

Political Philosophy and Public Purpose

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Aim of the Series

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Brian Caterino

The Practical Import of Political Inquiry

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*This book is dedicated to
Angelina Caterino (1922–2015) who passed away as this book was being
completed
And to Lori for all her support*

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SERIES EDITOR'S FOREWORD

The hegemony of analytic epistemology in mainstream social science and philosophy has been intensifying throughout the past two decades. Anyone perusing the flagship journals in sociology, political science, and economics knows all too well that the notion of social science increasingly makes pretenses to becoming a kind of natural science. As a result, abstruse mathematical and statistical models clog the mainstream journals. Behind this view is the basic assumption that human behavior can, and should, be conceived as operating under standard laws and patterns. There are innate tendencies that drive and shape our actions and, thus, our social reality. This has grown even more with the rise of cognitive scientific approaches to human behavior, and to the now pervasive view that the brain and behavioral science hold the key to any valid social–scientific approach to the realm of social and political reality. Marginalized now is the concept of critique: of the notion that social science should not simply be about understanding the mechanisms of behavior, but rather for the ethical enterprise of improving social life and enhancing social justice.

Ever since Hobbes' indictment of Aristotelianism, this tension between social science as an ethical–political enterprise on the one hand, and as a purely scientific endeavor on the other, has been a kind of intellectual battleground. Indeed, it was Max Weber who pushed this problem further by separating out the empirical and “scientific” aspects of social science from the practical, normative aspects of judgment with his neo-Kantian separation between “facts” and “values.” According to Weber, it was only by restraining our practical and normative commitments that we would be able to reach any kind of rational and scientific understanding of human

social facts. The place for applying our normative value commitments about how society should be was now to be cast into the realm of philosophy. This separation between facts and values has been particularly important in understanding how critical social science has been marginalized and how the analytic, empirical mainstream approaches have been able to consolidate their influence.

With this in mind, Brian Caterino's important study should help those who favor the former, but who also see the importance of theoretical reason. Caterino urges us not to fall into either a purely phronetic and judgment-based approach—advocated by Ian Shapiro, Bent Flyvbjerg, and Sanford Schram, among others—which emphasizes practical reason and engagement at the expense of rational and theoretical rigor even as he also seeks to import practical concerns into a theoretical understanding of social reality. A critical social science, therefore, is one that sees social actors as engaged in a reflexive exchange of reasons that constitutes a crucial starting point for inquiry. Social science does not commence from some privileged position, outside of the power relations and interpretive assumptions of the society as a whole. We cannot look, as the positivist does, for deductive laws that can explain in some causal sense social facts and social reality. Instead, we must look for the ways that interpretive schemes give shape to empirical facts. Caterino advocates for a practical political theory that overcomes the differentiation between expert and layman, as well as between theoretical reflection and reflexive self-constitution.

With this in mind, we can begin to see that political inquiry need not sacrifice theoretical rigor in favor of engaged concern over social problems. Instead, the orientation of political inquiry should now be directed toward the problems generated by the inquirer who is also at the same time a social participant. The critique of power and domination therefore becomes a matter of making theory accountable to the kinds of relations and structures that frustrate our communicative freedom and competence. Caterino's approach to the idea of a practical even critical form of political inquiry holds open for us the possibility of moving out from the ponderous weight of positivism, as well as the post-modern obsession with endless forms of power and domination. Rationality embodied in the world can now reveal for us the kind of political inquiry that can serve to illuminate as well as overcome the social problems that derive from domination and power relations. It is not the virtuoso theorist or the austere empiricist that emerges as the locus of critical reason for Caterino, but the rationality inherent in everyday life and discourse. With this bold and enlightened

vision in view, Caterino's important book should help us reinvigorate the concept of critique as well as rethink the future of the social sciences and its role in serving as the handmaiden of emancipatory social progress.

Michael J. Thompson
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