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*Between Philosophy and Politics: The Alienation of Political Theory* by John G. Gunnell

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new consensus (p. 311).

There are ironies in a collection of essays on
critical theory designed for a U.S. audience. The
ideas suffer more than a sea change as one reads that Consumer Reports represents a
critical negation of mass advertising, with no
recognition that the consumer project is more
rationally enhanced by the presence of such
reports. There is irony also in the critical
analysis of the Head Start program. While it
reveals the broader horizons possible for the
culturally deprived, little is made of the legiti-
mation function served by Head Start, and
there is no "critique" of the social reproduction
of capitalism that takes place in the midst of
this and similar programs. Perhaps Adorno
was ultimately right when he argued that the
only posture for critical theory is negation
without resolution. For, in the post industrial
age, it seems that a positive or practical ap-
lication of critical theory may lead uninten-
tionally to a new form of legitimation. The
essays in this volume inadvertently pose that
dilemma and deepen our interest in critical
theory.

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Between Philosophy and Politics: The Alienation
of Political Theory. By John G. Gunnell (Amherst: University of Massachusetts
Press, 1986. 240p. $25.00, cloth; $12.95, paper).

This trenchant work provides a "synthesis,
clarification, and elaboration" of arguments
made elsewhere by Gunnell alleging the "alienation" of academic political theory (p. ix). Not the first to suggest that dominant prac-
tices in this field are forms of intellectual
mutilation, Gunnell nonetheless presses this
central point with considerable zeal and with a
delightfully acid tongue. He is thereby sure
to provoke contention if not the "transformation" he desires.

Transforming the field requires an under-
standing of its present-day ills. Hence, the first
chapter offers a reconstruction of the intel-
llectual development (or rather devolution) of
the field over the last three decades in order to
identify a variety of historical forces that in
turn help account for the underlying cause of
the alienation of political theory today: its
entrapment in and by philosophical and meta-
theoretical discourse, or "its absorption with
metatheory" (p. 154), or (more creatively) its
"philosophization" (pp. 28, 31).

This dreaded disease engenders in political
theory a distorted and pretentious self-image.
Symptoms include the following: the subject is
ensnared in myths (identified on pp. 1 and
194); is unreflective about its parasitic relation-
ship to "the transcendental and epistemo-
logical traditions in philosophy which . . . are
themselves alienated enterprises" (p. 4); and is
unable to achieve an authentic appreciation of
its actual relationships to politics and political
inquiry. Though fruitful relationships are vir-
tually nonexistent, most theorists believe, or
pretend to believe, that their estranged and
rarefied discourse provides authoritative stand-
ards, foundations, and illumination for both
political practice and political inquiry, and on
which, therefore, both are or ought to be
dependent. They even believe, or make
believe, that much of this discourse, being in
some (distant) way about politics, is itself
political.

These illusions and delusions serve a variety
of purposes, but foremost among them is, of
course, the bolstering of self-image and of the
conviction that all this talk—about epistemol-
ogy, methodology, explanation, and interpre-
tation; about metaethics, normative founda-
tions, and facts and values; about the universal
dilemmas, fundamental concepts, and philo-
sophical dimensions of politics; about his-
toriography, hermeneutics, and the great
tradition of epic theorists—actually constitutes
an authoritative script for inquiry and an
authoritative and authentic "theoretical and
practical engagement of politics" (p. 138).

How might the patient be cured? Academic
theory "redeemed"? Discourse "transformed"?
Two prescriptions seem crucial. First, theorists
must come to recognize and freely admit that
political inquiry and politics are autonomous
practices, quite capable of getting along with-
out transcendental foundations and legimita-
tions. Second, they must rethink "what theory
is and can be in political theory." As we shall
see, taking this cure can help theorists "come
to grips with the question of the relationship of
academic political theory to politics," though
it cannot resolve this difficult problem (p. 135).

With respect to autonomy, Gunnell's posi-
tion is the contextualist one that criteria defining practices and standards of good practice are internal to practice; consequently, second-order reflection on practice, no matter how well performed, cannot be automatically authoritative (though it may be influential). This position means that science does not need metascience and that politics does not need metapolitics. Like science, politics has its own standards and theories, which may or may not be influenced by academics. But that most of what passes for political philosophy and political theory today could possibly affect practice, Gunnell very much doubts. To suppose it could would be to suppose that it took political practice as its object and that it had an audience with which to interact. In fact, however, it takes philosophical objects, projects, and perplexities and ascribes them to politics. Thus, Rawls's work and the cottage industry it has inspired “is not about any human practice; it is not about any state of affairs. It is about concepts and logic.” Similarly, MacIntyre assumes in After Virtue that moral relativism is a political rather than an academic problem, and that the latter is both the cause of the former “and the site of a solution” (pp. 176, 179).

What all this suggests is that political theorists should engage politics in the manner, for example, of that portion of the feminist literature that confronts an “existential problem . . . and that speaks to and for an actual audience” (p. 122). Such a prescription means only that metatheory, not substantive theory, be given up. Advancing substantive, constitutive, or ontological theory should be a primary task of academic political theory.

By substantive theory Gunnell means “that class of claims that establishes a domain of facility—what exists and the manner in which it exists—and provides the criteria of explanation, description, evaluation, and prescription” (p. 143). An example of such a theory, one on which Gunnell has been working for some years, is provided in the final chapter. It draws on theoretical (not metatheoretical) claims advanced in the philosophies of action and language, and thus postulates ontological claims about social phenomena that are familiar features of the literature on interpretive forms of social inquiry. It just happens to assert the conventionality of politics, thereby undercutting the contrary ontological positions of transcendentalists while underwriting an interpretive form of inquiry that would require taking conventional politics as its text.

Gunnell tries in this way to unite theory, inquiry, and practice. Because his (corrigible) theory entails the conventionality of politics, inquiry must proceed along interpretative lines. This in turn ensures that conventional politics will be the object of analysis, thus opening the possibility of practical engagement. By focusing on conventional political understandings and standards, the theorist just might find an audience interested in what he or she has to say. Of course efficacy is not guaranteed, but the alternative is hopeless. To continue the quest for transcendental political forms and standards is a sure loser even if such entities could be discovered. For these would resolve only transcendental crises and dilemmas and leave politics quite untouched.

It is this essentially political message that makes Gunnell’s position a compelling and timely one. Unfortunately, debate will focus on the metatheoretical, methodological, and theoretical claims he advances; the irony of this situation will be examined in great detail; protests aimed at his exaggerations and stinging rhetoric will be heard from many quarters; and the thundering political silence will continue.

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Aspects of Toleration: Philosophical Studies.
Edited by John Horton and Susan Mendus

John Stuart Mill’s On Liberty has set the context for modern discussion of the principle of toleration. Aspects of Toleration: Philosophical Studies, edited by John Horton and Susan Mendus, is a collection of essays that attempt to put Mill in the context of the 300 years that culminated in his seminal essay, to examine and to clarify his philosophical assumptions, and to link his work to contemporary issues.

The essays in the collection are reworked papers presented at seminars and conferences supported by the Morell Trust based at the University of York, England. All but one of the