Reflections on Political Theory: A Voice of Reason From the Past
NEAL WOOD
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Reviewed by GEOFF KENNEDY

Power, Discourse and Political Theory

The claim that the history of political thought is largely a bourgeois field of academic study is perhaps a generalisation, but it is not an entirely unfounded one. The field itself emerged out of philosophy as a ‘canon’ of great texts dealing with the timeless problems of political life. From its very foundation, therefore, the history of political thought had inbuilt elements of idealism and ahistoricism. Of course, this is not to say that no attempts have been made to bring both materialism and history into its study, although a necessary condition for any such attempt to succeed, however, would be a prior conceptualisation of what political theory is, and hand in hand with that, an appropriate methodology by which political theory can be properly analysed and interpreted. Neal Wood’s present book, Reflections on Political Theory, is an intervention into the current state of political theory and an attempt to sketch out a Marxist approach to the study of political ideas. But it is also a self-conscious plea for Marxists to start taking the history of political thought seriously. For whatever reason, Marxists have shown little interest in ‘canonical’ political thinkers other than Marx, Hegel, Rousseau, and perhaps Nietzsche. The ideas of other, more ‘primitive’ thinkers are often deemed unworthy of study or merely ignored altogether. The result has been the wholesale surrender of the field to bourgeois scholars. At best, this has meant that political ideas have reclaimed their role as the prime mover of history. At worst, it has lead to the ‘theorising’ away of historical traditions of radical political ideas themselves.2

For those unfamiliar with Wood’s academic work, it is necessary to point out that he was consistently concerned with contextualising political theorists within their...
historical contexts. Since this is the case, it may be appropriate to contextualise Wood’s most recent text in order to understand its significance within the field. Wood’s book comes at a time when postmodernism has declared the death of the author, decreed that history is bunk, and proclaimed discourse to be political theory’s primary object of study. Postmodern approaches to past ideas allow for the indiscriminate appropriation of past theories, mainly because meaning is said to be subjective to the extent that original intention becomes irrelevant. What we are being confronted with are decontextualised ‘readings’ of political theorists that tell us more about current academic fashions than they do about the history of political thought. As the lines between literary studies and political science become blurred, and as ahistorical methodologies based on deconstruction and psychoanalysis are employed to reinterpret the meaning of the past, the history of political thought is being increasingly emptied out of both history and politics.

It is against this backdrop that Wood chose to make his intervention. Wood’s is a self-consciously ‘old-fashioned’ book that rejects what he sees as the particularism, linguistic reductionism and ‘repudiation of collective agency and any general project of human emancipation’ (p. 1) characteristic of postmodern analysis. His text is divided into two parts, respectively dealing with conceptions of political theory and approaches to the study of political thought, both of which are intrinsically related. The strength in this approach lies in its clarity, accessibility, and its ability to bring the history of political thought alive. Wood achieves this by bringing political theory down to the concrete level of political interests and political struggle, and succeeds in identifying the specificities of particular histories of political thought. The weaknesses of his book, on the other hand, lay less in what Wood says, than in what he neglects to say. While it is admittedly dangerous to criticise scholars for the things that they do not say, I will try to show that Wood’s book does not adequately engage with some of his opponents, as well as his Marxist predecessors, at a methodological level, and that his theoretical prescriptions fail to capture the richness of his own empirical work. But before we move on to a critique, we must further discuss the context into which Wood’s book appeared.

The push towards historical contextualisation emerged with the increasing influence of history in the social sciences. In a 1952 essay entitled The Two Democratic Traditions, George Sabine argued that history is an ‘indispensable aid’ in the analysis of political thought for the simple reason that history provides the context surrounding the problems that political theorists are trying to deal with. Indeed, Sabine’s previous volume on the history of political thought was acknowledged by Wood himself as

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4 David Wootton makes this point in order to downplay the influence of Quentin Skinner and J.G.A. Pocock. See Wootton 1986.
5 Sabine 1952.