



commitment to emancipation, truth and universality against the contemporary 'postmodern' *doxa* of finitude, finality and particularity. It is a philosophy and a politics that asserts in the face of all the nihilism of the modern world, the unconditionality of truth, the universality of justice, the 'immortality' of the subject and the ethical dignity of extraordinary events. All these themes are not only reflected in *Polemics*, but are mobilized in a concrete way around 'real world' situations. To see a philosopher who usually deals in the abstract formalism of set theory and Lacanian psychoanalysis, turn his attention to current events — and in a way that is approachable and at the same time highly sophisticated and militantly engaged — makes for fascinating reading.

References

Jacques, R. (2004) 'Aesthetics, Inaesthetics, Anti-Aesthetics', in P. Hallward (ed.) *Think Again: Alain Badiou and the Future of Philosophy*, London: Continuum, p. 218.

Saul Newman
Goldsmiths College, London, UK

An Introduction to Political Philosophy

Jonathan Wolff

Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2006 (revised edition), £16.09, xii + 215pp.
ISBN: 0 19 929609 X.

Contemporary Political Theory (2008) 7, 229–231. doi:10.1057/cpt.2008.1

Political philosophy is a field of study that has generated passionate debate for over 2,000 years. This popular political philosophy text allows the reader to negotiate the basic concepts of these debates. In straightforward language, fundamental issues of politics are explored in a systematic, easy to follow manner that make complex concepts accessible to the beginner. Drawing on the works of great political philosophers of the past, Wolff explores ideas of how and to whom material goods, rights and liberties are distributed, and who should hold the political power to decide and enforce such decisions.

The author begins his exploration of political philosophy by outlining conceptions of what the basic 'state of nature' would be like without governance. He demonstrates that these understandings shape one's justification of the presence of the state and what form it should take. The discussion is concluded with the declaration that: 'Nothing genuinely worthy of being called



a state of nature will, at least in the long term, be a condition in which human beings can flourish' (p. 33). This leads into a comprehensive discussion of the dominant understanding of what the state actually is, focusing on arguments put forward to justify it. Wolff asserts that the task of justifying the state is often actually that of arguing the existence of universal political obligations. It is a shame that this wasn't taken further by entering into the debate over the *legitimacy* of these universal claims, but instead remains within a modernist philosophical discourse. For example, post-structural perspectives and the work of theorists such as Saul Newman could have been included here to demonstrate the rejection of the metaphysical foundations of the universal conception of the subject and its absolute moral and rational positioning (2005, p. 2). The discussion, however, is concluded by conceding the problematic nature of political obligation due to the specificity of human beings, but this may be perceived as just paying 'lip service' to post-modern developments in political philosophy, as the author also states that when the state is structured on *moral* law, it can legitimately act universally to protect its citizens. Others such as Torffing emphatically assert that morality *cannot* serve as the foundation for political and ethical judgment (1999, p. 61). The inclusion of this type of theorizing would have offered more depth to the discussion while simultaneously unsettling the traditional frames of political legitimacy and philosophical debates.

The new edition of this book is prefaced with the opinion that the great philosophers of the past still have an important role to play in the present as their work provides illumination to many of the issues that continue to dominate the political landscape. There are other authors such as Kymlicka (2002) who assert that the modernist categories of political philosophy are proving themselves to be increasingly inadequate for theorizing contemporary political landscapes (p. 1). Cavarero (2004) even goes as far as to describe the political categories on which modernity were founded to be '...obsolete, cumbersome, useless' (p. 67). Despite this, Wolff explores the traditional fields of political philosophy in a very comprehensive manner. The book covers issues such as who should rule, and does this by engaging with the main themes, debates and tensions within democratic theory. Essential concepts such as the place of liberty in political philosophy and the justice of distribution are explored. Rawls' theory of justice is asserted as such a dominant one that those who reject his methodology need to explain why (p. 176). The impact Rawls' work has had upon theorizing justice is indisputable; however, considering recent intellectual developments that unsettle traditional understanding of justice this is perhaps a big claim to make.

The final chapter of the book is an extremely important one as it addresses the individualist framing of the philosophical questions raised within the book. In doing so, it acknowledges there *are* other ways of viewing political



philosophy. These are posited to rest on the belief that liberal individualism ‘offers a false picture of human nature and social relation, and with it a misleading and damaging vision of what it is possible for human beings to achieve politically’ (p. 182). The details are recognized to differ among opponents, but the most considered debates among them the author purports are coming from feminism. A basic summary of liberal feminism, including a discussion on affirmative action follows, which is then conceded as consistent with liberal individualist discourses. The rejection by some feminist factions of capitalism and traditional understanding of justice on the grounds that they are ‘gendered concepts’ is also explored here. These are well addressed, but do not offer an adequate representation of some of the radical arguments that challenge the epistemology of traditional feminism. For example, the inclusion of queer theory could have been useful in demonstrating the way deconstruction of gender and identity undoes the fixity of power relations. These developments are of fundamental importance to contemporary political philosophy as they reflect the complexities of modern political practices, relations and concepts.

The concepts upon which this book is founded are firmly positioned within the dominant modernist paradigm. This offers the reader a well-structured framework with which to navigate traditional political ideas and debates. To understand contemporary developments in political philosophy, it is highly beneficial to have a firm understanding of the theoretical positions from which they derive. This book offers the reader this strong foundation, making it an important beginner’s text. Perhaps however, a title more indicative of the content such as ‘An Introduction to Traditional Political Philosophy’ would be useful to the prospective reader who at some stage will undoubtedly also engage with the contemporary terms and debates that exist within the discipline of political philosophy.

References

- Cavarero, A. (2004) ‘Politicizing Theory’, in S. White and D. Moon (eds.) *What is Political Theory?*, London: Sage Publications, pp. 54–79.
- Kymlicka, W. (2002) *Contemporary Political Philosophy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Newman, S. (2005) *Power and Politics in Poststructuralist Thought: New Theories of the Political*, London: Routledge.
- Torffing, J. (1999) *New Theories of Discourse: Laclau, Mouffe and Zizek*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

Beth Hall
University of Canberra,
Canberra, Australia