

The “Berkeley School” of Political Theory: A Discussion of its Beginnings, its Development, and the Disagreements over Calling it a “School”

Was There a Berkeley School of Political Theory?

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Like the Loch Ness Monster, Bigfoot, and the Abominable Snowman, the Berkeley School of Political Theory has reportedly been sighted by people who (allegedly) are not under the influence of drugs or drink. So, to cut to the chase: Is—or, rather, was—there once such a school? And if so, what were its identifying tenets or doctrines?

I suppose that we first must clarify what we mean by a “school.” In a recent interview with Dean Mathiowetz, Hanna Pitkin (with whom Mathiowetz worked on his dissertation and who supervised Emily Hauptmann’s and mine) denies that there was ever a Berkeley School, inasmuch as a school requires a shared doctrine and/or a single, authoritative, and charismatic leader—and no such figure was to be found at Berkeley (Mathiowetz 2016, 285). (The latter characteristic seems to me debatable because all or most of the Berkeley theorists were quite charismatic.) Pitkin’s conception of what constitutes a school strikes me as unduly narrow and highly debatable, inasmuch as she seems to conflate “school” with “cult” (or cult of personality). Certainly, there was no

theorist equivalent to Jim Jones or David Koresh; nor was Barrows Hall a compound to which the faithful retreated.

Here I suggest that the Berkeley School of Political *Theory* grew in part out of a pronounced aversion to the Straussian School of Political *Philosophy*. The Berkeley theorists—John Schaar and Sheldon Wolin in particular—strove to separate themselves from Strauss and the Straussians, with whom they were sometimes mistakenly associated. (This and other points come from conversations with Schaar, with whom I co-taught an undergraduate seminar at UC Santa Cruz and to whom I grew quite close in the early 1970s before moving to Minnesota.) In a sense, then, the Berkeley school was an anti-school “school,” defined in part by what it was *not*.

A, or perhaps *the*, seminal moment in the public and self-conscious creation of the Berkeley school was in 1963, with the publication of Schaar and Wolin’s review essay of Strauss et al.’s *Essays on the Scientific Study of Politics* (Schaar and Wolin 1963). It was a blistering “take-no-prisoners” attack on Strauss and the Straussians. So scathing was their criticism of the book that the editor of the *American Political Science Review* made the unusual move of sending the typescript to Strauss and his coauthors so that they could reply immediately and in print (Storing et al. 1963).

Schaar and Wolin began by noting that all of the volume’s contributors, except Strauss, held doctorates from the University of Chicago and were former students of Strauss. Their “common training has produced a volume of such

uniform texture that it might have been written by one hand” (Schaar and Wolin 1963, 125–6). (The Berkeley theorists, by contrast, were without exception fine writers with quite distinctive prose styles.) All were uniformly hostile to the modern social sciences, and to political science in particular. By contrast, Schaar and Wolin expressed admiration and respect for “the solid findings of such researchers as [Robert] Dahl, [V. O.] Key, [Paul] Lazarsfeld, [Herbert] McClosky, and the Michigan group” of voting researchers (Schaar and Wolin 1963, 125). This sympathy for the social sciences set the emerging Berkeley school apart from the Straussian school. The former differed from the latter inasmuch as its members were moderate and open to a variety of approaches to the study of politics, including the then-new “behavioral approach.” One of the Berkeley theorists (Schaar) collaborated with the department’s leading behavioralist, Herbert McClosky (see McClosky and Schaar 1965). Moreover, Wolin, who served as my adviser until he left Berkeley, insisted—over my strenuous if misguided objections—that I take McClosky’s year-long seminar on political behavior. This turned out to be a wise decision because I learned a lot and became quite fond of Herb, who hired me as a research assistant at the Survey Research Center and was later instrumental in my getting my first job at the University of Minnesota.

This sympathy for the social sciences, including behavioral political science, was only one of several things that set the Berkeley school apart from Strauss and the Straussians, whom Schaar and Wolin called “fanatics”: “This is a serious book, deadly serious, fanatically serious” (Schaar and Wolin 1963, 126). All contributors hewed to “The Straussian position on this [or that] question,” which Strauss himself set out in various venues, most notably his books. That is, the Straussians merely parroted Strauss (Schaar and Wolin 1963, 130, n. 6). “Straussian political *philosophy*” has a decidedly uniformitarian and conformitarian character that brooks no disagreement or dissent (Schaar and Wolin 1963, 131; my italics). Berkeley political theory, by contrast, was open and pluralistic and not led by a single all-wise and all-knowing guru. Its thinkers held views that were compatible and overlapping but far from identical.

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Schaar and Wolin’s review essay was, in effect, a Declaration of Independence for (Berkeley) political theory from the sort of Straussian political philosophy with which it was sometimes confused. They said, in effect, this is not the way we study politics at Berkeley. However, a mere three years earlier, Wolin (1960) had written repeatedly of “political philosophy” in *Politics and Vision*:

In this book I have attempted to describe and to analyze some of the continuing and changing concerns of political philosophy.

In many intellectual circles today there exists a marked hostility towards, and even contempt for, political philosophy in its traditional form. My hope is that this volume, if it does not give pause to those who are eager to jettison what remains of the tradition of political philosophy, may at least succeed in making clear what it is we shall have discarded (Wolin 1960, v).

This emphasis continues in Part I (Political Philosophy and Philosophy) and Part II (Plato: Political Philosophy versus Politics). “Political theory” is nowhere mentioned in *Politics and Vision*. That changed after the appearance of Strauss’s *What Is Political Philosophy?* (1959) and the authoritative Straussian textbook, *History of Political Philosophy* (1963).

Causation or coincidence? I do not know. But my guess—educated, but a guess nonetheless—is that Wolin’s shift from “political philosophy” to “political theory” was not entirely coincidental and not without some weight of its own. This shift, I suggest, was not merely a semantic one about “words.” It has considerable political import, as Arendt noted in a 1964 interview on West German television. And, given how “Arendt-centric” the Berkeley school was, or became, her view carried considerable weight. (I am not suggesting that any of the Berkeley theorists saw the interview at the time—highly unlikely, given the technology of the day—only that there were shared sympathies on this matter.) She came to Berkeley as a visiting professor in the mid-1950s, replacing Wolin—who, although on leave, remained in Berkeley writing *Politics and Vision*, and she *The Human Condition* (Gunnell 1993, 247). Arendt and Wolin met and talked occasionally, if only infrequently. Whether she then shared her views on the distinction between political philosophy and political theory, I do not know. In her television interview with Günter Gaus (Arendt 1994, 1–2), he began by asking how, as a woman, she felt about belonging to the mostly male “circle of philosophers.” She replied:

I am afraid I have to protest. I do not belong to the circle of philosophers. My profession, if one can speak of it at all, is political theory. I neither feel like a philosopher, nor do I believe that

I have been accepted in the circle of philosophers.... I have said good-bye to philosophy once and for all.

Although Arendt explicitly eschewed the appellation “political philosophy,” Strauss and his followers—and Wolin in 1960—emphatically embraced it. After that, though, Wolin parted ways with Strauss & Company, opting—like Arendt—to speak exclusively of “political theory.” This we see, for example, in his entry “Political Theory” in the *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (1968) and, more famously

still, in “Political Theory as a Vocation” (Wolin 1969). In this, he was joined by all of the Berkeley theorists.

But did the Berkeley theorists constitute a “school”? Even if they did not think so, many others did. Austin Ranney, for one, believed (in Gunnell’s paraphrase) “that Sheldon Wolin, John Schaar, Norman Jacobson, and some of their students such as Hanna Pitkin constituted an identifiable persuasion within the field” (Gunnell 1993, 318, n. 22). And, on a more personal note, in 1966–67, my undergraduate adviser at UC Santa Cruz urged me to apply to pursue my graduate studies at Berkeley because its program in political theory was arguably the best in the nation. Its faculty, he said, constituted a coherent school (or maybe he said group, or both) but without the mystifications and obfuscations (his words, not mine) of the Straussian school.

As mentioned previously, members of the Berkeley school held diverse but compatible and overlapping views. If I had the technological talent and know-how, I would represent these in a Venn diagram. The circles in that diagram would be of various sizes and would intersect or overlap at various points. The circles would be labeled “community,” “the political,” “participatory democracy,” “the critique of liberalism,” “authority,” “American political thought,” “political theory as ‘tradition’ and ‘vocation,’” “epic theory,” “the critique of behavioralism,” “psychoanalysis,” and “film and other cultural media” (mainly Michael Rogin and Norman Jacobson), among others, with names attached. Schaar, for example, extolled “authority” and “community” (his paradigm case being—unsurprisingly, given his emphasis on authority—the New England Puritan community). I am the first to admit that such a schema is crude but, alas, it is all that I have.

If there were indeed a Berkeley school—and I believe there was—it ended abruptly in 1970 with Wolin and Schaar’s departure from Berkeley. Their respective reasons for leaving are discussed in the contributions to this symposium by Emily Hauptmann and Jack Gunnell. ■

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