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"Ontological Not Normative," at panel on "What's Worth Doing and Why - Political Philosophy and Political Science," at Yale University

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What's Worth Doing and Why

Political Philosophy
and
Political Science

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Steven Smith
John McCormick

Friday, October 1, 1999
12:00 noon to 1:30 p.m.
70 Sachem Street
lunch to be provided

please join us
(I'd rather say: "political theory")

My question: "What is the utility of classical political theory to current-day positive (i.e., explanatory) political science?"

----classical = through Weber, at least

The poli sci profession's answer has been:
--a source of normative illumination

This is, I think, a dismissive answer, and not very smart or useful.

My answer is: a source of ontological illumination. (nature of being)

If we were sure what political reality is, we wouldn't feel the need to go back to classical political theory, but we're not, and we don't agree, and we keep needing clues. Hence we keep the classical tradition alive (or at least this is one reason for it)

The tradition generates at least 4 answer to the q: What is political reality? That have remained alive, at least to some degree, in 20c poli sci as a positive—i.e., not normative activity.

Here, I'll try to specify these four, drawing on classical pol theory to do so, at the risk of mistakes!

1) Political reality is configuration. (this is the most familiar, and influential, today, probably)

That is, is it patterns of conflict, coalition-making, or cooperation among stipulated units. Chiefly individuals, but also, e.g., interest groups, classes, parties, states, or even civilizations (SPH!)

This is chiefly Anglo-American:

Hobbes – Bentham – Marx (part of)
--pluralism (Lasswell, Who Gets?)
--rational choice, strategies, etc. (Riker, Downs, etc.)
@ microeconomics – admits of mathematicization.
2) Political reality is formation (in the public realism—to distinguish from psych or soc proper)

That is, it's the shaping of views, ideologies, activities, and people that goes on in a context of public interaction, and it needs to be studied as such.

This "take" won't go away.

Aristotle, the republican tradition, through e.g., Tocqueville & Arendt.

Today, e.g.,
--the devt of civil society
-the devt of social capital ("shaping" is part of the treatment here)

These are growth stocks. (see our applications right now!)

NB: not "configuration" -- not at all -- a decisive difference here
-and the methodologies need to be suitable ...

3) Political reality is steering

--i.e., it's the management of states or governments by leaders; That's what needs to be studied.

--Plato, Machiavelli.

Mid-20c efflorescence:
--Neustadt
--Kissinger
--Oakeshott (yes, not a positive poli sci thinker proper)
--Keynes, in ecs—macroeconomics

But, a falloff:
--Krasner?
--poli sci as anti-steering (Graham Allison)—it can't be done.
--economics, see the trend away from state steering in the Nobels.
--this is odd, given the continuing importance of states.
4) Political reality is unfolding/structures.

(This is largely a German tradition.)

That is, political reality is the unfolding of history, and certain "structures" (in a large sense) that come into existence in the process of that unfolding.

The role of poli sci is to tell the story of the unfolding, and to anatomize the stuctures.

Hegel – Marx (in one guise, with his successive states of affairs)
--Weber (capitalism, bureacracy)
--Frankfurt School: Habermas (public sphere), Marcuse, Offe.
(also Tocqueville.....)

That's what political reality is, and that's what poli sci should be.
(in the U.S.? Often, bafflement when Germany meets particularly the Midwest!)

Configuration

Steering
Unfolding

All these understanding of politics are alive in 20c works (positive) ones that we read and use in courses.

This is a condition of ontological pluralism.

The role of the classical pol theory tradition?

1) You need to be aware of it to understand what contemporary positive poli sci is.

2) Poli sci remains ontologically pluralistic the way it is, in part at least, because scholars continually resort to the classical tradition for clues about how to construe political reality.