**On Political Theory at Berkeley**

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“It was a splendid population… .”

Mark Twain, on California, in *Roughing It*

Though none of my degrees are from Berkeley, Berkeley was in the air that gave me intellectual life. At Oberlin College, one of my teachers was Carey McWilliams, a Wolin/Schaar student. Sheldon himself had graduated from Oberlin (a student of J.D. Lewis, another of my teachers) and taught there briefly. So I approached coming of age in a definite atmosphere. Later I sent students on to study at Princeton and Berkeley.

What does one inhale from the Berkeley political theory air? The air in and of Berkeley can be breathtakingly clear and head-clearing. Ideas there can become as clear to one as a clear Berkeley day can be: Berkeley was important as a place. I doubt that what developed there from the last half of the 1950’s until the early 1970’s could have happened in any other place in America. Having a particular group of scholars in that particular place during a particular period of American history was central to what they achieved – and achieving something was in the air, in the way that it might not have to have been in institutions of a more secure reputation. And as such the thought that developed there seems to me to have three basic components.

First is what I once referred to as “Berkeley metaphysics“ (I think I stole the term from Stephen Thomas). Politics is most often presented as a shared participation and conflict, by nature an amateur non-professional activity. It is almost necessarily in tension with dominant “mainstream” forms of activity. (Thus Berkeley events in the middle 1960’s were typed by Wolin and Schaar as a “rebellion.”) The concern with politics started from a reaction against the dulling gentleness of Eisenhower-period organizationalism through the rise of the civil rights movements to the anti-Vietnam war demonstrations. On the edge of the continent, Berkeley had the wind in its face and was for many at the forefront of change.

Secondly, there is a strong sense that the availability of the full meanings of “politics” – though not of “the political” – has changed over time, and not always for the good. “Politics” was the day-to-day conflicts: elections, policy development, foreign adventures. Over a fifteen-year time period, there was a strong sense that this had become much less democratic, much more divorced from the concerns and participation of average citizens. From ever more bureaucratic regulation, the country seemed to be subject to an increasingly unresponsive executive in league with powerful economic interests. One feels the weight of this development in the classic chapter ten of Wolin’s *Politics and Vision* and his elaboration of “inverted totalitarianism” in the second edition. “The political,” on the other hand, was a realm in which human being confronted each other as human: one did not or could not always live there – for reasons somewhat like those Oscar Wilde gave against socialism: it took “too many evenings” – but it was important to retain it as a touchstone that might return again and again. “Democracy,” with reference to this sense of “the political,” was not so much a form of government as an available form of life – a form that contemporary developments in politics made more and more rare.

Thirdly, the impact of ordinary language philosophy, of meaning what one said, whether or not more or less informed by Austin and or Wittgenstein, is strong, if most often quietly so. Here the recognition is of language as an activity of human beings, not just as a tool but constitutive of the world. While this comes to most obvious prominence in the work of Hanna F. Pitkin, it is already present in many of the others. (“The word ‘political’ means …”)

I might note here in passing that while there are important differences between the Berkeley school and Cambridge History, it is the case that the historical knowledge of the major players at UCB was extensive. I once, as editor of *Political Theory*, sent a paper on Rousseau and Geneva to Wolin for review. (Malice was perhaps aforethought as Sheldon has negative things to say about Rousseau in *Politics and Vision*). His two-page response was a detailed account of the political system in Geneva in the XVIIIth century, pointing out where the author was right, what had not been taken into account, and where possibly off-target.

All of this turned around a complex sense of a kind of tradition of thought, increasingly perhaps lost in the West, but definitive of the political realm, that realm that makes humans human. There is often a dark pessimism about the present and future state of affairs – Wolin will later go so far as to say that democracy is at best “fugitive” and is not properly understood as a form of government.

What follows from this? The architecture of this approach has the following claims. First, language is not only the medium by which we describe politics, it makes the political possible. Our “vision” (to draw on the title of Wolin’s book) of the world is understood as formulated in language. Secondly, moral and political languages can and should be to some degree differentiated from each other. Generally, the Berkeley theorists do not think of political theory as a subset of moral discourse but as an autonomous realm, or at least as one that should be. Thirdly, as political language is the central medium of shared experience (this is the basis of what Wolin calls “epic theory”), should two groups not share the same concepts (not use them in the same way) they would then most likely have difficulty in fully understanding each other. Wolin will thus adduce as important the Kuhnian notions of paradigms and potential incommensurability. Jacobson will ask wonderfully what American political science would have been like had the Articles of Confederation remained the basis of the polity rather than the harder-hearted professionalized “realism” of the Constitution. Fourthly, the discourse of a period is seen as loosely defining (or setting boundaries) as to what can be thought and what might or may be future developments. There is thus, lastly, an acceptance of a kind of historical relativism, without that conclusion entailing a nihilistic or post-moral stance. If one cannot jump over Rhodes, the task, perhaps, is to find another way to go.

Thus: the categories in which the political world makes itself available to us are themselves mutable. If this be true, then the pursuit or assertion of instrumental constants (rationality, self-interest, community, revealed preference) that might be taken to lie at or as the foundation of political life is not only impossible but wrong. The foundation of any political theory (and by extension political science) is or should be change, not permanence. What something is not is not necessarily something it might not become. (All three negations in that sentence are necessary).

To this one may ask, what is *not* here? The first answer is a serious engagement with Leo Strauss. The notorious twenty-five page March, 1963 APSR review by Wolin and Schaar of Storing’s *Essays on the Scientific Study of Politics* may have cost Wolin a job at Harvard – and certainly prevented what might have been a more complex interaction. The political differences between Berkeley and Chicago are enormous but, after or before that, both schools have a reverence for a set of texts, the greatness of which is that they can absorb whatever we bring to them critically. McWilliams did try to bridge this chasm. A second lack comes in a more or less general passing over of post-modern and continental thought, at least in the published material. (Pitkin’s mountain-climber book on Wittgenstein is an exception). But generally figures such as Weber, Lenin, Freud, Schmitt, Heidegger, even Arendt (except for a quite critical book by Pitkin) are not part of the story that they make public (although articles on some of these figures were published separately). The chapters on Marx and Nietzsche in the second edition of *Politics and Vision* strike me as weak. Liberal political thought rarely gets more than the back of a hand, perhaps often deservedly so(?).

I write their names out for this text: Sheldon S. Wolin; John H. Schaar; Norman Jacobson; Michael P. Rogin; Hanna F. Pitkin – all, except for Hanna, no longer with us on this earth. Were they a school? Not in the sense that, on a Chicago model, they *required* disciples (though at one period a number of very smart graduate students suffered from the power of the presence of those major figures). One has only to look at the other scholars present in this symposium and add to them names like Richard Ashcraft, J. Peter Euben, Wendy Brown, John Wallach and many, many others to find that these are not disciples -- *and* that there is a family resemblance.

For a period of about twenty-five years, there was indeed a Berkeley school in place; it sprang a few offshoots, now mostly withered, at Santa Cruz and Princeton. That family is now in diaspora: accordingly, there is no longer a place for and of “Berkeley political theory.” And try as one may, email and Facebook do not compensate for the lack of a place, for the accidental encounters in hallways, for endless cups of coffee and other shared libations, for the immediate proximity of colleagues, a time to talk.

When a friend calls to me from the road

And slows his horse to a meaning walk,

I don't stand still and look around

On all the hills I haven't hoed,

And shout from where I am, 'What is it?'

No, not as there is a time to talk.

I thrust my hoe in the mellow ground,

Blade-end up and five feet tall,

And plod: I go up to the stone wall

For a friendly visit.

(Robert Frost)