Contemporary Political Thought: A Reader and Guide

Alan Finlayson (ed.)

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One day, someone will write a history of introductory texts to the field of political thought. Such a history will reveal much about the changing preoccupations, both of the field of political theory in its relationship to the world of politics, and of its practitioners as members of a profession. It will tell the story of the construction, both of a more-or-less unified discipline and of a series of problematics, and it will no doubt have something to say about the wider social, cultural, and political dynamics to which those practitioners were subject and to which they saw themselves as responding. Inevitably, it would be work-in-progress, a footprint in time bearing traces of its own concerns, but reflexively so, aware that it would one day itself be the object of such a study.

Although Finlayson offers no such history in his admirable introduction to this collection, he does offer an account of the concerns of political theory and of its potential role in actual political life, that is both accessible to those new to the field and seeking orientation in a complex, fragmented subject, and reflexively aware of its role in the making and remaking of that subject. It is explicitly not therefore merely a survey of the current state of the discipline, but is a collection, as Finlayson himself puts it, that ‘has a ‘mission.’’ (p. 1) That ‘mission’ is to convince us that political theory *matters*; that it is not some abstract and aloof pursuit, detached from the politics that it claims to inform.

On the contrary, Finlayson suggests, the more detached we feel from everyday politics and the more politics becomes a matter for ‘experts’ and professionals, the more important political theory — in all its manifestations: normative, explanatory, and critical — becomes. The collection then has the feel not only of ‘A Reader and Guide’ — doing exactly what it says on the tin, so to speak — but also of an intervention in, and engagement with, the field it seeks to delineate. And it is all the more interesting and exciting for that. Moreover, as the editor points out, many of the theorists whose work is represented and discussed here are not simply academics, but also activists, advisors to governments, journalists, and broadcasters too. Finlayson therefore makes out a good case for political theory as a concrete activity, and one that informs practice. Any tutor charged with the task of convincing a group of sceptical students as to why they need to be studying political theory could do a

lot worse than recommend that they read Finlayson's 'General Introduction' to the book.

The book itself is organized into four sections, each with an introduction (written by Finlayson), two or more essays each written by a contributor, a useful list of 'Questions for Discussion', and a guide — not merely a bibliography — to further reading. Each of the essays is followed by a selection of extracts from major theorists in the field under discussion. Thus (by way of illustration) the section entitled *Alternative Visions and Revisions* (Section 3) contains essays by Mike Kenny (Communitarianism), Kate Nash (Feminism), Tim Hayward (Ecologism and Environmentalism), and Iain MacKenzie (Poststructuralism and Postmodernism) while the Kenny essay (to take one example) is followed by extracts from Sandel, Glendon, Etzioni, and Mulgan. The collection is bookended by an *Analytical Table of Contents* at the front, and a *Bibliography*, useful *Glossary of Terms*, and an *Index* at the back. The whole package is therefore designed not merely as an overview of the field, but also as a useful teaching-aid and resource — no bad thing given the escalating costs of books and the relative impoverishment of students.

The individual essays by contributors vary in style and approach — again, no bad thing — from John Seery's account of the recent history of political thought mapped through his own personal (and political) experiences; through Terrell Carver's elegant and insightful defence of Marx against Marxism; to Oliver Leaman's brief but informative survey of some key non-Western traditions of political thought. All are accessible and all are worth reading, both for students and academics alike. There will be quibbles about the selection of readings — the inclusion by Mike Kenny of a piece by Geoff Mulgan written for *The Independent* seems on the face of it an odd choice to sit alongside such communitarian luminaries as Sandel, Etzioni, and Glendon — but given the 'mission' alluded to above it is surely not the task of this particular text to contribute to a process of canonization.

As a reader and a guide the book succeeds. As an incitement to think clearly and critically about politics — and as an example of such thinking — it succeeds admirably.

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