



# The Past, Present, and Future States of Political Theory

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## Abstract

Beginning with a historical perspective on the long and short past of political theory, I argue for three priorities for the field's future: (1) theorizing why and how constitutional democracies corrode and die, and what might be done to stop rising authoritarianism and fascism, as well as racism and misogyny, in liberal egalitarian political systems; (2) the advancement of more predictive and future-oriented forms of political theory to address democratic corruption, democratic backsliding into authoritarianism, and other urgent political problems; and (3) the need to diversify the field and the wider discipline of political science by advancing women and people of color. To stay true to its own history, political theory should lend a helping hand to politics and society when democracy is in crisis.

**Keywords** Democracy · Authoritarianism · Intersectionality · Political science · Science fiction · Prediction · Political theory

## Introduction

In 1999, I took my first trip to the American Political Science Association Meeting to present a paper, based on my dissertation on Rousseau, Burke, and Wollstonecraft's theories of the relationship between the family and the state. I flew to Atlanta with one of my female friends from Yale who was presenting her work on the Scottish Enlightenment on the same panel. As we navigated the packed corridors of the conference hotel, we stood out. Sometimes it felt as if we were the lone women in political science, drifting in a sea of men's blue suits. I joked to my friend that I thought we had gone into academia, not joined IBM.

In the twenty-two years since, I have attended most of the APSA meetings, and have organized divisions, panels, roundtables, and mini-conferences at them. I have recently served as a co-president of the association's Women, Gender, and Politics Research Section with leading scholars from the fields of American Politics (Shauna Shames, Nadia Brown), Comparative Politics (Merike Blofield), and International Relations (Louise Davidson-Schmich), and represented the section on the committee for the Okin-Young Award for the best article in feminist political theory (which

honors the work of two of the leading feminist political theorists of the turn of the twenty-first century, Susan Moller Okin and Iris Marion Young). I was honored to be recently elected to the council of the APSA. Perhaps because of these experiences, I no longer find the conference as intimidating and overwhelming as I once did: I even look forward to the event as an opportunity to see friends, and to network to make more friends in the profession. Likewise, I no longer find the field of political theory as daunting as I did those jam-packed, blue-suited corridors of the conference hotel on the eve of Y2K.

After an inauspicious beginning, political theory has become my professional home. What keeps me coming back is that this place is not so much an office as a labyrinth. The field unfolds a capacious and seemingly limitless space. Like Borges's library of Babel, it is equipped with too many doors, rooms, bookshelves, books, manuscripts, and articles to count, let alone read or map them as a whole (Borges 2007). The aporetic quality of political theory as an expansive and interdisciplinary field of study allows for a range of approaches to, and perspectives on, the theoretical and philosophical study of politics as it can be most broadly conceived.

## Political Theory in/of Political Science Present

To read the 2021 APSA program is to immerse yourself in the disciplinary "matrix" of political science (Kuhn 2012). Filled with interminable hyperlinks that seductively gesture toward

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panels or persons or papers you need to know to stay in touch with what's happening at the cutting edge of scholarship, the online program is a virtual reality or model that affords a meta-perspective on what the discipline itself is meant to represent ("The Matrix (1999) Transcript" n.d.). To add to the virtual vertigo triggered by reading the abstracts of every theory panel in the online program for APSA's first-ever hybrid conference during year two of the Covid pandemic, I chose to do so in real time while I tuned into some video presentations of interest on my laptop.

The annual meeting of the APSA might be used as an imperfect, though pragmatic, gauge of the current state of the field of political theory ("APSA Annual Meeting & Exhibition 2021"). Although many other conferences support political theory and the history of political thought, the APSA annual meeting is the only major international conference that supports political theory in all of its forms. The first four divisions of the conference are (1) Political Thought and Philosophy (focusing on historical approaches to the study of political theory); (2) Foundations of Political Theory (run by the primary organized section for political theorists in the discipline of political science, and featuring normative, analytical, critical, historical, and literary approaches to the field); (3) Normative Theory (promoting contemporary political theorizing on normative questions and practical issues, with a strong analytical orientation in approach); and (4) Formal Political Theory (using game theory and other formal models as a basis for explaining empirical political phenomena).

Out of the fifty-nine divisions of the annual meeting, there are an additional six divisions that regularly host political theory in relation to other fields in the discipline of political science: (1) Women, Gender, and Politics Research (profiling feminist theory and intersectional approaches); (2) Race, Ethnicity, and Politics (emphasizing critical race theory and intersectional approaches); (3) Sexuality and Politics (drawing from queer theory, feminist theory, and intersectional approaches); (4) Politics, Literature, and Film (treating a range of literary approaches to the study of political questions); (5) Ideas, Knowledge, and Politics (a new section devoted to the history of ideas, epistemology, and philosophy of social science); and (6) American Political Thought (another new section that offers historical, philosophical, and literary approaches to the study of American political and legal ideas).

My (or any) attempt to derive a typology of the field of political theory from the latest APSA program cannot be comprehensive. Arguably every one of the fifty-nine divisions of the APSA meeting is rooted in political theory, in the sense that all political science takes a four-point path of inquiry: (1) it begins by asking abstract questions about some aspect of politics, (2) defining the terms of the debate on the problem at hand, (3) setting forth hypotheses or probable answers to the questions that guide the inquiry, and (4) defending those answers by way of systematic argumentation. It is in this fourth

stage of analysis that the varieties of political theory—analytical, formal, empirically grounded, normative, historical, literary, critical, psychoanalytic, postmodern, poststructuralist, feminist, intersectional, and so on—diverge and distinguish themselves against the background of the broader discipline of political science.

## Political Theory in/of Political Science Past

While other dominant fields of the discipline (International Relations, Comparative, American politics and other nation-state centered political studies) tend to treat theory as a tool for conceptualizing and explaining what has been discovered through a rigorous social scientific method for the empirical study of politics, political theory treats theory as valuable in itself. Indeed, political theorists tend to think of political theory as worthy of study in its own right: so much so that writing (and rewriting) its intellectual history is a foundational part of the work of the contemporary field (Strauss and Cropsey 1963; Skinner 1978a, 1978b; Minogue 2000; Brett and Tully 2006; Armitage 2012a; S. B. Smith 2012; Ryan 2012; Whatmore 2016; S. B. Smith 2018; Skinner 2018; Whatmore 2022). Despite varying timelines, terminologies, and foci, intellectual histories tend to divide the field into two main currents: *theoretical*, or oriented toward understanding the empirical political world (Minogue 2000; Shapiro et al. 2004), and *philosophical*, or raising abstract questions about politics for logical analysis and rigorous argumentation, and generating ongoing debate on moral, social, and political puzzles and problems that defy easy resolution or benefit from creative engagement from new perspectives (S. B. Smith 2012; Shapiro 2012).

Given the historical orientation of the field of political theory (and the broader discipline of political science) toward understanding its own abstractions, questions, and problems as they have developed over time, it is not surprising that the first division of the APSA conference is "Political Thought and Philosophy: Historical Approaches." This division of the field is most strongly associated with the work of Quentin Skinner and the "Cambridge School" on the contextually oriented and linguistically attuned approach to tracing the uses and meanings of concepts and ideas in the "history of political thought" and "intellectual history" of the West and increasingly, far beyond it. It is also associated with the competing esoteric hermeneutics and close readings of canonical texts by Leo Strauss and the various camps of "Straussians" in developing a Western-centered history of political philosophy grounded in the classical Greek tradition.

Since the famous philosophical and methodological confrontation of the young Quentin Skinner with the much older "Professor Strauss" in the late 1960s, there have been various permutations and conglomerations of these two predominant

schools in the history of political theory (Skinner 1969). What became increasingly common in the 1990s and 2000s were attempts to bridge the rigorous contextual approach of the Cambridge School with the philosophically oriented, interpretive, text-driven approach of the Straussians, often in combination with alternative theoretical and philosophical perspectives as found in feminism (Okin 1979; Okin 1989; Pateman 1989; Hirschmann 2009a, 2009b, 2018a, 2018b; Arneil 1999; S. Smith 2017, 2021), critical theory (McCormick 2007; Villa 2020), democratic theory (Allen 2009; Locke 2016; Pineda 2021), liberal theory (Levy 2000; Pitts 2009; Ryan 2014; Bejan 2017), poststructuralism and psychoanalytic theory (Wingrove 2000), international law and global history (Armitage 2000, 2009, 2012a; Pitts 2018), disability studies (Arneil and Hirschmann 2016), critical race theory (Mills 2014; Pateman and Mills 2013; Ikuta and Latimer 2021; Rogers and Turner 2021), intersectionality (Locke and Botting 2010; Hancock 2016), post-colonial and indigenous political thought (Tully 1995; Ivison et al. 2000; Cordova 2007; Simpson 2017; Borrows 2019; Burkhart 2019; Allard-Tremblay and Coburn 2021), comparative political thought (Dallmayr 1999; Euben 2007; Lee 2018; Idris 2018), and so on.

Whatever their particular normative commitments or topical interests, historical approaches to political thought and philosophy assume that political theory, in all of its forms, is best understood in retrospect. One might say that they enact in practice the Hegelian metaphor of watching the “owl of Minerva” flying at dusk (Hegel 1991). Historians of political thought assume that political theory and philosophy can only know themselves when they are done, or close to done, their work in a given era.

Paradoxically, however, historians of political thought can never be truly *done* their work of writing and rewriting the history of ideas. Situated in the present, they look back on the past—both the short and the long term—in order to grasp *what has been done* by other political thinkers. Thus, the Hegelian owl cannot in practice be the historian: the bird in flight must be philosophy itself. The historian must take the short-term view afforded by the present (the “petite durée”) as she studies the flight of the owl toward an as yet unknown future, and yet she can elucidate the arc of owl’s path against the background of the long-term view of the past (the “longue durée”) (Guldi and Armitage 2014).

This “rear-view mirror” approach to studying political theory and philosophy animates much of the work in the wider field. Such a retrospective method—broadly construed—bridges analytical, critical, literary, normative, formal, feminist, intersectional, and other approaches to political theory in that they all depend in different ways on established models and methods of reasoning and interpretation, drawn from the short- and the long-term history of the field and wider discipline. Political theorists depend on these inherited models and methods (and their iterative updates) in order to make their

systematic arguments, whether they are oriented toward empirical explanation of politics, philosophical reflection on its problems, or predictions of its future patterns or impacts. Indeed, looking into the “rear-view mirror” in the present to understand political theory in the past generates a paradoxically futuristic outlook: for it pushes the whole field in new directions by unearthing new topics and issues for contemporary scholarship to tackle.

A good example of how the history of political theory can help push the field toward new frontiers can be found in the 2021 APSA conference program: the virtual “author meets critics” roundtable on Katrina Forrester’s *In the Shadow of Justice: Postwar Liberalism and the Remaking of Political Philosophy* (Forrester 2019). Forrester’s award-winning book offers a rethinking of John Rawls’s political philosophy of liberal justice by situating it in the broader currents of post-World War II politics and academic life. Forrester leads readers to consider Rawls not in mythic terms as the much-vaunted reviver of the fields of political theory and political philosophy in the post-war era, but rather in historical terms as the architect of the most influential philosophical model of liberal egalitarianism in the late twentieth century. She shows that Rawls and his followers’ approach to defending a liberal egalitarian theory of justice was fatally flawed by their myopic attempt to construct a systematic political philosophy in relatively abstract isolation from the contingencies and injustices of real-world politics. As a result, Rawlsianism developed blind spots to deep-seated issues of racism, poverty, disability, and gender inequality that continue to compromise the just (or fairly balanced) realization of equality and liberty for each and all in liberal constitutional democracies, which Rawls and his followers strove to justify as ideal regimes.

Responding to Forrester’s book, Jacob Levy alluded to the pioneering work of the recently deceased Charles Mills, the Jamaican philosopher whose critical analysis of the racial blind spot in Rawls’s “original position” has become a vital theoretical tool for both critical race theory and intersectional feminist theory (Mills 2009, 2014; Gordon-Roth and Weinberg 2021). Levy argued for the continuing need to de-center our historical understanding of what constitutes political theory, Rawlsian and otherwise, before any hegemonic and limiting conception of the field ossifies in the curricula of elite but vastly influential (primarily East Coast) universities. Levy also highlighted the ways that Rawls’s first principle of justice (equal rights for each and all) lost play relative to the lively debates over his second principle of justice (the distribution of goods across an unequal population such that it would be to the advantage of the worst off).

In Levy’s view, this neglect of Rawls’s first principle of justice was to the detriment of understanding how Rawls’s liberal egalitarianism differed from both utilitarianism and socialism. Levy pushed for future scholarship to underscore the priority of equal rights in Rawls’s political thought, as well as

the first principle's ongoing relevance for theorizing the problem of racial injustice, in the spirit of Charles Mills's work.

Erin Pineda then pivoted the discussion to take up a sharper version of a question that Levy had raised earlier: might we productively strive to take an agnostic approach to the question of what "counts" as political theory at all? Shifting toward a more neutral, pluralistic, and open-ended perspective on the recent history of approaches to our field, Pineda argued, would continue the ongoing resistance within the field to the re-inscription of Rawls and liberal egalitarianism as the font and model of normative political theories of justice.

Forrester replied to Pineda, Levy, and her other critics on the panel by affirming her general view of the "remarkable parochialism" of Rawls and Rawlsianism with regard to real-world politics, especially imperialism and territorial expansion of states, in the post-war era. At the same time, she provocatively asserted that she expected Rawlsian liberal egalitarianism to effectively serve as a "handmaiden" to public policy on distributive justice going forward, even as its philosophical limitations are widely dissected in the academy. If her prediction proves true, it will prove to be an ironic turn of events for the Rawls industry in academia: for real-world economic policy, not abstruse philosophy, would be Rawlsianism's greatest long-range contribution to resolving problems of social justice.

Taking a longer rear-view-mirror perspective on the field, I would counter that political theory has insisted on its usefulness to both the broader discipline of political science and to politics itself, even when it is not heard. From the time of Plato and Aristotle, political theorists have aimed to provide foundational systems of thought to frame the study of politics (Lane 2016). Aristotle modeled how political theorizing could be applied to a dizzying array of subjects in order to glean insights into the world around us that would otherwise be missed. He applied his scientific (historical and empirically grounded) approach to understanding human political life to study everything from the aesthetic and ethical implications of Attic tragedy for the wider human condition (Aristotle 1961), to the crafting of an influential philosophical typology of the best and worst regimes (Aristotle 1996). Aristotle's *Politics* inspired many typologies of ideal versus non-ideal regimes, such as in Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws* (Montesquieu 1989), Robert Dahl's *Democracy and its Critics* (Dahl 1989), and Rawls's *The Law of Peoples* (Rawls 1999). These and other typologies of regimes legitimate and illegitimate—or, in the later Rawls's more neutral terms, ideal and non-ideal (Rawls 1999)—have shaped schools of thought in political science that continue to have resonance in multiple fields of study, and in the real world of politics, law, and policy.

## Political Theory in/of the Future

With the January 6th insurrection at the U.S. capitol still looming large in my political rear-view mirror, I would argue

that the most important "real world" or applied work to be done by political scientists and political theorists is on democratic backsliding and rising authoritarianism (Nalepa 2021, 2022a; Shapiro 2010; Meng 2020). In particular, the field of political theory should be diagnosing, conceptualizing, and critiquing the ways that corruption takes hold of a democracy, governed by and for the citizenry, and changes it into a tyrannical, authoritarian, totalitarian, or fascist form of government, governed by a ruler or rulers' fiat and force. This is an ancient problem that Aristotle, and his teacher Plato before him, made prominent in the history of Western political thought, with their famous typologies of how a democracy can evolve into a tyranny due to the decay of the principles and practices that enable rule by and for the people (Plato and Lane 2007; Aristotle 1996). If political theory fails to address this truly urgent problem in our own time, we risk losing the liberal democratic constitutional protections that ensure the equal rights upon which a free society—characterized by freedom of speech, association, thought, academic work, religion, and the press—depends.

Contemporary empirical political science has admirably persisted in this theoretical vein. In 2018, comparativists Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt published the book *How Democracies Die* (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). They theorized how the rise of the Trump administration was as symptom of a larger problem in American politics: the steep degradation of norms and institutions of democratic governance since the 1980s and 1990s. Since the contested U.S. presidential election of 2000, in which Gore won the popular vote but the Supreme Court upheld Bush as the winner, there has been steady erosion of the representation of the majority will of the American citizenry. The erosion has beset the formal electoral system, due to strategic gerrymandering, and burdensome voter registration rules. It has also corroded the egalitarian spirit and letter of legislative-based representative government, due to the making and upholding of laws and policies that seek to undermine equal rights. During the Trump administration from 2016 to 2020, the rights of women, LGBTQ, immigrant, Black, and other racial and ethnic minority citizens have been under sustained attack by conservative leaders, legislators, judges, and bureaucrats (Gould 2021).

Levitsky and Ziblatt argued that the 2016 election of Trump to the U.S. presidency paved the way for further democratic backsliding in the oldest standing republic with a written constitution (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). They predicted that this trend might push the U.S. to shift from a global model of democracy toward its antithesis: a form of "competitive authoritarianism." Associated with Russia under Putin, competitive authoritarianism features strong-armed executives who manipulate the electoral system to remain in office, and thereby undermine foundational principles of democracy itself: free and fair elections and peaceful transfer of power to the rightful winners.



Levitsky and Ziblatt also contended that the authoritarian tendencies of Trumpian politics broke down a culture of liberal “forebearance” that had underwritten the legitimacy of American democracy in practice (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). Historically, elected representatives would forebear from the opportunity to tyrannically deploy power even when the separation of the three branches of U.S. government and the capitalistic market economy opened many doors for such abuse, from partisan blocking of Supreme Court appointees to the dissemination of ideology and misinformation through social media. Their arguments proved prophetic.

After the January 6th insurrection, Republicans loyal to Trump worked to block the former president’s (unprecedented) *second* impeachment from being confirmed by the Senate. The ultimate failure of the Republicans to forbear from a brute partisan show of loyalty to Trump manifested three forms of democratic corruption: (1) they squelched formal public scrutiny of the presidential administration’s shocking involvement in stoking violent insurrection at the Capitol while the legislative power was in session, (2) they contributed to the losing candidate’s undermining of public confidence in the legitimacy of the 2020 presidential election, and (3) they threatened—for a tense few weeks in American history—the peaceful transfer of power to the rightful winner of the presidency.

In the 2021 APSA program—which was finalized during President Biden’s first four months in office—there were seventeen mentions of insurrection, with fifteen referring to the events of January 6th (“APSA Annual Meeting & Exhibition 2021” n.d.). Six of the latter were in the political theory divisions. In a panel co-sponsored by the American Political Thought and Race, Ethnicity, and Politics divisions, Elizabeth Beaumont highlighted “the violent insurrection” as an example of the long-standing problems of “white nationalism and white supremacy, and their recurring influence on politics.” In a panel on “Resistance Culture as a Remedy for Epistemic Justice” sponsored by the Foundations of Political Theory division, Mona Lena Crook and James M. Glass each offered systematic philosophical papers on the politics of the insurrection. Glass treated the psychological origins of the insurrectionists’ rage through the lens of Hobbes’s political theory of how “phantasy pushes the passions of hate, vengeance, and rebellion.” Crook analyzed the insurrectionists’ “semiotic violence”—the public performance of disrespect toward women, blacks, and other politically marginalized groups—as “attacking not only democracy—but also the principle of equality itself.”

Meanwhile, other divisions of the 2021 APSA conference, such as Democracy and Autocracy, were doing the heavy lifting in theorizing the causes and effects of the January 6th insurrection, and how it differed from other forms of political violence that threaten democracy, such as military-driven usurpations of power or *coup d’etats* (Singh 2021). Given that political theory typically begins with a retrospective

perspective, the time is ripe for the field to theorize how the Trump presidency, patriarchal forms of populism, electoral corruption, and the unchecked technological influence of social media have compounded to erode three pillars of modern representative democracy: free and fair elections, protection of equal rights through legislative government, and peaceful transfers of power to newly elected representatives. Political theorists should follow the lead of Bonnie Honig (Honig 2018, 2021), Lorna Bracewell (Bracewell 2021), Nancy Love (Love 2020), and Anthony DiMaggio (DiMaggio 2021) in picking up the pace of responding to current fascist, patriarchal, white supremacist, and authoritarian political behaviors and cultural trends in the U.S., especially post-2016, and incorporating them into philosophical and historical work on protest, conflict, and democratic citizenship (Locke 2016; Cohen and Ghosh 2019; Pineda 2021) and the causes of domination, inequality, and corruption (Sen 1995; Pateman and Mills 2013; Shapiro 2016; Sparling 2019).

As the complex lives and work of Socrates, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Wollstonecraft, Truth, and hooks attest, engaging recent history and contemporary politics is as relevant to doing innovative political theory as studying issues and arguments from centuries ago. The thoughtful comparison of past and present issues is one way that political theorists and historians of political thought have long succeeded, over the centuries, in making their field’s work relevant to the future (Lane 2016).

Political theory, however, does not always make itself heard beyond its own cottage industries and echo chambers—and this may be its own fault. Though we strive to be practitioners in the field, we usually do not make it out of our own (home) offices (especially during the pandemic), unless it is to find coffee. Despite our dependency on email and social media to network with friends, we do not try hard enough to intellectually connect with other fields in the discipline or with other disciplines altogether. Rather we tend to get lost in an ever-narrowing labyrinth of our own making. The irony is that we are often led to a dead end, when we had hoped to find an outlet for our latest conceptual innovation.

There have been important exceptions to this “hedgehog” tendency to burrow into a one-way tunnel in the field of political theory (Berlin 2013). A number of scholars have insisted on building intellectual “corridors” to connect political theory and the history of political thought with the other fields of political science (Armitage 2012b). Robert Dahl developed his theory of the most practicable form of modern democracy as polyarchy (rule by the many, instead of rule by the elite or rule by the whole people) in dialogue with the work of his comparativist colleague Juan Linz on democratic breakdown (Dahl 1989; Linz 1978). Linz’s work has since been inspirational for Levitsky and Ziblatt’s typology of the authoritarian signs of the death of democracy (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). Rogers Smith led the way for the incorporation

of intersectional (race-, ethnicity-, nation-, class-, and gender-overlaid) approaches to the study of citizenship and community in the fields of American politics, constitutional law, and comparative politics of citizenship and migration (R. M. Smith 1997). Duncan Bell (D. S. A. Bell 2003; D. Bell 2010) and Alison McQueen (McQueen 2018) have shown how international relations, especially realist theories of international politics, could and should benefit from stronger and richer ties to the fields of political theory and the history of political thought.

Bell's current work on H.G. Wells, the history of science fiction (sf), and their relevance for thinking about the future in modern political science represents a productive path forward for several fields in the discipline (D. Bell 2020). The APSA was founded in 1903, just at the time that Wells's sf gained steam. His stories like *War of the Worlds* (1897) and "The Land Ironclads" (1903) quickly came to be seen as predictive of dystopian political futures, including the rise of the technologies—especially "big guns" and "machines" that can "walk"—that motored the two world wars of his lifetime (Hunt Botting 2020). Contemporary political science might benefit from periodically returning, in a time machine as it were, to its cultural roots at the turn of the twentieth century, when "modern political science fiction" took off with the literary success of Wells (Hunt Botting 2020).

Rooted in the influential and prescient sf novels of Mary Shelley, modern political science fiction has spawned a legion of dark predictions about the future that warn of the disasters that lie ahead if we fail to make critical changes to our political systems in the present. Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) envisioned the use of science, medicine, and technology to make human children or humanoid Ais (Hunt Botting 2020). She also foretold the injustices and tragedies that would result if these creatures were bereft of love and care by their makers.

In *The Last Man* (1826), the predictive powers of Shelley's gothic imagination were in full display (Shelley 2006). She foresaw with remarkable accuracy the national and international politics that would exacerbate a local plague into a lethal global pandemic. The pestilence shuts down countries and economies in the 2090s, much like SARS-CoV-2 did in early 2020. But Shelley's ecological insight goes deeper and darker, much like contemporary thought on the existential threat of climate change. Her fictional global plague nearly wipes out the human species that unleashed it through international war, travel, and trade (Hunt Botting 2020).

The prophetic dimensions of *Frankenstein* and *The Last Man* are not due to any supernatural powers of the author, but rather to her serious study of history, politics, and science from the short and the long past. She paid close attention to the works of her parents, the revolutionary-era political philosophers William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft. From her mother she learned the value of direct political engagement with the most pressing issues of her time. Wollstonecraft

wrote about her experiences of the French Revolution in a variety of genres: the political treatise, journalism, history, letters, and the novel (Wollstonecraft 2014). Shelley, in turn, engaged the politics of the post-revolutionary period and the Napoleonic Wars in her own epistolary, journalistic, literary, and historical writings on conflict, peace, rights, and justice. She then applied the ideas she gleaned from her studies, her life, and her family to craft the riveting counterfactual plots of her two greatest novels.

Shelley used her historically and scientifically informed *poliscifi* to explore futuristic questions about humanity's responsibility for their own creations and disasters. These stories have become modern myths that resonate with readers in an age of high-tech and pandemics. Of particular interest to contemporary political science should be *The Last Man*, in which Shelley theorized how the breakdown of republican or democratic government would exacerbate the political conflicts and economic crises that drive the spread of contagion (Hunt Botting 2021).

As devoted readers of Shelley and Wells, dystopian political thinkers from George Orwell to Octavia Butler to Margaret Atwood have also immersed themselves in philosophical and political ideas of the short and long past. In now-legendary works of modern *poliscifi*, they transformed these ideas into stories that everyone recognizes—even if they have not read their books—due to their prescient critiques of the worst forms of domination that politics can bring to the world (Hunt Botting 2020; Shames and Atchison 2019).

Political theorists and political scientists need not write their own political science fictions in order to philosophically benefit from reading them. Literature and history—perhaps especially when they are synthesized in "political science fiction"—can inspire political scientists and political theorists to chart new vistas of creative thought on the future and what can be done to make it better than what has transpired with tragic injustice in the past (Hassler and Wilcox 1997; Wilcox and Hassler 2008). Since the shocking result of the 2016 U.S. presidential election, there has been rising public interest in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Butler's *Earthseed* series, and Atwood's *Handmaid's Tale* series as predicting the death of American democracy at the hands of authoritarians, demagogues, fascists, totalitarian surveillance technologists, and racist religious patriarchs (Orwell 2021; Butler 2017; Atwood 2020). Dystopian *poliscifi* thus has a special potential in our political moment to inspire new and compelling theoretical work on why and how liberal constitutional democracies (such as the U.S.) corrode and die, and what might be done to stop rising authoritarianism and fascism, as well as racism and misogyny, in historically liberal egalitarian political systems (Shames and Atchison 2019; Hunt Botting 2021).

While turning to political science fiction to analyze our contemporary political crisis might seem laughable to some, we might recall that George Orwell wrote *Animal Farm*

(1945) during the blitz in London. He salvaged the manuscript for publication after a bomb hit his and his wife's apartment (Solnit 2021). Sadly, his wife Eileen O'Shaughnessy Blair—who proposed the form of a fable and helped him with editing—died before it was published, due to health complications exacerbated by wartime grief and anxiety (Topp 2020). The rest is history: *Animal Farm* continues to be taught in middle and secondary school curricula as a devastating allegory of the disasters that ensue when democracy and liberalism fail to stand up to the machinations of authoritarianism, totalitarianism, and fascism.

## Redrawing the Boundaries of the Field: Gender, Race, Democracy

I began this essay on “the state of the field” of political theory on a personal note, because I think it helps to illustrate both how far the field has come in recent decades, and how far it needs to go, especially on issues of gender, race, and democratic inclusion, both in advancing new theories of politics and in shaping practices of professional development within the discipline. Although APSA no longer feels quite like a blue-suited matrix of the late 90s tech boom, the field of political theory still needs reform in order to realize its potential for promoting social justice for each and all, rather than reinforcing the biases that keep women and people of color out of curricula, high-profile platforms, and public debates that might, with them included, effect a sea-change away from a rising culture of patriarchal and racist authoritarianism toward stronger rights-based democracies around the globe.

We have reasons to hope for this philosophical and political shift. Over the past two decades and more, I have witnessed (and been part of) three wider changes in the field of political theory: (1) the increased representation of women, especially women of color, as authors and/or presenters in major events and/or journals; (2) greater attention to women of all cultures and eras as subjects of study in the history of political thought and normative political theory; and (3) organized movements to better incorporate women and other marginalized groups into political theory and cognate fields in the humanities and social sciences, such as philosophy, literature, history, gender studies, and critical race studies. Although I am more at home in the field than ever before, I am aware of how fragile a victory this outcome is for the full range of historical minorities in the field: especially people of color and all people who identify as women.

At the 2021 American Political Science Association Meeting, the three major divisions devoted to political theory and the history of political thought had only two “manels” (“APSA Annual Meeting & Exhibition 2021” n.d.; Else 2019). If we include the fourth division, Formal Political Theory, there were only a handful more, in a branch of the

field that has been traditionally men-dominant. This pattern is changing. Monika Nalepa, a comparativist whose work employs game theory and formal models to explain democratic corruption and transitional justice in democratic, authoritarian, and post-authoritarian regimes, is the first chair of the new Formal Political Theory Section of the APSA, founded in 2020 (“Formal Theory – American Political Science Association” n.d.).

The greater inclusion of people of color and other historically marginalized groups in the profession will make it possible, over time, to rethink how political theory is done from the inside out. As Amy Atchison points out in the introduction to her textbook, *Political Science is for Everybody* (2021), people of color are presently only 8.7% of the people in Anglo-American political science, while women of all backgrounds represent only 34.4% of the profession in the Anglo-American part of the discipline (Atchison 2021).

Atchison's textbook represents a gestalt-shift on the field of political theory within the discipline of political science. Divided into three main sections, *Political Science is for Everybody* treats the discipline as having three overlapping fields: foundational political theories and philosophies, comparative approaches to politics, and international relations (Atchison 2021). The contributors treat national-level political systems as part of comparative politics, just as the APSA conference has evolved to do. Atchison and her colleagues highlight intersectional political theory—grounded in the work of Black feminists in the late twentieth century such as bell hooks and Kimberlé Crenshaw (hooks 2014; Crenshaw 2022)—as foundational to the field as ancient works by Plato and Aristotle.

On this inclusive model, what makes a political theory foundational is its ability to open up new and fruitful perspectives on the study of politics and political science itself. Intersectionality theorizes how gender, race, class, and other social statuses compound to create differing experiences of disadvantage in society for individuals and groups (Crenshaw 2022). Given the rise of racism, racist violence, ableism, misogyny, and sexual and class-based discrimination during the Trump administration and the present pandemic, there is no political theory that deserves more to be understood and used as a foundational tool for analyzing and resolving pressing problems of inequality and injustice. Intersectionality is the political theory of the future.

## Toward a Political Theory/Political Science for the Future

With these critical political issues in mind, I strongly support “intersectional” practical reform efforts of the APSA to elevate the status of women, people of color, first-generation citizens and college students, and other historically marginalized groups more visibly in the profession. I also applaud

efforts by colleagues to strive to be more inclusive and open-minded in the ways that they design curricula, admit graduate students, build panels, make editorial and grant decisions, shape reviewer pools and editorial boards, and grow networks or scholarly communities in the profession.

I also push political theorists as a profession to confront head-on the biggest problems and issues of our time, such as why the January 6th insurrection happened and how such acute threats to democracy and justice can be averted (Nalepa 2022b; Singh 2021). So far, it has been mainly comparativists, not political theorists, who have risen to the occasion to theorize the causes, consequences, and political implications of this startling challenge to the stability of the world's longest standing constitutional democracy. Political theorists ought to be at the fore of these vital matters, bringing conceptual clarity and argumentative rigor to murky and chaotic present-day debates on democracy's future. Political theory should not settle for being a moral bystander to the attempted violent takeover of the U.S. capitol by racist, patriarchal, populist supporters of Trump and the consequent undermining of the perceived legitimacy of the 2020 U.S. presidential election.

The greatest of political thinkers and writers—from Plato and Aristotle, to Wollstonecraft and Shelley, to Orwell, Butler, and Atwood—have not shied away from theorizing the causes and effects of democratic corruption. Nor should we, if we stay true to the history of our own field. The time to act, and to theorize, is now. In the present and near future, the only subject for political theory is and can be the preservation of modern democracy. For without democracy, and the equal rights it protects through contemporary systems of constitutional law, there will be no space to do political theory at all.

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