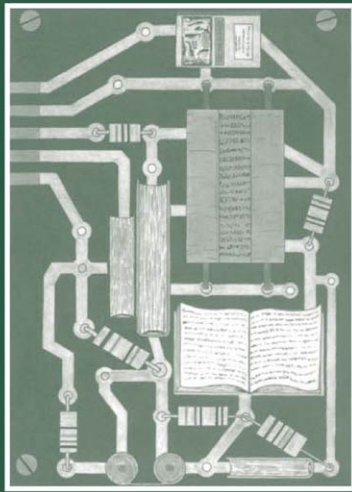


# REAPPRAISING POLITICAL THEORY



TERENCE BALL



CLARENDON PRESS OXFORD

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# REAPPRAISING POLITICAL THEORY

*Revisionist Studies in the History of  
Political Thought*

TERENCE BALL

CLARENDON PRESS · OXFORD

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For  
Jean and Glenn Willson

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Although I do not believe the classics beyond criticism, I hold that they have merits especially well-calculated to counterbalance our defects. They provide support just where we are most likely to fall.

De Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*

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## PREFACE

THIS is the second in a series of three companion volumes travelling under the general title 'Political Theory and the Human Sciences'. The first, *Transforming Political Discourse* (Blackwell, 1988), dealt with the ways in which political theorizing, argumentation, and criticism change the meanings of the concepts with and through which political discourse is conducted. The third volume—*Positivism, Politics, and the Social Sciences*—will examine aspects of the history and philosophy of the social sciences, as seen from within, and criticized from outside, the positivist tradition of political and social enquiry. Taken together, this trilogy—if that is not too kind a term for a rough-hewn three-legged stool—is intended as a commentary on, and criticism of, several key features of modern social and political theory.

The present work proceeds from the premiss that political theory is in part, and inescapably, a backward-looking historical enterprise. This second volume accordingly consists, in the main, of a series of studies in the history of political thought. I tend to favour the essay as a form and a forum for these reappraisals. For an essay, in its original meaning, is not only a literary form or genre but a 'test' or 'trial' in which an author's views are tried out, tested, and considered from several sides. An essay is also an 'assay' or 'appraisal' of the adequacy or worth of an idea or argument. This is not merely a way of writing but one of thinking and even, one might say, of living one's life. As Robert Musil says of his protagonist Ulrich in *The Man Without Qualities*: 'It was approximately in the way that an essay, in the sequence of its paragraphs, takes a thing from many sides without comprehending it wholly . . . that he believed he could best survey and handle the world and his life.' For a student of political thought, the world and one's life are inextricably bound up with one's studies. That, it seems to me, is why the essay is especially well suited to the study of political theory and the reappraisal of the thinkers and texts that comprise it.

Different though these essays are, all are connected by a common thread. That thread is the idea that the study of political



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thought requires the reinterpretation and reappraisal of—to use a now-contentious term—the ‘classics’ of political theory. That indeed is how they retain their status as classic works. But it is important to note that this ‘canon’ (if indeed that is what it is) does not consist of timeless truths preserved unchanged for those fortunate few who can decipher the coded messages contained in The Great Books. The ideas that inform and constitute political discourse are not, *pace* Plato, eternal entities, ideal forms floating freely above the political fray. Political ideas and concepts are conceived and articulated—and amended or transformed—within particular political contexts, at specific sites, and within a determinate range of rhetorical possibilities. Although bound by context, political ideas are historical artefacts which can, and characteristically do, exist in several contexts at once. They can, for one, be traced to, and placed back in, the context of their origins, as the tool or brain-child of this or that writer or party with a particular political agenda. Or they can be placed in the context of their subsequent reception by this or that audience, each having its own political problems and agendas, and its own reasons for reworking old ideas for new purposes—purposes unforeseen and perhaps even unforeseeable by an earlier author. One of my purposes in the present volume is to show, by way of a fairly wide-ranging series of studies, how tensions and confusions arise when contexts of origin and reception are confused or are not taken into account by those attempting to write the history of political thought—or, more often, particular episodes therein—for various purposes, be they political or scholarly. To expose, criticize, and solve such interpretive problems is, at the same time, to reappraise the theorist and theory under discussion. Such reappraisals, I contend, are a necessary feature of the political theorist’s craft, inasmuch as they inform and enrich our understanding of our predecessors’ contribution to the political traditions to which we are heir and to which we contribute even as, and because, we think and write about them.

But how, exactly, ought we to think about these works? How, that is, should they be read and understood, i.e. interpreted? My approach in the present study can be characterized in two words: *pluralist* and *problem-driven*. That is, no one method of interpretation will suffice in all cases; which of many methods one chooses depends on the particular problem being addressed, and

not the other way around. Mine might be termed the Gertrude Stein approach. Legend has it that, as Stein lay dying, her friend Alice B. Toklas, apparently believing the near-dead to have clairvoyant powers, asked, 'Gertrude, what is the answer?', whereupon Stein rather sensibly replied, 'That depends, Alice, on what the question is.' So it is with textual interpretation. An interpretation is an attempted answer to a question or a tentative solution to a problem. Interpretations therefore follow from some problems and, of course, give rise to others. Students of political theory need never fear the spectre of intellectual unemployment.

This account of my aims is, of course, unduly abstract. It will be vindicated—or not, as the case may be—in the following studies. My studies have been supported by several institutions: the University of Minnesota, which has been generous in granting financial support and leaves; the University of California at San Diego, where I was a visiting professor in 1984; Nuffield College, Oxford, where I was a visiting fellow in 1978–9; Christ Church, Oxford, which elected me to the Fowler Hamilton Fellowship in 1993; the National Endowment for the Humanities, which awarded me a Fellowship for Independent Study and Research in 1978–9; the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, DC, where I was a fellow in 1987. And, not least, six magnificent libraries—the Bodleian, the British Library, the London Library, the Cambridge University Library, the National Library of Scotland, and the Library of Congress—supplied the serenity and the resources without which my work would never have been undertaken, much less completed.

I owe a special debt to Tim Barton, my editor at OUP, for his initial interest in and continued support of my work. I should also like to thank two anonymous readers for the OUP for the care and thoroughness with which they reviewed my manuscript. I am also much indebted to Mary Ellen Otis for transforming my rough typescript into a readable manuscript.

I owe a much more unusual debt to my brother, David Ball, for painting 'The Hermeneutic Circuit', a picture with a punning title that captures in one succinct image what I have tried to convey in many thousands of words. Since he has kindly allowed me to use that picture on the dust-jacket, I would like to think that this is one book that can be judged by its cover.

The studies comprising the present volume have benefited

greatly—though not, I fear, nearly enough—from the suggestions given (and warnings issued) by many friendly critics, none of whom should be held responsible for what I have done, or failed to do, with their criticisms. For friendly criticism, companionship, and conversations from which I always learn a good deal—and, not least, for reading all or part of the present work—I thank Elias Berg, Isaiah Berlin, Terrell Carver, Janet Coleman, Richard Dagger, Fred Dallmayr, Mary Dietz, John Dunn, Peter Euben, James Farr, Bruce Haddock, Iain Hampsher-Monk, Jeremy Jennings, Gregory Leyh, Douglas Long (for musical companionship and scholarly criticism), James Miller, Donald Moon, the late Christopher Morris, John Pocock, the late John Rees, Quentin Skinner, Giorgio Tagliacozzo, William Thomas, James Boyd White, and Donald Winch. It is customary—and in this instance true—to say that all errors are my own.

T.B.

*Madeline Island in Lake Superior*  
*May 1994*

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

WITH the exception of the first chapter, these studies originated as papers presented to audiences in North America and Europe. Several studies in the present volume—Chapters 2, 3, 4, 8, 9, 10, and 11—have, in shorter and sometimes quite different versions, already appeared in print. Chapters 1, 5, 6, 7, and 12 appear here for the first time. Chapter 2 was first presented as an invited ‘theme’ paper at the 1989 Midwest Political Science Association and appeared in *Political Science: Looking to the Future*, edited by William Crotty and published by Northwestern University Press in 1991. Chapter 3 was in its first incarnation a paper presented at the University of California at San Diego in 1984 and, under the title ‘The Picaresque Prince: Reflections on Machiavelli and Moral Change’, appeared in *Political Theory*, 12/4 (November 1984), 521–36. Chapter 4 began as a paper presented at the 1983 meeting of the American Political Science Association and was, in substantially revised form, subsequently published in *Polity*, 17 (1985), 739–60. Chapter 5 was the first Elias Berg Lecture in Political Theory, given at the University of Stockholm in 1988. Chapter 6 began as a paper presented to the conference on ‘The Scottish Enlightenment in its European Context’ at the University of Edinburgh in 1986 and, in a revised version, to John Dunn’s and Quentin Skinner’s political theory seminar at Christ’s College, Cambridge, in the Easter Term 1993. Chapter 7 was my contribution to the International Utilitarian Studies Conference at the University of Western Ontario in 1992 and, in a much revised version, was my 1993 Fowler Hamilton Lecture at Christ Church, Oxford. Chapter 8 began as a paper presented to the Politics Seminar at Nuffield College, Oxford, in 1979 and, under the title ‘Utilitarianism, Feminism and the Franchise: James Mill and his Critics’, appeared in *History of Political Thought*, 1 (1980), 91–115. Chapter 9 was published as ‘On “Making” History in Vico and Marx’, in *Vico and Marx: Affinities and Contrasts*, edited by Giorgio Tagliacozzo (Humanities Press, 1983), 78–93. Chapter 10 was originally a paper presented at the universities of Stockholm and Swansea in 1978, and subsequently appeared as ‘Marx and Darwin: A Reconsidera-

tion', in *Political Theory*, 7 (November 1979), 469–83. Chapter 11 was in an earlier and much shorter version a paper presented at the 1987 meeting of the American Political Science Association and, under the title 'Constitutional Interpretation and Conceptual Change', was my contribution to *Legal Hermeneutics*, edited by Gregory Leyh and published by the University of California Press in 1992. Finally, Chapter 12 was a paper presented at the 1993 annual meeting of the American Political Science Association in Washington, DC.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

|                          |                                                                                                                                        |
|--------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>AJPS</i>              | <i>American Journal of Political Science</i>                                                                                           |
| APSA                     | American Political Science Association                                                                                                 |
| <i>APSR</i>              | <i>American Political Science Review</i>                                                                                               |
| <i>ASJJR</i>             | <i>Annales de la Société de Jean-Jacques Rousseau</i>                                                                                  |
| Bentham, <i>CW</i>       | <i>The Collected Works of Jeremy Bentham</i> , ed. J. H. Burns, J. R. Dinwiddy, and F. Rosen (London, 1968–)                           |
| Bentham MSS, UCL         | Bentham manuscripts, University College, London                                                                                        |
| Bentham, <i>Works</i>    | <i>The Works of Jeremy Bentham</i> , ed. J. Bowring, 11 vols. (Edinburgh, 1838–43)                                                     |
| BL Add. MSS<br><i>EW</i> | British Library Additional Manuscripts<br><i>The English Works of Thomas Hobbes</i> , ed. W. Molesworth, 11 vols. (London, 1839)       |
| <i>HPT</i>               | <i>History of Political Thought</i>                                                                                                    |
| <i>JHI</i>               | <i>Journal of the History of Ideas</i>                                                                                                 |
| <i>Lev.</i>              | Thomas Hobbes, <i>Leviathan</i> , ed. C. B. Macpherson (1651; Harmondsworth, 1968)                                                     |
| <i>LW</i>                | <i>The Latin Works of Thomas Hobbes</i> , ed. W. Molesworth (London, 1839)                                                             |
| <i>MC</i>                | Thomas Hobbes, <i>Man and Citizen</i> , ed. B. Gert (Eng. trans. of <i>De homine</i> ) (Garden City, NY, 1972)                         |
| <i>MESC</i>              | K. Marx and F. Engels, <i>Selected Correspondence</i> (Moscow, 1975)                                                                   |
| <i>MESW</i>              | K. Marx and F. Engels, <i>Selected Works</i> , 1 vol. edn. (New York, 1968)                                                            |
| <i>MEW</i>               | K. Marx and F. Engels, <i>Werke</i> , 39 vols. (Berlin, 1968–)                                                                         |
| Mill, <i>CW</i>          | <i>Collected Works of John Stuart Mill</i> , ed. J. M. Robson, 29 vols. (Toronto, 1963–89)                                             |
| <i>NS</i>                | G. Vico, <i>The New Science</i> (Eng. trans. from <i>Scienza nuova</i> ), trans. T. G. Bergin and M. H. Fisch (1744; Ithaca, NY, 1984) |

- OC* *Œuvres complètes de Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, ed. B. Gagnebin and M. Raymond (Paris, 1959–)
- PW* James Mill, *Political Writings*, ed. T. Ball (Cambridge, 1992)
- SC* Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Social Contract* (my trans. from Rousseau, *Contrat social*, *OC* iv)
- SPD* Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (German Social Democratic Party)
- WPQ* *Western Political Quarterly*



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# I BEARINGS

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# REAPPRAISING POLITICAL THEORY

## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

Several years ago a colleague asked me why it was that scholars specializing in political theory continued to write about the 'great thinkers' of the past. Had not everything that could be said already been said? Why had no one had the last word on, or written the definitive work about, Rousseau or Mill or Marx? Were we too dim to understand what our elders and betters were up to? Or were we merely multiplying the number of articles and books about the great political thinkers in order to secure tenure and promotion? And why all the fuss about 'interpretation'? Why do we bother to devise (or to read) this or that interpretation instead of going straight to the source and seeing what the author has to say?

It was an astonishing and unsettling series of questions for which I had no fully satisfactory answers. Some of us, I readily admitted, probably are rather too dim to understand what Plato or Machiavelli or Marx were about. And some scholars do, to be sure, write with the instrumental intention of getting tenure or being promoted (although this phenomenon is hardly unique to political theorists). But for the other questions I had no good answer, save to mutter something about the perennial fascination of classic works for succeeding generations of readers, each of which reads them anew and from their own vantage-point. And besides, I added, these authors and their works comprise an important aspect of our Western political tradition, which we renew and enrich by reading, reflecting upon, and criticizing these 'classics'.

These answers satisfied neither my colleague nor me. I have often thought about this exchange, especially when hearing complaints about a 'canon' of works by 'dead white men'

whose ideas are pickled and preserved (in much the same way, one imagines, as Lenin's and Bentham's corpses continue to be). Such complaints have, if anything, become even more numerous (and nasty) of late. And, perhaps surprisingly, they have a long ancestry and a familiar ring.

Earlier but similar criticisms were once heard from 'scientifically' minded political scientists, who complained that the worship of long-dead thinkers was impeding the development of genuinely scientific theories of political behaviour. Nowadays, however, such criticisms come more often from quarters that one would expect to be sympathetic if not friendly to the historical study of political thought. The first include advocates and practitioners of analytical political philosophy, some of whom see a sustained and systematic interest in the history of political thought as an antiquarian distraction and an obstacle to our thinking for ourselves in more modern, and presumably more fruitful ways, about the pressing political concerns of our own time. They tend to favour, not the historical study and interpretation of old texts, but the application of economic, rational choice and game-theoretic models and theories to questions of freedom, justice, political participation, and other concerns. Or, if they do study classic works, it is to mine them for insights or to look for forerunners and ancestors who share their views. Thus (to mention merely one of many examples) Hobbes becomes a proto-rational choice theorist and the Hobbesian state of nature a model of decision-making under conditions of perfect rationality and imperfect information.

A second set of objections comes from proponents of 'multiculturalism' in the modern curriculum. We should not, they say, be in the thrall of old books by 'dead white men', since these 'canonical' texts tend to preserve and legitimate the power of living white males, and to 'marginalize' the views of women, blacks, gays, and other minorities. We need first to deconstruct this 'canon' in order to show how it functions to empower some while disempowering or oppressing others; and we need next to discard, or at least delegitimize and move to the margins, the very idea that there are 'classic' works in political theory that repay careful study by both sexes, regardless of race or nationality or sexual preference.

Such sweeping criticism has, perhaps predictably, provoked

howls of protest from defenders of 'the great books' and the 'timeless truths' that they teach to the fortunate few. The disciples of the late Leo Strauss have been particularly vocal on this score and have, in the main, succeeded in conforming closely to the stereotype or caricature created by postmodern critics of the texts comprising the canon. Since this is a book about the problems and pleasures of interpreting such texts, I suppose I should begin by saying something in defence of my enterprise, if only to distance myself from certain of its latter-day defenders.

Consider first the matter of method. There is in modern academic discourse much ado about one's method or approach to the interpretation of texts. Now of course being aware of, and attentive to, matters of method is no doubt necessary, and to proceed methodically is an altogether admirable trait for a scholar (as indeed it is for a motor mechanic or a carpenter or anyone who practises a skilled craft). The danger is that these means have a way of becoming, at least in academic settings, ends in themselves: method becomes 'methodology', and a driving force in its own right. I wish it could be otherwise. The proof of the pudding being in the eating rather than in the recipe, my reappraisals would, if I had my way, be judged according to their merit, or lack thereof. But ours is for better or worse an age in which method precedes matter and sometimes pre-empts substance. If one's enquiries are to be both intelligible and legitimate, one must conform to the norms of one's own age and culture, and ours requires that one begin by describing and defending one's method or approach.

My defence of the approach taken here proceeds in the following way. I begin with a brief defence of the claim that interpretation is both inescapable and necessary. Next, I consider several strategies of interpretation now competing for attention and even, one might say, allegiance. I then go on to claim that several of these strategies are mutually compatible, inasmuch as each answers to quite different but entirely legitimate interests. I then offer a defence of a problem-centred and multi-method approach to interpretation. And, finally, I provide a brief overview of the revisionist reappraisals comprising this book.

## 1.2 THE INESCAPABILITY OF INTERPRETATION

Disputes over interpretation are almost certainly as old as the human species itself. Although unwritten, the first 'texts'—omens and portents, animal bones and entrails—had to be 'read' and their meaning made clear. Later still, the singers of tales told and retold stories whose meaning was interpreted and reinterpreted from one generation to another.<sup>1</sup> With the advent of the written word came new and even more intractable problems of interpretation, and along with it a written record of the sorts of difficulties faced by interpreters, commentators, and critics.<sup>2</sup> Aristotle's *Poetics* is perhaps the most famous, if not the earliest, example of the genre. Nor were questions of interpretation merely pleasant pastimes enjoyed by the idle and affluent. Then, as now, lives were often at stake in the interpretation of legal and religious texts. What counts as a capital crime, or as heresy or blasphemy, is a matter of interpretation not only of legal or religious texts, but of the intent of the accused. Thus questions of interpretation constitute what I call 'deadly hermeneutics'—deadly inasmuch as people's lives, liberties, and happiness hang in the balance.<sup>3</sup>

Another feature of this long history is the periodic and recurring call to 'get back to basics'—to the text, the author, the author's intention, or whatever—and eschew interpretation altogether. This is the move made with almost predictable regularity by fundamentalists in law and literature as well as in religion. The law or the scripture, they say, has become encrusted with interpretation, each successive layer of which skews or distorts the original or 'true' meaning of the text and/or its author (or, in the case of holy scripture, Author). The first task must accordingly be to undo the damage done by earlier commentators. Hence Luther's claim that interpretation is 'the scum of holy scripture' and his call for a return to the 'straight road' of scripture, unadorned and undistorted

<sup>1</sup> See A. B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, Mass., 1960).

<sup>2</sup> R. Thomas, *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece* (Cambridge, 1993).

<sup>3</sup> See my 'Deadly Hermeneutics', in Ball (ed.), *Idioms of Inquiry* (Albany, NY, 1987).

by commentary or interpretation. As he remarks in the preface to his translation of the New Testament, his own preface is necessary only because earlier interpreters 'have perverted the understanding of Christian people till they have no inkling of the meaning of the gospel. . . . This distressing state of affairs calls for some sort of guidance by way of preface, to free the ordinary man from his false though familiar notions [and] to lead him into the straight road . . .'<sup>4</sup> The irony is, of course, that Luther's fulmination against interpretation is itself inescapably interpretive, inasmuch as it amounts to a defence of one kind of interpretive strategy against other alternatives.

Even now, in one version or another, variations on Luther's complaint can be heard not only from religious fundamentalists, but from judges, lawyers, and literary critics. In the United States some conservative jurists call for a return to the 'original intent' of the Founders.<sup>5</sup> And among literary critics some, such as Susan Sontag, take their stand 'against interpretation'.<sup>6</sup>

But surely it is as absurd to be 'against' as it is to be 'for' interpretation, much less to 'love' it, as Professor Fish professes to do.<sup>7</sup> Whether one likes or dislikes interpretation is quite beside the point, for one really has no choice in the matter. The decision to interpret or not to interpret is not an option open to human beings, but a requirement that comes, so to speak, with the territory of being human. For our language-using and meaning-seeking species, interpretation is inescapable. Heidegger put the point with uncharacteristic clarity when he said that for human beings interpretation is an ontological category. And Gadamer has underscored the point by saying that hermeneutics—the art and practice of interpretation—is a matter not of method but of ontological necessity.<sup>8</sup>

The world we inhabit and the texts we read, says Gadamer, are never raw sense-data or some ideal *objet trouvé* but are

<sup>4</sup> Luther, *Selections*, ed. J. Dillenberger (Garden City, NY, 1961), 14.

<sup>5</sup> See Ch. 11 below.

<sup>6</sup> S. Sontag, *Against Interpretation* (New York, 1966).

<sup>7</sup> S. Fish, *Is there a Text in this Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, Mass., 1980).

<sup>8</sup> H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York, 1984).



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