An Introduction to Contemporary Political Theory

Colin Farrelly

*Sage Publications, London, 2003, 320pp.**ISBN: 761949070.***Contemporary Political Theory: A Reader**

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As someone who has taught contemporary political theory in a range of institutions for longer than I care to remember, it was with some interest and anticipation that I began reading Colin Farrelly's *Introduction to Contemporary Political Theory* and its accompanying *Reader*. Assessing these books raises the obvious question: what makes a good textbook? At least, three factors strike me as important. First, the text must be accessible to the audience for which it is intended without being too simplistic. This means that it must elucidate key concepts clearly yet rigorously. Next, it should endeavour to offer examples that illuminate key theoretical points in a way that enhances understanding. Finally, it should offer an accurate and up-to-date critical survey of its field and, if it is a very good text, it should also present familiar material in an original and provocative way. Clearly the criteria for a reader are slightly different: its usefulness lies primarily in the cohesiveness and representativeness of the range of sources that it collects together. In the case of Farrelly's two books, since the reader is designed with the introductory text in mind, one might also add, that its merit depends on the degree to which this collected material supports the *Introduction*.

The aim of Farrelly's books is to introduce students of contemporary political theory, political ideas and political philosophy to what he conceives to be the main conventions, questions and positions in political theory today. Taking as his central concern the manner in which different traditions have construed the organization of society, Farrelly offers chapters in the *Introduction* on Rawls, Nozick, Gauthier, Dworkin, communitarianism, multiculturalism, deliberative democracy and feminism. The *Reader* offers a parallel selection of extracts to complement the *Introduction*. This includes material from all Farrelly's named authors barring Dworkin, as well as a representative sample covering his four broader themes (communitarianism, multiculturalism and so on). Oddly, the *Reader* somewhat inexplicably also incorporates a section on republicanism though there is no corresponding evaluative chapter in the *Introduction*. The choice of the material is judicious

and, although some may quibble both about what has been included as well as what has been omitted, overall the *Reader* usefully complements the *Introduction*.

In terms of accessibility, the *Introduction* is, for the most part, clearly written. Material is presented in a lucid and concise fashion, although sometimes this concision works against the introductory nature of the text where, occasionally, knowledge of key debates is assumed rather than explicated. An unfamiliar reader may thus, at times, struggle to contextualize what they are reading. Here, Farrelly's introduction compares less favourably with, for instance, Will Kymlicka's *Contemporary Political Philosophy*, which furnishes the student reader with far more detail both about specific thinkers and about the main strands of critical response to those thinkers. In a sense, though, this is not comparing like with like, for Farrelly designs his text with a particular pedagogic intent: to stimulate critical thinking. In order, thus, to encourage *active* engagement with the theories under discussion, Farrelly provides a series of questions or exercises which the reader is encouraged to think about and respond to. Although some of the questions are leading in their phraseology, and would perhaps have benefited from more precise reformulation, students ought to find them a useful resource in focusing their reading. They might also be used as the basis for seminar debate. Finally, each chapter also contains a summary of its principal points (useful for revision) and a guide to further reading to supplement the schematizations Farrelly provides.

Since one of his aims is to explore the 'practical significance' of 'abstract theoretical debates' and the role they play, and in Farrelly's opinion ought to play, in actual policy making and public debate (p. xi), Farrelly often exemplifies arguments with interesting and evocative illustrations. In the chapter on multiculturalism, for instance, he discusses the familiar controversy in France around Muslim girls wearing headscarves to school as well the question of the Orange Order marching in Northern Ireland. The chapter on communitarianism takes the question of abortion politics in the US as a way of addressing problems to do with state neutrality. Although there is inevitably some unevenness in the handling of such examples — some of the theoretical material Farrelly is surveying lends itself more easily to topical exemplification — overall he gets his message across. Political theory offers critical tools for thinking about issues of practical political significance.

So, what about the scope of the book? Does *An Introduction to Contemporary Political Theory* deliver what it promises on the back cover: 'a complete and accessible introduction to the main theorists and issues in contemporary political theory today'? The answer, in short, is no. Indeed, it would be difficult to imagine what kind of book could offer a complete assessment of contemporary political theory given the breadth and range of that work. My unease with the text arises not principally from this over-

ambitious claim, however, but rather centres on how Farrelly characterizes political theory and thus determines what might justifiably be included in a textbook on contemporary thought. In the section entitled 'What is 'political theory'?', Farrelly acknowledges the absence of a consensus concerning its scope and content and confesses to a certain cautiousness in stipulating a definition of it. He also duly notes the dynamic nature of what counts as political theory. Despite these qualifications and reservations, however, Farrelly then determines that what unites political theorists and differentiates them from political scientists is that they are all concerned with 'how things ought to be' (p. ix). Political theory — including the contemporary variant with which he is concerned — is essentially *normative*. This claim, he avers, endorses that of John Plamenatz some forty years ago, when he declared that political theory is the 'systematic thinking about the purposes of government' (cited in Farrelly, p. ix). Appearing to derive an 'ought' from an 'is' here, Farrelly construes Plamenatz's emphasis on the systematic appraisal of the ends and rationale of government as a requirement to think about what government ought to do. In one fell swoop, other forms of political thinking, including more critical and interrogatory forms of political theory, are erased. Furthermore, normative political theory is then reduced further to a sub-species of moral philosophy concerned primarily with questions of justice.

The effect of these erasures and reductions is to deny the richness of contemporary political theory and to occlude important and influential contributions to it, from radical democracy, though neo-Marxism, post-structuralism and Foucauldian-inspired accounts of governmentality, to civic republicanism, to name only the most obvious, all of which have shaped debates in contemporary political theory in significant ways. Furthermore, by equating political theory principally with considerations of justice, an additional distortion occurs. Contemporary theories such as feminism or liberalism that are *not* defined exclusively by questions of justice are nevertheless treated as relevant to contemporary political theory only when they do deal with it. This can be usefully illustrated by briefly considering how Farrelly construes the idea that the personal is political in the chapter on feminism. Farrelly exemplifies this idea with relation to Susan Moller Okin's call for the family to be considered as a site of justice (against, of course, Rawls). While it is indisputable that feminists see the family in political terms (crucially as a significant site of *power*), to represent the personal as political entirely in terms of (in)justice within the family is to overlook the politicization that this move entailed of other significant features of the personal realm. Questions to do with sexuality, the body, intimate relations, emotion and so on, are equally, if not more, relevant both to feminism as a *political* theory and to its critique of political theory in non-feminist mode. Indeed, the idea that the personal was political forced a rethinking of the very nature of politics and the

parameters of the political. Even within the very narrow framework of what comprises contemporary political theory adopted by Farrelly, feminist thinking had more radical effects — the ethics of care sought to displace the priority attached to dispassionate, abstract moral thinking with an alternative (supplementary) mode of reasoning that emphasized empathy, emotion and human inter-dependence. Yet there is no mention of this move here.

As one endorsement of the *Introduction* notes, *Contemporary Political Theory* is an ‘excellent teaching resource’ for those ‘many courses offering surveys of recent debates between liberals and their critics’ (back cover). I would qualify this further; it is an excellent resource for courses reviewing liberal theories of justice and their critics. On such courses, the *Introduction* and *Reader* would serve the students well. For courses that treat contemporary political theory as a rich and diverse field marked by significantly different modes of theorizing, however, they are far less useful.

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