishing between the documents' tones, moods, purposes, and theories. "The Articles of Confederation read like the work of a band of hopeful amateurs. But the Constitution is the product of a group of sophisticated professionals, men well versed in the day-to-day practice of a craft" (Jacobson 1963). Wolin made use of this same distinction, similarly throwing his lot in with the vanquished "hopeful amateurs" rather than the victorious "sophisticated professionals." Schaar shared Jacobson's and Wolin's trait of siding with the losers, judging the value of political acts independently of their success or failure in the world.

Rogin was certainly the most idiosyncratic in his approach to political theory, but his work plainly displays his shared deep appreciation for the literary and historical aspects of theory. Situating Jacobson's *APSR* essay alongside Wolin's lead essay in *democracy* highlights how Rogin complemented Jacobson's, Wolin's, and Schaar's understanding of American political thought. Jacobson's 1963 essay focused early attention on the demonology of politics apparent in Section 8 of the Constitution. Jacobson (1963) wrote "Threats to order were everywhere, and Section 8 takes on the aspect of a demonology of politics, foreign and domestic." Rogin amplified this insight, applying it across much of American political thought, from Jackson to Reagan (Rogin 1983, 1987). In his excavation of the fears, insecurities, and madness that sat right below the dominant narrative of American politics, Rogin pierced the inevitability of the American present, creating theoretical and political space for the alternatives recalled by Jacobson, Wolin, and Schaar and imagined by Pitkin (Pitkin and Shumer 1982). A common anxiety of the "Berkeley School" was that we would forget the roads not taken and the alternatives offered by history's losers, and accept as the whole truth the mythical American history that obscured the injustices, violence, and contingencies buried there, thereby accepting the receding democratic present as inevitable and immune to radical political action.

Jacobson, Wolin, and Schaar argued and taught that the road not taken of the "band of hopeful amateurs" and of the local, participatory, and egalitarian vision of the Anti-Federalists and Tom Paine need not be completely lost to us if we read closely enough, thought carefully enough, and took courage and inspiration from our submerged democratic tradition.

The Berkeley School also shared an opposition to capitalism's creeping incursions into the academy, evident in some of their writings—especially in Wolin's later work (Wolin 2008)—but most apparent in their teaching. They taught and carried themselves indifferent to if not defiant of the self-promotion and academic status-climbing that has all but colonized academia. They modeled what it was like to pursue an academic life willfully blind to the ascendant ethos of capitalism and its reach into the classroom and wider university. On the last day of my first course with Wolin, I entered the mahogany-paneled bowl, prepared to enthusiastically clap at the close of his last lecture, making evident to him that this discerning sophomore appreciated his masterful lectures. "I would ask that you do not applaud," I recall him warning us. "I find it embarrassing as I do not consider myself a performer nor our work together as anything like entertainment that calls for applause." This was one last reminder of what the academic life was, and was not, or at least should be in his eyes.

In his 1963 *APSR* essay, Jacobson wove a story linking the Federalists to modern American political science. Madison was the central figure, and much of Jacobson's aim was to (1) challenge the unquestioned universal applicability of the categories of political science used at the time; and (2) pierce what he regarded as the overconfidence of the discipline in its methods and independence from the established political system of the day. Wolin's narrative, written in the wake of the ascension of Ronald Reagan in 1981, placed Alexander Hamilton at the center, tracing the growth of state power constituted by and grounded in the new political economy. The underlying dualisms and the sadness about "the road not taken," but also the hope expressed that the memory of the Anti-Federalists, or of Tom Paine, could serve as a subversive present weapon, linked Jacobson's 1963 essay with Wolin's 1981 piece. Jacobson, Wolin, and Schaar argued and taught that the road not taken of the "band of hopeful amateurs" and of the local, participatory, and egalitarian vision of the Anti-Federalists and Tom Paine need not be completely lost to us if we read closely enough, thought carefully enough, and took courage and inspiration from our submerged democratic tradition.

The Berkeley School presented an exceedingly attractive conception of the academy, the project of political theory, and democratic politics more broadly. Even in the face of their marginalization within the discipline of political science during this period and a mournfulness regarding the waning of our democratic promise, their teaching and writing served as a reminder of the possibility of meaningful, creative action in the present, if only.... If only for what? What I took away from their work was that a good part of the vocation of a teacher and writer of political theory was to formulate that question in a such a way that students, readers, and possibly even a broader public would be encouraged to stop, think seriously, and begin a dialogue about how we as democratic citizens should best live together.

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