Political Theory and Social Theory

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How should we think about the relationship between political theory and social theory? The account of the division of academic labour set out in the opening chapter of *The New Handbook of Political Science* presents us with the image of an intellectual territory which has come to be occupied by distinct and sometimes overlapping disciplines and sub-disciplines. It suggests that the partitioning of territory between these should itself be regarded as the product both of the expansion of academia and of growing professionalisation within it. The number of disciplines and sub-disciplines, and the boundaries between them, are thus seen as developing over time, partly as a result of the growth of the academic profession and the specialisation which this makes possible, but partly also as a consequence of new discoveries and theoretical approaches. Following this account, we might be tempted to identify political theory as a sub-discipline of political science which has differentiated itself from closely related specialisms in the course of a long process of professionalisation. What distinguishes it from other sub-disciplines of political science would be the fact that it is the only one to specialise in the examination of normative issues relating to political life. Where the other sub-disciplines focus on explanatory and descriptive issues, political theory deals with the rights and obligations that citizens ought to have, especially, but by no means exclusively, as these relate to the work of government. It is thus primarily concerned with the way politics ought to work, rather than with how it actually does work in known societies.

While it is not difficult to find a place for political theory in such an image of the division of academic labour, the location of social theory is not so clear. Indeed, the term is sometimes used to cover the many kinds of theory to be found in the empirical social sciences, most particularly in sociology and anthropology. What enables us to keep the size of this chapter within reasonable bounds is the existence of a more specific usage. Social theory, in this sense, focuses on the nature of society and/or human sociality. But it would be incorrect to interpret this as a purely explanatory activity in contrast to the normative ambitions of political theory. The founders of modern social thought saw their work as having a directly normative character. Its aim, in August Comte's view, was to place social reform on a strictly scientific footing (Comte 1998). Likewise, Emile Durkheim's programmatic *The Rules of Sociological Method* presents sociology as a diagnostic discipline, aiming to identify the causes of society's ills and thus to offer appropriate remedies. Where the image of a division of labour outlined above relies on a distinction between normative and empirical expertise, Durkheim's analogy between the sociologist and the medical practitioner ties these forms of expertise together. The task of the sociologist, in his view, is to identify social problems and advise on how they should be addressed; here, the descriptive/explanatory and normative elements of analysis are seen as inseparable. In spite of their differences, however, political and social theory share the one set of historical roots and, partly in consequence, a core set of assumptions. As a result, they can be seen as having much more in common than political theorists, in particular, often suppose.

The separation of political and social theory (and of political theory from other areas in the study of politics) is a relatively recent development. Few significant figures in the history of political thought, at least until the early part of the twentieth century, have tried to separate their normative arguments from the analysis of society and human sociality in the manner suggested above, and some have explicitly rejected the idea that they can or should be separated. There is a clear normative agenda in all of Marx's work, for example, but he denounced the utopian socialisms of

his own time and argued that his socialism had a real foundation in the scientific analysis of society and history. What we now think of as the separate traditions of political theory and social theory were clearly intertwined in the early modern period. John Locke's work on the idea of an original, pre-political human condition provides a good illustration of this point.

A recent paper by John Dunn insists that the account of the state of nature which Locke presents in his *Second Treatise on Government* is neither an hypothesis nor a description. Rather, he claims, it is normative in character: a 'theoretical analysis of the fundamental relations of right and duty which obtain between human beings, relations which are logically prior to the particular historical situations in which all actual human beings always in fact find themselves' (Dunn 2001, 33-4). This claim places Locke's 'state of nature' firmly in the lineage of twentieth century contract theory, whose 'original condition' has an equally unrealistic, 'theoretical' character. Yet it ignores the fact that for Locke and his near contemporaries the state of nature was not a simple theoretical artifice, but was also regarded as empirical truth, and it consequently obscures the significance of the early modern idea of a state of nature for the broader development of Western social and political thought.

There are certainly important parts of Locke's *Second Treatise* which support Dunn's interpretation. He describes the law of nature, for example, as teaching 'all Mankind, *who will but consult it*, that … no one ought to harm another in his Life, Health, Liberty, or Possessions' (Locke 1988, #6). This tells us that while the teachings of the law of nature are available to anyone who cares to look, at least in principle, not everyone will be familiar with them in practice. Locke's account of the law of nature, then, is not intended to be a description of, or an hypothesis about, the laws that were actually recognised by people in the earliest stages of human development. Rather, It claims to be an analysis of the laws that all human beings ought to follow. Indeed, he argues that our rights and obligations under the law of nature follow from the fact that we are 'all the Workmanship of one Sovereign Master, sent into the World by his order and about his business, … made to last during his, not one anothers Pleasure' (ibid.).

Yet, like other early modern advocates of the idea of a state of nature, Locke is clearly concerned to establish that there was indeed an original condition of freedom and equality. If his account of this condition was to serve as an effective counter to the patriarchalist view that subjection to others is the natural human condition, then it had to work as a description of the true natural condition of humanity. Locke tries to establish the reality of this condition in various ways: through his attack on Filmer's interpretation of the Book of Genesis which dominates the *First Treatise*; appeals to Greek and Roman sources and the classical myth of a Golden Age; and the use of evidence from the Americas. Indeed, he sometimes uses recent evidence from the New World to reinforce his claims about the ancient peoples of the Old – for example, in the *First Treatise, #144*. His account of the state of nature, then, is not only normative, but also descriptive/explanatory, in character. His *Two Treatises* provides an early example of the now familiar Western view that the peoples of the West have advanced further than other sections of humanity. This perception remains influential, even today, not only in the treatment by Western states of their indigenous inhabitants and in the broader geo-political order, but also, as we shall see, in both political and social theory.

In *The Great Transformation: the Political and Economic Origins of our Time*, the economic historian Karl Polanyi identifies an important sense in which society was discovered in late eighteenth and early nineteenth century England. Debates about the English Poor Law, he tells us,

> shifted the vision of men towards their own collective being as if they had overlooked its presence before. A world was discovered the very existence of which had not been suspected, that of the laws governing a complex society (Polanyi 1957, 84).

However, Polanyi's own discussion presents us with two rather different understandings of society, both of which appeared around the beginning of the nineteenth century. One is the liberal view, which continues to provide the most influential basis for political theory's normative aspirations. The economy is seen here as a field of interaction in which the conduct of individuals is regulated by the real or anticipated actions of others. Its proper functioning thus requires that individuals are free to act in response to signals provided by other economic actors. It operates most effectively, we might say, in the absence of direction from above. In this view, the economy appears as a model for the analysis of social life more generally. Society is seen in liberal thought as a collection of overlapping spheres of interaction – the economy, the family, civil society, politics – each of them regulated by the decisions of the individuals concerned. The role of the state, on this view, is to provide a framework of laws, maintain security, and pick up the pieces on those occasions when something goes wrong.

The other is the functionalist view, adopted by Polanyi himself, which saw society as a law-governed unity made up of interdependent parts. Each part contributes towards, and is in turn both sustained and constrained by, the larger social whole to which it belongs. It is, in Polanyi's words, 'embedded in society'. Economic liberalism, in his view, failed to appreciate the interdependence of society's parts, and it therefore promoted a dangerously misleading understanding of society and especially of the place of economic activity within it. This second view of society was elaborated in the work of August Comte, writing at around the same time as the political economists discussed by Polanyi, and it remains central to contemporary functionalism, without doubt the most influential tradition of modern social theory.

According to the functionalist view, society should be seen as a reality which, in Emile Durkheim's words, is '*sui generis*'. It cannot be understood, in the manner suggested by early modern contract theory, as constituted by the individuals who, in one sense, make it up. Talcott Parsons uses the idea of emergent property to make the same point. In his view, societies, like other social systems, have properties which cannot be derived from the nature of their lower-level components. Functionalist social theory suggests not only that people are social beings, and thus that there can be no purely asocial human condition of the kind which appears in early modern accounts of the state of nature, but also that they are constituted by the society to which they belong. Durkheim argued that humans were both biological and social organisms, that our drives come from the one aspect of our being and our moral and cognitive ideas come from the other. Such a view of the individual as product of society has always been influential within sociology and anthropology. It has also been disputed, most powerfully perhaps by the methodological individualism of Max Weber, whose view of the individual is, in certain respects, remarkably close to that of liberal political theory. The functionalist view was elaborated further in the work of Talcott Parsons and his associates during the 1950s and 1960s (Parsons 1951; Parsons and Shils 1962), leading many sociologists to respond by endorsing Dennis Wrong's influential complaint that modern sociology had an 'oversocialized conception of man' (Wrong 1961).

One can perhaps see functionalism as paradigmatic within twentieth century social theory, with American sociology and Marxism offering competing accounts of the functioning of the social whole and of how individual subjectivity should be seen as the product of social structure. In one of his most influential papers (Althusser 1971), for example, the French marxist Louis Althusser argued that subjectivity was an ideological construct, and that ideology functioned to interpellate individuals into their structural positions within society. The continuing appeal of methodological individualism nevertheless resulted in recurrent debates concerning the allegedly conflicting roles in social life of 'agency' and 'structure' – that is, of individual and society – and equally recurrent claims to have resolved the issue: for example, in Talcott Parsons' analysis of the structure of social

action (Parsons 1937), Pierre Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus' (Bourdieu 1977) and Anthony Giddens' theory of structuration (Giddens 1984). The dominance of functionalism has also been disputed by post-structuralism, which retains the view of subjectivity as social artifact, although it rejects many other aspects of functionalism. It sees subjectivity as an artifact of diverse practices and conditions, with no common source or origin; modern individualism, in the Foucaultian view, arises in large part from the proliferation of disciplinary practices (Foucault 1979), and from liberal attempts to govern, as far as possible, through the promotion of suitable forms of individual liberty (Rose 1999).

There are, then, important differences between conventional social theory, with its emphasis on the socialised character of human subjectivity and behaviour, and conventional political theory, with its emphasis on the autonomous individual. The latter appears to social theorists as an artifact either of structural complexity or of discipline, government and techniques of the self. In neither case is it seen as providing a reliable foundation for social explanation or normative reflection.

However, the differences between contemporary political and social theory are too easily overstated, and the fundamental similarities – arising from their shared intellectual history and rootedness in the same set of cultural assumptions – too easily overlooked. There are two closely-related points to be made in this regard. First, all conventional contemporary political and social theory rests on what Foucault calls the 'figure of man': the largely unquestioned and unexamined acceptance of the human 'individual' as an autonomous, self-directing subject of its own representations and behaviours, and as the locus of agency, reason and will. In *The Order of Things* Foucault argues that the very possibility of the human sciences is dependent on 'an absolutely singular event' (Foucault 1970, xxii) in the history of Western culture. This event is the emergence of the figure of man which, at the start of the 19th century 'marks the beginning of the modern age' (ibid). The reliance of liberal political theory on this figure is obvious. What is perhaps more surprising, given our earlier depiction of social theory as promoting a view of subjectivity as social artifact, is that this figure is fundamental to social theory as well. Functionalists and methodological individualists may have disputed the relative significance of agency and structure, but both operated with a version of the figure of man, disagreeing only over the impact of social conditions on the individual's interests and values.

Foucault and others – such as the anthropologist Marilyn Strathern (Strathern 1988) – have shown that the figure of man in turn gives rise to a specific conception of human sociality. That conception involves, in particular, viewing sociality in terms of highly discrete, bounded unities held together by shared values and concepts (including language): states, societies, cultures, nations, civilisations (Helliwell and Hindess 1999). Such unities are central to the work of both political and social theory, where they present increasingly pressing problems for attempts to theorise processes such as globalisation, multiple citizenship and various forms of population mobility and transnationality which cut across the boundaries between them.

Second, for all the differences between them, both political and social theory normally take for granted some form of historicist and developmental understanding of humanity. This follows in part from the constitutive role of the figure of man in both, since this readily leads to a view of those states or societies in which individual autonomy is valued as superior to those in which it is not. But the existence of such elitist views of human difference within Western thought long predated the emergence of the figure of man. Aristotle, for example, describes man as being 'by nature a political animal', that is, as belonging to a *polis* (Aristotle 1988). Nevertheless, while treating the *polis* as a natural collectivity, he also saw it as a relatively unusual form of human development. Not only, in his view, had much of humanity not advanced beyond the lesser forms

of human collectivity, the family or the village, but many of those who had done so belonged to states that were tyrannical and deformed. The view that much of humanity had not advanced beyond the lesser forms of collectivity identified here, the family and the village, effectively treats many of Aristotle's contemporaries as if they represented an earlier condition of the Greeks themselves. The modern elaboration of this developmental understanding of humanity began with European attempts to come to terms with the peoples encountered in the Americas (Pagden 1982). We have already noted its significance for Locke's political theory, but the same understanding of humanity underlies early modern social and political thought more generally. Social and political theorists have rarely questioned the assumption that states are more advanced than non-state forms of social life.

In addition, political theorists have generally focused on states of a recognisably Western kind, tending to regard other states as falling short of the Western norm. We can take John Rawls as a significant contemporary example. His later work (Rawls 1985; 1993) clearly acknowledges that his theory of justice is political, not metaphysical, and that it aims to explicate norms which, in Rawls' view, are already embedded in the major institutions of liberal democratic societies. There seems to be no suggestion here that these norms are universally valid and that they should therefore be accepted even by those who live in societies of a very different kind. However, his account of the international order in *The Law of Peoples* presents a more disturbing view. The Law of Peoples, he tells us, 'is developed within political liberalism' and it must therefore be seen as 'an extension of a liberal conception of justice for a domestic regime to a *Society of Peoples*' (Rawls 1999, 55). His discussion proceeds, first, by adapting the idea of a social contract to a 'society' whose members are not human individuals but 'liberal democratic peoples', and then by extending the idea of such a society further to include 'decent nonliberal peoples' among its members. Finally, Rawls acknowledges that there are peoples in the world who are neither liberal nor decent, but they would not be admitted to membership of his society of peoples and they may well be targets of military or humanitarian intervention by the society of peoples or some of its members. Thus, while his theory of justice might seem to apply only to liberal democratic societies, it is clear that these societies nevertheless set the standard by which other peoples are to be judged.

Elsewhere in the social sciences, with the partial exception of anthropology, theories of development reign supreme. The idea of a developmental continuum, in which humanity is seen to move from its original a-social condition through the progressive establishment of social institutions, reached its fullest development in the great eighteenth-century project of conjectural history and the nineteenth-century systems which built upon them. Together with the figure of man, this developmental understanding suggests that the autonomous individual should be seen, not only as the product of a long process of institutional development, but also as the fullest expresson of human nature. The idea of an original a-social condition was finally abandoned under the influence of evolutionary ideas, but the social sciences and history have nevertheless generally retained their allegiance to the idea of a developmental continuum. Sociological theory, functionalist or otherwise, routinely distinguishes between the modernity, or even post-modernity, which characterises the societies of the West and the condition of other societies which are not so modern. The use of a temporal adjective here to describe differences between contemporaries clearly implies that the latter still inhabit an earlier period and are thus in need of modernisation or development. Similarly, anthropological textbooks commonly distinguish between different 'types' of society in terms of a developmental framework, with hunter-gatherer peoples treated as the earliest social forms, and industrialist groups as the most recent. Johannes Fabian terms this 'the denial of coevalness': the treatment of some of our contemporaries as if they belong to an earlier time (Fabian 1983).

The view that subjectivity is a social artifact need not entail a developmental perspective, but here too the presumption that Western societies are in some sense ahead of the rest of humanity is commonly taken for granted. Even Foucault's account of the emergence of the figure of man insists that there is a real and substantial difference between Western and other cultures. He describes, for example, Western culture's 'fundamental relation to the whole of history' both as one of its distinguishing features and as enabling it 'to link itself to other cultures in the mode of pure theory' (1970, 376). His discussion here draws on a conception of culture as a self-contained unity which itself results from the emergence of the figure of man, thereby illustrating his own claim that our reliance on the figure of man is inescapable. It also draws on the familiar conceit that what particularly distinguishes Western culture from all others is the possession of a scientific rationality, a capacity to relate to the world in the mode of pure theory.

The sophisticated account of the emergence of modern forms of subjectivity laid out in Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self* (Taylor 1989) offers another telling example. Taylor insists that the view of the human individual as an autonomous agent, endowed with a sense of inwardness, freedom and individuality, is an invention of the modern West. Non-Western cultures, and earlier cultures in the West itself, have operated with very different understandings of the individual. Yet, rather than simply acknowledge this diversity and then proceed to ask what lessons might be drawn from it, Taylor presents the contemporary Western view as fuller, more complete, than the available alternatives. His argument is thus a qualified defence both of modernity itself and of its claims to be more advanced than other human ways of living.

The publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* in 1978, and the debates which followed its appearance, had a salutary impact on the treatment of this issue in the humanities. Unfortunately, as the editors of *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament* insist, the social sciences 'have been particularly recalcitrant when it comes to self-reflection on their representational strategies in respect of the non-western world' (Breckenridge & van der Veer 1993, 16). This is one of the most substantial legacies of their joint past which political theory and social theory have yet to seriously confront.

Given these fundamental commonalities between political theory and social theory, it is hardly surprising that much contemporary political theory relies on general accounts of society and sociality similar to those developed by social theorists. Sometimes – too often, in fact – these accounts are implicit or relatively undeveloped. John Rawls describes his analysis of justice as fairness, for example, as founded on two 'basic intuitive ideas' which are, in his view, 'embedded in the political institutions' of modern constitutional regimes: the idea of society as a fair system of cooperation between free and equal persons, and that of the person as a 'citizen, that is, a fully cooperating member of society over a complete life' (1985, pp. 225, 233). Rawls also suggests that the first idea describes how these societies operate, that their political, social and economic institutions do in fact 'fit together into one unified system of social cooperation' (p. 225). He draws here on an implicit and, partly for this reason, rather simplistic, theory of society as the institutionalisation of central values. Rawls' normative analyses thus rely on a contentious description/explanation of contemporary Western societies of the kind developed more systematically, around the middle of the twentieth century, in the functionalist sociology of Talcott Parsons and in T. H. Marshall's sociological analysis of modern citizenship (Marshall 1950).

Or again, the communitarian critique of liberalism draws on a particular view of human sociality to argue that liberalism has an incomplete and, in some respects, seriously misleading view of human individuals and the interactions which take place between them. Yet, in most cases, the communitarian's own account of sociality shows little of the richness and sophistication of, say,

American functionalist sociology or symbolic interactionism. The most notable exception here is the work of Charles Taylor, whose *Sources of the Self* is, for all its limitations, a major contribution to the study of human sociality.

In summary, then, in spite of their rather different approaches and concerns, there is a great deal that is shared between conventional political theory and conventional social theory. This is, in part, a product of their common intellectual history, but it also stems from their shared Western cultural origins, and their consequent basis in the same set of unquestioned assumptions. Perhaps the most significant difference between them is that while conventional political theorists are concerned primarily with normative issues, social theorists generally believe that the normative cannot be separated from the descriptive/explanatory in the analysis of social/political life. Partly for this reason, most social scientists regard political theory as simply a sub-branch of social theory. Whether or not one agrees with this view, our discussion above suggests that political theorists would do well to acknowledge how much they share with other social theorists, and, in particular, to make greater use of the sophisticated accounts of sociality and subjectivity to be found in their work.

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