

Extract from

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Lectures in the History of Political Thought

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I: Introduction

1. What I have to offer you in these lectures is best described as a study of political thought, or aids to the study of political thought.

In the main, it will be an historical study.

First, we shall be concerned to find out what has actually been believed and thought and said about politics, or in the idiom of politics, from time to time and from place to place, among some of the peoples of Europe during the last 3,000 years.

Secondly, we shall be trying to understand and account for these beliefs and ways of thinking by relating them to the circumstances of their appearance. And this is what I mean by an historical study.

History I take to be a mode of thought in which events, human actions, beliefs, manners of thinking, are considered in relation to the conditions, or the circumstantial context, in which they appeared.

This circumstantial context, however, is composed of other events, actions, and beliefs, just as the context of a word in a sentence is composed of other words from which we gather its meaning on that particular occasion.

That is to say, history is not a mode of thought in which we understand events, actions, and beliefs as examples of the operation of general laws, but one in which we understand events, actions, and beliefs in relation to things of the same kind—namely, other events, actions, and beliefs. The question the historian is out to answer is: What is the significance of this event, or action, or belief in the context of events and beliefs in which it appears.

Now, I have described what we shall be doing in this way because I do not want you to think that I am suggesting anything so specific as a relationship of cause and effect between the conditions or the circumstances in which a belief appeared and the belief itself.

For example, the geographical conditions of ancient Greece, or the institution of slavery, or their religious beliefs, did not cause the Greeks to think about politics in the

Lectures on the History of Political Thought

way they did. These are merely part of the context which helps to make ancient Greek political beliefs more intelligible to us.

An historical study of political beliefs cannot, then, supply anything like a final explanation, or even anything that could properly be called a 'justification' of these beliefs.

We must be content if, in the process, these political beliefs and thoughts become a little more intelligible to us, and a little less mysterious, than they often are.

The point of view here is that nothing which men have thought or done is intelligible except in its own context of circumstances.

And the enterprise here is to make one event or belief more intelligible by seeing it in a context of other events or beliefs.

2. But, although this is to be an historical study, I want to avoid the appearance of putting before you anything like a continuous history of European political thought.

Adventurous books have been written in this style, but I do not think that any of them is really satisfactory.

Some people have believed that there is something to be called 'the history of political thought' which reveals a kind of cumulative achievement of European peoples gradually acquiring a 'truer' (or at least, a less erroneous) understanding of politics, or even a progressively more intelligent manner of considering and answering political questions.

It has even been believed that the history of political thought may be understood as the story of the 'mistakes' the human race has made in thinking about and practicing politics. And that in studying this history we may learn ourselves to avoid these mistakes.

I do not, myself, think this is so. I cannot detect a history of political thought which reveals a gradual accumulation of political wisdom and understanding. Indeed, I cannot detect anything which could properly correspond to the expression '*the* history of political thought'.

Introduction

What I think I can see is different peoples, at different times, in different intellectual and physical circumstances, engaging in politics in different ways and finding different things to think about it.

And sometimes I think I can see some sort of an explanation for these different peoples having had the thoughts which they did have. And that is about all.

Consequently, I am inclined to direct your attention away from anything like a continuous story of European political thought, and towards the study of the political thought directly connected with some of the different and more memorable passages of political experience which the histories of European peoples have to show.

I will tell you later which these passages are.

Each of them I regard as a relatively self-contained political culture, and therefore as the proper context for political beliefs.

3. Now, a certain amount of unnecessary mystery has gathered round this expression: 'Political Thought'.

Some people speak and write of it as if it were a special kind of thinking; and in this way they make it more difficult to understand than it really is.

Others are disposed to include in it everything that has ever been thought or said or written about the human condition; and in this way they make it appear less specific than it really is.

But as I understand it, 'political thought' is *not* a special and mysterious kind of thinking with standards and manners peculiar to itself; and it is thinking about something quite specific, which should not be confused with anything else, namely *political* activity.

Most human activities are capable of being thought about and reflected upon; and in certain circumstances they are apt to be thought about.

We think about bringing up children, building houses, breeding horses, about, fishing, and about banking.

Each of these activities provokes questions peculiar to itself, but in every case

Lectures on the History of Political Thought

the common objects of thought are being pursued.

We think in order to devise appropriate courses of action and in order to find reasons for recommending them. We reflect in order to understand, to make more intelligible, to interpret, or to explain.

Political thinking is people pursuing these common objects of thought but in connection with a specific activity, different from any other; an activity called politics.

4. We begin, then, with an experience, the experience of a political life and political activity. Without this there can be no political thought.

Consequently, in order to be able to recognize political thought, we should have at least some provisional ideas about the political activity which is its necessary condition.

There are, of course, a great number of different kinds of human activity.

Some of them are primordial, like eating and drinking. Others are more sophisticated, like writing poetry, travelling in foreign countries, buying and selling, and curing diseases.

Political activity is, in the first place, to be understood as *one* among the numerous activities which have become characteristic of human beings.

Moreover, it belongs to the more sophisticated rather than the primordial activities. It is an acquired, rather than a 'natural', activity.

Everybody, in order to live, must somehow get a living; but there have been many peoples who have had no 'politics' and who are consequently innocent of political thought.

Now, every kind of activity requires certain conditions for its appearance and practice. And normally these conditions do not appear suddenly and complete. They emerge gradually, and at a certain point the activity appears unmistakably with the emergence of the conditions which make it possible.

In order to be an accountant, you need a manner of doing business which uses accounts, which uses ledgers and account books, and you need to be familiar with

Introduction

certain invented mathematical techniques.

At what point in the emergence of all this does the man we now call an 'accountant' appear?

In order to be an astronomer you need not only the stars but also questions of a certain sort to ask about them, and instruments and techniques to help you find the answers.

At some point, not exactly to be discerned, the activity of mere star-gazing turns into astronomy. It is a question of the emergence of the necessary conditions in a sufficient and significant degree.

Our question is: What are the necessary conditions for the emergence of the activity we call 'politics'? What are the conditions required for the appearance of 'politicians'?

I think we may distinguish three important conditions for the appearance of a political experience.

Forgive me if I verge upon the obvious.

(i) Political activity is possible only where there is a plurality of human beings.

The solitary inhabitant of an island might write poetry, he might be a farmer or a geologist; the conditions for each of these activities are present. But he could not be a politician.

But political activity requires more than a mere plurality of human beings; it even requires more than a number of human beings living in close proximity to one another.

It requires an association of human beings.

Now, what constitutes an association is the recognition of common customs or rules of conduct. It is these rules of conduct which give the singleness or unity to an association which makes political activity possible.

But, on the other hand, an association of human beings in which there is no diversity of feeling, sentiment, belief, attitude, and activity could not generate a political experience.

Lectures on the History of Political Thought

This is why we are apt to think that a genuinely tribal society, which certainly has rules and customs, is not one in which politics is likely to appear. Such a society may have the necessary unity, but it rarely has the necessary diversity.

And this is why societies which admit a large variety of beliefs and activities among their members are apt to have a large place for political activity. And that is why associations capable of politics are apt to be, like the states of modern Europe, artificial associations which bring together in a single society people of diverse origins and cultures.

Politics, from one important point of view, may be said to be the activity in which a society deals with its diversities. And, consequently, a society without diversities is apt to be a society without politics.

(ii) The second condition for the emergence of political activity is the presence, within an association of the sort I have described, of some authority recognized to be the official custodian of the law of the association and the official director of the common affairs of the association. In short, a government of some sort; a ruling authority.

From one important point of view, political activity is itself concerned with the government and the instruments of government of a society. For these instruments constitute the recognized means by which a society deals with its diversities. And politics is deliberating on how, and upon what, to set these instruments to work.

As we shall see, it is quite possible to have government without politics, but it is impossible for there to be politics without government.

Another way of stating this condition for the emergence of political activity is to say that it is possible only in an association which has recognized a distinction between 'public' and 'private' and has acquired a specific authority whose office is concerned with 'public' affairs.

(iii) But before political activity can appear a *third* condition must be satisfied.

Either the ruling authority itself, or the common law of the association, or the public policy being pursued, *or* all these, must be understood by the members of the

Introduction

association to be capable of being determined by human deliberation and action.

In other words, political activity is concerned with government, the instruments of governing, and with public policy. And it can appear only when what it is concerned with is understood to be amenable to human choice and decision.

This is, perhaps, the most important of the conditions of political activity.

It means that there is no place for 'politics' in an association whose members firmly believe that the ruling authority itself, the law and the instruments of government, are all utterly unalterable—not merely difficult to change, but by their nature incapable of being changed.

And it means there is no place for politics in a world believed to be wholly determined by natural necessity.

If choice about human conduct is, for one reason or another, believed to be impossible, if there were no imaginable alternative to what is happening, and if that alternative could not be chosen by human beings, then politics would be impossible.

Politics, then, is an activity between human beings. We do not do politics with gods (unless we imagine the gods to be just like human beings), and we do not do politics with animals.

And the chief assumption about human beings which 'politics' entails, is that they are capable of determining their actions by taking thought.

Now, although politics without government is impossible, there is a distinction to be made. Ruling itself is not doing politics.

A ruling authority may engage in political activity either in relation to other ruling authorities, or in relation to its own subjects; but when it does so it is doing something other than ruling.

The reason why politics presupposes the possibility of alternative courses of action, and the possibility of change, is because it is an activity precisely concerned with deciding between alternative courses of action and with instituting change.

Politics is not ruling; it is thinking about what should be done and persuading or inducing those who have the authority to act to make certain choices and not others.

Lectures on the History of Political Thought

Thus, although a society may have certain rules and conventions about who should be listened to in deciding about its public affairs, or may suppress the utterance of opinions about its public affairs, in principle, 'politics' is not an activity confined to rulers, and it is an activity different from that of ruling itself.

These conditions, which must be satisfied if there is political activity at all, tell us, then, that there are certain intellectual and historical situations in which politics cannot appear.

But they tell us something more.

(i) They tell us not to expect political activity to be merely present or absent, but to expect it to appear in varying degrees of significance.

(ii) They tell us to expect it to be a gradually emerging activity whose appearance anywhere cannot be exactly dated or assigned to any universal cause.

(iii) They tell us that political activity is like other activities in that it emerges imperceptibly with the emergence of the conditions which make it possible.

(iv) And lastly, they tell us to expect political activity not only to appear in varying degrees of significance, but also (according to circumstance) in varying degrees of intensity; and to expect it to be either a continuous activity or a merely intermittent activity.

5. Now, associations of human beings of this sort, associations which provide in a significant degree the conditions for political activity, have existed for about 3,000 years.

This sort of association of human beings has been more common in some parts of the world than in others.

In many parts of the world, during these 3,000 years, human beings have lived in communities of one sort or another in which there was no recognizable form of political activity—not because it was arbitrarily forbidden, but because the current beliefs about law, government, and the world in general allowed no place for it.

Introduction

But the part of the world where associations of human beings capable of political activity have been commonest is what, generally speaking, we now call Europe.

'Politics' may be said to be, in the main, a European invention; it is Europe's somewhat embarrassing gift to the world.

But even in Europe, during the last 3,000 years, there has been no continuous history of political activity.

It has emerged here and there, and it has often been submerged, or half-submerged, again. The best that can be said is that, in this part of the world, politics have never been allowed to lie submerged for any great length of time. Political activity has been as constantly rediscovered and reinvented as it has been lost or allowed to lapse.

For the most part, in the history of Europe, political societies (that is, associations of human beings which provide the conditions necessary for political activity) have emerged out of tribal societies. But there has been no uniform pattern in this emergence.

Some tribal societies have transformed themselves and have acquired the character of political societies by having to deal with changes forced upon them from the outside. But the commonest occasion for the emergence of a political society has been when a number of tribes have united to compose a new association.

And this has been not only the commonest occasion but also the most characteristic and the most decisive occasion. For a union of tribes is manifestly not itself a tribe, its law cannot be a tribal law, and its rulers are not tribal rulers: it is an association which provokes, almost inevitably, a new attitude to law, to government, and to the activity of governing and being governed, an attitude favorable to the emergence of political activity.

Such unions of tribes have, on some occasions, been the result of the choice of the tribes themselves (this was often the case in ancient Greece); on other occasions (in ancient Rome, for example, and in Scotland) it has been imposed by a conqueror. But

Lectures on the History of Political Thought

wherever it has taken place it has been not only a momentous event, but also an exceedingly difficult achievement often taking many generations to accomplish.

Nor do we need to go to far distant times to observe the difficulty and the uncertainty with which a political society emerges from a union of tribes: the counterpart to what happened in ancient Greece and ancient Rome has been happening with an increasing momentum for the last sixty years in Africa and is taking place before our eyes.

6. Now, the relevance for us of these remarks about the conditions in which political activity and a political experience can appear is that they are also the conditions for the appearance of political thought.

There are, as we shall discover, many different levels of political thinking, but political thought may be said to appear, first, as deliberation directly connected with political activity: thought, that is to say, in the service of political decision and action.

And just as nobody acts unless he believes that the world is such that it may be acted upon and changed, so nobody deliberates about what should be done unless he believes that there are alternative courses of action open and that he is capable of making a choice.

In short, the assumption of political deliberation is that what goes on in the world is not determined solely by natural necessity, but is amenable to human choice.

Now, when political thought appears as deliberation in the service of political action, the appropriate expression of this thought will be in words of a certain kind.

They may be words which simply express an opinion or a belief about what choice should be made; or they may be words which compose themselves into an exhortation, an advice, a warning, or an argument designed to recommend or to persuade or to justify.

In short, it would not be unreasonable, in looking for 'political thought', to look for it first in political speeches and debates and in the utterances of rulers, statesmen, and their advisers.

Introduction

Many of these political utterances are directly concerned with decisions about what to do in specific political situations; and their vocabulary is often the vocabulary of ordinary practical activity.

The words used are the ordinary words we use whenever we recommend a certain course of action or predict its consequences—whenever we advise, warn, admonish, or restrain.

They are words which are not by any means peculiar to political thought, discourse, or argument.

But wherever ‘politics’ has established itself as one of the current activities of a society, wherever a significant political experience has emerged, a specifically political vocabulary has also emerged.

Sometimes the words in such a political vocabulary are new—invented in the course of political thinking and have an exclusively political reference: words like ‘state’ or ‘citizen’ or ‘empire’.

Sometimes they are the ordinary words of practical discourse which have been given a specifically political meaning: words like ‘freedom’, ‘power’, ‘right’, ‘revolution’, ‘tyranny’—none of which were, in the first place, political words.

Now, this practical political vocabulary is of the utmost importance.

It is these words which express political beliefs. It is these words, and the way in which they are used in political argument or in the expression of political opinions, which tell us how a people thinks when it thinks about politics.

Every significant political experience has its own political vocabulary.

To be able to use that political vocabulary is the first of the political arts.

And, in the end, the only means we have of coming to understand any political experience, our own or that of another time and people, is by listening to the political utterance and by getting to know its political words and how they are used.

But all these political vocabularies, besides containing comparatively simple words, words which they are apt to share with the general vocabulary of practical discourse, contain some words which stand for larger and more generalized political

Lectures on the History of Political Thought

thoughts.

Words, for example, like ‘democracy’, ‘liberalism’, ‘nationalism’.

(i) Sometimes, they are collective words, which stand for complicated beliefs which may be taken to pieces and their components examined.

(ii) Sometimes, they are used as if they were specially compelling reasons for pursuing a recommended policy, or specially compelling justifications for having done what has been done.

But, what is important, is that they all belong to this practical political vocabulary, used whenever political matters are discussed, debated, or argued about.

What we have to try to discern is their place and their significance in the arguments and utterances in which they appear.

The study of political thought may, then, in the first place, be understood as the study of political deliberation, discourse, and argument.

And what is to be studied is not only deliberation, discourse, and argument about matters of greatly varying dimensions—ranging from what shall be done tomorrow, through (for example) master-plans for the British Economy, to questions such as: what is the ground of a ruler’s authority to rule.

What is to be studied is also the different kinds of argument which are apt to appear in political discourse.

And the object of the study is to understand the thought embedded in this practical political deliberation and discourse, and to discern the assumptions it reflects, by putting it into its context of beliefs about the world and human beings.

In studying political thought, what we are seeking is something which may perhaps be called the intellectual organization, the organization of ideas, arguments and methods of argument, of a political experience.

What we are seeking is to understand political utterances in their place in what may be called the political culture of a people.

A history of thought is a history of men thinking, *nota* ‘history’ of abstract, disembodied ‘ideas’.

Introduction

7. Now, if it is reasonable to look, first, for political thought in the utterances which exhibit deliberation about practical political matters, and in the utterances in which practical political beliefs and policies are argued about, this is not the whole of the matter.

Not all thought is the servant of action.

And, besides the practical political thought—whose design is to diagnose political situations, to recommend responses to be made to them, to choose and to decide what shall be done or to defend or justify in argument what has been done—besides all this, there is another kind of thinking whose design is to understand and to explain.

In order to distinguish this kind of thinking about politics from the practical kind, it has often been called theoretical thinking: and so we have the expression ‘political theory’.

But unfortunately this word ‘theory’ has become deeply corrupted, especially in connection with politics; and I prefer not to use it.

I shall call it, instead, *explanatory* thinking.

No significant political experience has appeared in the world without having provoked thought of this explanatory kind about politics.

And in connection with politics this impulse to understand and to explain has appeared in two different modes: historical and philosophical.

I do not propose, now, to explore further the nature of this explanatory thought about political activity.

My main point is to warn you that in this study of political thought we shall come across writers and pieces of writing which are not concerned to recommend or to defend practical political beliefs or policies, but which are concerned to explain political activity, either historically or philosophically.

And I want to suggest that we should do well to avoid confusing practical political beliefs and arguments with these other explanatory political theories and arguments. They belong, I think, to two different histories.

Lectures on the History of Political Thought

8. Now, this distinction between practical political sentiments, beliefs, ideas, aspirations; and theoretical, or explanatory, thinking about politics is important.

To have it in mind enables us to recognize the difference between different sorts of ideas, arguments, utterances.

It enables us, for example, not to mistake an argument designed to defend or justify a policy or a recommendation from an argument designed to explain or make intelligible a policy.

It enables us to distinguish between, for example, a writer like Machiavelli or Locke and a writer like Hobbes or Hegel.

It is a distinction more or less parallel to the distinction between religious beliefs, sentiments, and longings, and a theology in which these beliefs are transformed into a system of abstract ideas.

And what we are concerned with in this study of political thought is both the explanatory 'theories' which have emerged (and which correspond to a 'theology'), and the sentiments, beliefs, and aspirations which belong to practical political thought, and which correspond to the sentiments and beliefs of a popular religion.

9. Now, I have said that this study of political thought is to be, mainly, an historical study.

That is, we shall be trying to understand political beliefs and utterances as components of a political culture, and trying to understand political cultures as components of more general cultures—beliefs about the world in general, moral, religious, and social beliefs.

And I have said, also, that this study is not to be a continuous history of European political thought.

The view I am taking is that political thought (both practical and explanatory) takes place always in relation to a particular political experience—that is, belongs to some specific political culture.

And I design to concentrate this study upon four different political experiences

Introduction

or cultures, each highly developed, each with a vocabulary of political ideas of its own, each exhibiting its own characteristic political sentiments and beliefs, and each profoundly reflected upon.

1. The city-states of ancient Greece.
2. The ancient Roman Republic and Empire.
3. The feudal realms of medieval Europe.
4. The states of modern Europe which began to emerge in the sixteenth century and which constitute our own political experience.

Each of these constitutes a specific political culture different from the others. And if you are more interested in our own political culture than any other, I think you will find some interest and profit also in exploring and trying to understand these earlier political experiences.