

Scholasticism at Berkeley

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Was there a “Berkeley School” of political theory? A dictionary definition of “school” is “a group of persons, especially intellectuals or artists, whose thought, work, or style demonstrates some common influence or unifying belief.” By this definition, it is reasonable to claim that there was a Berkeley School, but it was not a self-ascribed school, such as in, for example, the case of the Cambridge School, and it was not as intellectually uniform as many might think of as the “Straussian School.” I am not referring to all of those who by the 1970s would be counted among the theorists at Berkeley, including Paul Thomas, A. James Gregor, and Michael Rogin. I am referring to Sheldon Wolin, John H. Schaar, and Norman Jacobson and students including Hanna Pitkin and Peter Euben who, during a period from the late 1950s to the early 1970s, were most intimately exposed and attached to their ideas.

Jacobson and Wolin, who had both served in World War II, were the same age (born in 1922). Jacobson came to Berkeley in 1951; Wolin was hired in 1954 but was granted leave after receiving a fellowship and did not actually begin teaching until 1956. He had been replaced in the interim (1955) by Hannah Arendt, who lectured on the history of political theory and gave seminars on ideologies. She and Jacobson conversed, especially about American political thought, and her work influenced Wolin, even though he had not actually read the *Human Condition* before finishing his manuscript for *Politics and Vision* (Wolin 1960). Schaar, a student of Thomas Jenkin at UCLA, arrived in 1958 at age thirty. Jenkin had published a short book on political theory (Jenkin 1955), which stressed the complexities of the field but emphasized the widespread sense of decline voiced by many contemporary theorists ranging from David Easton to Leo Strauss. Pitkin also had taken her first year of graduate study at UCLA before moving to Berkeley and later studying with Wolin. She received her PhD in 1961 and eventually joined the Berkeley faculty in 1966, after teaching at San Francisco State and the University of Wisconsin, Madison.

From the perspective of the students in the early 1960s, the theorists appeared to constitute a somewhat common intellectual front. Although Wolin, Schaar, and Jacobson did not overtly claim that their respective work coincided, they were—personally and professionally—closely associated, and the students found ways of viewing their ideas as at least complementary. I was one of those students, from the spring of 1959 to the summer of 1964. In the comparatively brief period that I was enrolled at Berkeley (one year of which I spent as a legislative intern in Sacramento), I never took a course with Schaar, although I occasionally listened to his

elegant and dramatic lectures, and I took only one seminar each with Wolin and Jacobson. Not many graduate courses in theory were offered, but there was little need for them when the atmosphere was thick with what reasonably can be interpreted as the defining beliefs of the school. The aura of a “school,” however, was hardly a mere student invention. In Wolin’s *New York Times* obituary, he and his colleagues in political theory were referred to as creating “the headquarters of what became known as the Berkeley school of political theory.” This was a common attribution by, among others, Austin Ranney, a president of the American Political Science Association (APSA) and an editor of the *American Political Science Review*.

Wolin dominated the political-theory curriculum and he appeared to have a conscious commitment to what could be defined as a school. He attempted to develop and articulate a distinctive perspective within the field of political theory and, despite many similarities, to differentiate his position from that of Leo Strauss, Judith Shklar, and others. He later floated the idea of a separate department of political theory at Berkeley, proposed a program at Stanford, and—when he moved to Santa Cruz—harbored the hope that a special program in theory could be developed there. Finally, at Princeton, he was allowed to establish a separate program in political theory.

In light of all this, one must ask why Pitkin would say that she “wouldn’t think of it as a school.” In a recent interview, she noted that “there was no central figure, guru, leader, and not even much overlap of scholarly interests”; that “they really did very different things”; and that there were “personal tensions” between them (Rosenblum 2015). Although this may have been the case to some extent, the same could be said of, for example, the Frankfurt School. However, it is difficult to exclude Wolin from the category of “guru”—that is, the image of a “teacher, guide, master” of some form of knowledge—and fail to recognize the extent to which he wished to assume that role, the degree to which many students treated him in this manner, and the amount of adulation that was eventually accorded him by the wider political-theory community. Despite significant differences in style, the theorists each tended to present themselves as somewhat oracular and at least “guru-esque.”

With respect to recognizing the existence of a “school,” a friend and contemporary of mine at Berkeley, Gene Poschman, suggested David Foster Wallace’s parable of two young fish. They were swimming along when they met an older fish who said, “Morning, boys, how’s the water?” The two young fish swam on but, eventually, one looked over at the other and asked, “What the hell is water?” In the case of Berkeley, the parable could apply to both students and faculty.

Graduate students may not have voiced the view that they belonged to a school, but some “old fish” were so accustomed to their environment that they also were not particularly self-reflective about it. It was not until I had ascended, so to speak, from the water that I came to understand fully the nature of the intellectual sea in which I had been swimming. My particular academic and personal circumstances had led me to ask questions while I was still immersed. However, it

APSA to talk about the concept of tradition. However, I never had an opportunity to speak because Wolin spent the whole session reading a long essay defending the idea of tradition represented in his work as well as in the projects of Strauss and Arendt. Although Wolin had praised my earlier critiques of behavioralism, he now accused me of falling into the type of “methodism” that he had attributed to that movement and of a heretical abandonment of what he had famously dubbed

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was a decade after I left Berkeley before I fully recognized and confronted the nature of that medium from which my intellectual life evolved.

It is important to recognize the pervasive character of the genre of academic political theory that emerged in the 1950s and 1960s and with which Wolin, despite his attempt to distinguish his own rendition, associated himself. It was prophetic, claiming to discern nothing less than the very essence of what was political and to relate a synoptic story of its historical manifestations. One of the guiding assumptions of the Berkeley group was its particular version of the common general claim of a tradition of political theory manifest in the classic canon reaching from Plato onward, to which could be attributed both an overall meaning—whether it was George Sabine’s story of progress or more recent accounts of decline by Strauss, Arendt, Eric Voegelin, John Hallowell, and others. This story was offered as the etiology of both contemporary politics and the study of politics. Coupled with this was the transformation of the adjective “political” into the noun phrase “the political,” which was not to be confused with the everyday phenomena of politics. It was more transcendental, somewhat an esoteric mystery, and—although often fleeting—something, as in Wolin’s reference to “fugitive democracy,” that occasionally appeared as a historical epiphany and to which we should aspire. The ideal of the political was one that honored but depreciated both individualism and pluralism in favor of the values of community, tradition, and authority. As radical as many may have viewed the Berkeley message after the early 1960s, it was in some respects deeply conservative. The call was to recover something that had been lost in modern life and to recapture a mode of political inquiry that had been replaced by debased forms.

In 1979, I published a short book in which I described and critically examined what I referred to as the “myth of the tradition” as it had emerged in the history of political science and contemporary political theory (Gunnell 1979). I also discussed alternative accounts of interpretive inquiry, such as the challenges mounted by Quentin Skinner and John Pocock, among others. Wolin and I were later brought together in 1982 at the

the historical “vocation” of political theory, which he believed could be perpetuated by a remnant of academic political theorists. Our exchange was extended as a book to which a number of theorists contributed including, among others, George Kateb, Pocock, Richard Flathman, and Nathan Tarkov, who largely defended the idea of the great tradition (Nelson 1986). Wolin invited me to present my case at Princeton, and I later interviewed him extensively at his home in Northern California in preparation for writing a book on the history of academic political theory (Gunnell 1993). He had said that, in a long-awaited second edition of *Politics and Vision*, he would elaborate and defend his account of the tradition. However, this edition, when finally published, consisted simply of the content of the first edition with additional chapters; it contained nothing new about tradition.

When Wolin delivered the talk at the APSA that would be published as “Political Theory as a Vocation” (Wolin 1969), in which he asked theorists to follow—through the medium of education—his rendition of the values of the calling represented in the great tradition, a friend who was a prominent political theorist referred to him as “our prince.” However, that which Wolin designated as the vocation of political theory was, in fact, the vocation into which students at Berkeley—from the late 1950s to the 1970s—had been inducted. We did not grasp, however, the relative youthfulness—both chronological and intellectual—of our teachers. By the beginning of the 1960s, only Jacobson was tenured.

What I once referred to as the Berkeley “thesis” first appeared in Jacobson’s chapter in Roland Young’s book, *Approaches to the Study of Politics* (Jacobson 1958). The argument was that political theory must avoid the extremes of both “moralism” and “scientism,” which actually were code names for Straussianism and behavioralism, respectively. They certainly avoided scientism, but moralism was another matter. In the early 1980s, I had a telephone conversation with Skinner, who was a visitor at the Princeton Center for Advanced Studies. Although he objected to my critical discussion of his work, he said that he was happy that I had done “justice” to Wolin by recognizing him for what he was—not

a historian but rather a “moralist.” He did not mean this in a negative sense but only to indicate the genre to which Wolin’s work belonged. The medium was historical but the message—like most of the dominant literature in the field—was moral. The intellectual portraits of the canonical authors were wonderfully drawn, but these authors were basically presented as actors cast to play particular roles in the world-historical drama of the declination of “the political.” However, members of the Berkeley school were all moralists, in the sense of the dictionary definition, even if their moralism—at least initially—was academically confined. Wolin, of course, would later be widely heralded as a leading democratic theorist.

In retrospect, it is evident that the Berkeley School horizon was quite limited, even within the Berkeley universe as a whole. What was happening in the philosophy of science and the philosophy of social science, for example, was totally off the faculty agenda, even though it was discovered by some students, such as in Pitkin’s association with the philosopher Stanley Cavell and her turn to ordinary language philosophy. The faculty basically taught their own ideas rather than providing along the way what one might think of as a comprehensive account of the field of political theory and a careful analysis of the work from which they wished to distinguish themselves. Before *Politics and Vision* was published, Wolin made the manuscript

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Despite the influence of European émigré scholars on various aspects of the Berkeley school, there was a lingering American bias attached to this identity. When the “chips were down” in the department—which inadvertently had come to include two Straussian theorists, Richard Cox and the recently hired Harvey Mansfield Jr.—the tenured theorists joined the growing behaviorist wing, with which they had been consistently at odds, in voting to purge the interlopers. In the course of the fight, Wolin and Schaar wrote an essay defending American pragmatism against a concerted Straussian critique. One of the hallmarks of the Berkeley School, however, was its continuing concern with vouchsafing and maintaining its particular identity within the field of political theory, as well as within political science as a whole.

For many students, the theory program at Berkeley offered the security of a distinct intellectual niche, but the context—or at least perceptions of it—was in some cases a significant burden. Whereas some settled into it, almost catechistically, the demands of living up to and contributing to what some sensed was expected were too great. There were tragic cases of intellectual paralysis, delayed and failed examinations, and unfinished theses and dissertations, even among some of the most promising and valued students. Few of the cases of angst reached the level of one troubled young man who, after teaching at McGill for a short time, returned to live in Berkeley and wrote a long essay, later a book, titled “Masters and Disciples” (Sarf 2002). It recounted how his life had been damaged by the impossibility of living up to what he perceived as unreachable and even unknowable expectations. After exploring this generic relationship in Western intellectual life, he turned to a general description of the Berkeley School, to Wolin as master, and then to Euben as the archetypal “epigone.” Although this was clearly a paranoid rendering of the situation, it was not without an element of truth.

available for all graduate students, and it became a kind of club handbook. Jacobson, however, was a special case. He was much more willing to talk at length with students and, as in my case, encourage them to find their own way.

When I left Berkeley, I was initially very much an apostle, and the Berkeley School had offered a way to approach teaching political theory as well as a list of academic friends and enemies. Before leaving, however, my personal and academic circumstances had already pushed me out of the fold. My dissertation prospectus focused in part on the question of why the study of political theory took the form of a historical narrative when the actual concern was with the condition of contemporary politics. However, my principal topic was the manner in which the canonical authors had sought to overcome the historical dimension of political order and subsume time in political space (Gunnell 1968), an idea for which I was indebted to Wolin.

After 1964, what had been perceived as the Berkeley School came for many to mean something quite different. Although Pitkin had had prior association with leftist politics, or at least leftist political ideas, the others did not. Wolin, Schaar, and Jacobson were, as Pitkin suggested, “radicalized” by the Free Speech Movement, the Vietnam War protests, and what Wolin and Schaar described as the “rebellion” at Berkeley (Wolin and Schaar 1970). At least in the case of Wolin, this seemed to offer the idea and hope of a more public outlet. Although Jacobson’s focus was basically on the internal “idea of a university,” Wolin—after giving an address to a massive gathering of protesting students—began to envision the possibility of an academic political theorist becoming a public intellectual and democratic activist. This became his goal after moving to Princeton and leading the creation of the journal “*democracy*.” The term “democracy,” however, did not even appear in the index of *Politics and Vision*. Nevertheless, at Princeton, Wolin continued to attract acolytes, both academically and ideologically.

By the mid-1970s, the original members of the Berkeley School were no longer close, either personally or professionally. In 1970, both Wolin and Schaar left for Santa Cruz, where Euben had been hired. Their exit was partly for personal reasons but also because of the increasing dominance of the behavioral persuasion. Disappointed with the possibilities at Santa Cruz, Wolin left for Princeton in 1972. Jacobson, by this point, had temporarily moved out of the department and become a sort of psychotherapist. In 1978, he published his only book, *Pride and Solace: The Functions and Limits of Political Theory* (Jacobson 1978). Although this work could be read as another eulogy for the past of political theory, it also could be interpreted as a rejection of much of what the Berkeley School had professed and what the vocation had come to mean. Jacobson presented the great political theorists in the image of the Grand Inquisitor, whose hubris led to fantastical plans for providing solace to the mass of humanity by bestowing blissful ahistorical ignorance. Although the Berkeley School—in its original form at Berkeley as well as in what some consider its reincarnation at Princeton—lives on, it is only as an imprint in the minds of those who have continued to perpetuate or critically reflect on the residue of its constituent ideas. ■

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