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WE, THE POLITY

A new history of political thought.

By Adam Kirsch

Among the lodestars of Alan Ryan's book are Plato, Hegel, Machiavelli, Marx, St. Augustine, and Hobbes.

On November 6th, more than a hundred million Americans will go to the polls and choose between two Presidential candidates. If you live a full life span, you will get to vote for President about fifteen times before you die, and for members of Congress somewhat more often. In the opinion of almost all of us, this entitles us to say that we live in a democracy—a word that comes from the ancient Greeks, for whom a democracy was a government in which the people, the demos, ruled. If you are a member of the American demos, however, and ask yourself in what sense you really have a hand in ruling the country, the answer is not obvious. You can vote for a President, but you will almost certainly never get to be President yourself. Unless you are one of the few people to serve in elected or appointed office, you will never personally decide whether America should go to war or make peace; you will never draft a law or vote on its passage; you will never decide a constitutional case. You will never decide on zoning issues or tax rates, building projects or environmental policy.

Perhaps, once or twice in a lifetime, you will serve on a jury and help decide whether to send a person to prison—the only time you will experience what it means to have power over your fellow-citizens.

What would American government look like if it began from the principle that people in a democracy should exercise the levers of power individually and collectively? The fairest way to make sure that everyone had an equal chance to rule would be a lottery. Imagine, then, that on November 6th, instead of going to the polls, you opened your e-mail and found a message informing you that, for the next term of office, you would be a senator, or a mayor, or a city councilman. Of course, as Alan Ryan notes in “On Politics” (Norton), his magisterial new two-volume history of political philosophy, there are so many people in the United States that it would be hard to give everyone a chance to serve. If, in the next four years, every adult in New York City were to be mayor for an equal term, that term would be just twenty seconds long.

To avoid such absurdities, our jurisdictions would have to be much smaller: a city, or even a country, would have to contain no more than about twenty thousand citizens, to insure that every adult had a chance to hold power for a meaningful amount of time, at least once. Such small polities would be bound to come into frequent conflict, and much of our time would be spent fighting or preparing to fight; military service would be a prerequisite for political eligibility. Naturally, spending so much time fighting and thinking about politics would mean that we had much less time for making a living. So we would have to designate a class of people to do the work for us—ideally, robots, but, failing that, slaves, ones that we either bought or took prisoner in war. And if we were to exercise real power as rulers, no part of the government should be off-limits to any of us: we should be able to judge criminal cases, make laws, and choose generals, as the situation demanded.

In pursuit of democracy, then, we would end up with a society with immutable social hierarchies, without checks and balances or a separation of powers—a slave state in which the only life that mattered would be public life, and individual rights would be irrelevant. In other words, we would end up with an ancient Greek polis, a city much like Athens in its prime, in the fifth century B.C. For thousands of years, the West has admired Athens and paid tribute to it as the birthplace of democracy. Yet most of us

would find such a city not only undesirable but unfree and unjust. In achieving true democracy, we would come up with a form of government that violates what we think of as liberty.

This paradox was never more clearly stated than by the French politician Benjamin Constant, in his 1819 lecture “The Liberty of the Ancients Compared with That of the Moderns.” Speaking to an audience that had lived through the Revolution, the Terror, the Napoleonic Empire, and the restoration of the monarchy, Constant asked what sort of freedom modern people really valued. He argued that in the modern age liberty meant, primarily, freedom from coercion and interference. People want to be free from arbitrary imprisonment, free to speak their minds, free to choose their professions and associates. To the ancient Greeks and Romans, on the other hand, freedom meant something much more positive: freedom to participate in government decisions, to make laws and declare war and judge criminals. Yet this ancient liberty came at a price that we would find prohibitively high—“the complete subjection of the individual to the authority of the group.” A Spartan lyre player, Constant noted, once got into legal trouble for adding a new string to his instrument; how much less would a Spartan expect to have the freedom to marry for love, to set up in business, to stay home when others went to war?

Constant wrote, “The aim of the ancients was to share power among the citizens of a single country; that’s what they called ‘liberty.’ The aim of the moderns is to be secure in their private benefits; and ‘liberty’ is their name for the guarantees accorded by institutions to these benefits.” The error of the French Revolution, he argued, was that it expected modern individualists to build a Republic of Virtue as austere and demanding and total in its claims as any ancient polis. But life had changed too much for ancient institutions to serve modern men, who “should never be asked to make sacrifices in order to establish political liberty.” True happiness, he concluded, requires combining ancient and modern liberty, the immunities of liberalism with the commitments of democracy.

A book of the scope of “On Politics” can’t be reduced to a single theme. In more than a thousand pages, Alan Ryan, a longtime Oxford professor who now teaches at Princeton, undertakes to introduce the reader to most of the major political

thinkers in Western history, from Thucydides and Plato to John Dewey and John Rawls. “A colleague,” Ryan writes, “once described political theorists as people who were obsessed with two dozen books,” and at the heart of “On Politics” are accounts of the major works of Western political thought—by Aristotle, Cicero, Augustine, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Hegel, Mill, and Marx, among others. These share the stage with lesser or less explicitly political figures, including Dante (in his capacity as a theorist of universal monarchy), the English republican Algernon Sidney, and the Third World liberationist Frantz Fanon. As Ryan approaches the present, he also allows a number of political scientists and sociologists to join the pure philosophers, from Max Weber to David Riesman.

In general, Ryan’s itinerary is what you would expect from an Anglo-American professor of political theory: ample attention is paid to the drafting of the Constitution, for instance, while thinkers from the Continent are in greater danger of being omitted; there is little to nothing on Vico, Spinoza, Nietzsche, or Sartre. Ryan’s own intellectual focus is the liberal tradition—earlier this year, he published a collection of essays under the title “The Making of Modern Liberalism,” and he has written studies of sages like Dewey and Mill. The tensions of modern liberal democratic societies are the intellectual motor of the book. Thus the second volume, which covers the past three hundred and fifty years, is a good deal longer than the first, which covers the previous two thousand years. It is also more lively and intellectually engaging, as Ryan enters into the range of problems that continue to preoccupy us in the twenty-first century. Although Ryan, oddly, does not devote a section to Constant, it is clear that his lecture, which Ryan calls “a liberal sacred text,” is a cornerstone of the book.

Another way of framing Constant’s dualism, Ryan writes, is as a struggle for the soul of the West between ancient Greece and the Persian Empire. Historians looking for the turning point in Western history often point to the Battles of Marathon and Salamis, in the early fifth century B.C., when Greek armies and navies thwarted an invasion attempt by the much larger forces of the Persians. Persia was an absolute monarchy, its ruler known as “the Great King”; yet it was also a highly efficient state, capable of ruling a large territory and an ethnically various population. (As Ryan notes, the U.S. Postal Service’s slogan—“Neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night stays

these couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds”—is borrowed from Herodotus’ praise of the Persian messenger service, a triumph of effective bureaucracy.)

To live under the Persians was to enjoy the benefits of good government, but not the rights of free men. Herodotus relates that in 480 B.C., on the eve of an invasion of Greece, the Persian king Xerxes showed off his armies to the exiled Spartan king Demaratus. How could the loose alliances of Greek city-states, lacking a single master, possibly stand up to his own monolithic power, he asked? The Greek replied, “They have a master, and that master is Law, which they fear much more than your subjects fear you. Whatever this master commands they do; and his command never varies: it is never to retreat in battle, however great the odds, but always to remain in formation and to conquer or die.”

For Ryan, the stern liberty of the ancient Greeks represents an ideal that we are no longer certain we can aspire to. “Perhaps the modern world, modern politics, and the modern state were the delayed revenge of the Persian Empire on the victors of Marathon and Salamis,” he writes. Do we not value good government and private happiness more than the chance to govern ourselves and uphold public virtue? And, if so, is that necessarily a loss? The questions, raised in Ryan’s first pages, hover in the background throughout “On Politics,” and return with urgency in the last section, when he addresses the flaws and fears of liberal democracies after the Second World War.

From the Persian War to the Second World War is a long time, however, and, for much of that span, democracy didn’t play much of a role in how people thought about politics. Ryan describes “On Politics” as “a history of political thought,” which strikes a balance between the history of political philosophy in its narrowest definition and the broader history of the practice of politics—which might end up becoming simply a history of the world. By opening with historians such as Herodotus and Thucydides, rather than with Plato—the first political philosopher—Ryan makes clear his intention to place philosophy in its historical context, showing how given thinkers emerge from and react against the political worlds they inhabit. This is a difficult balancing act, as it is always hard to know which periods of history readers will need more information about: Ryan offers perhaps too much about papal-imperial rivalry in

the Middle Ages and not enough about the English Civil War, which was so crucial an influence on the thought of Hobbes and Locke.

As Ryan shows, this historically grounded approach goes, to some extent, against the grain of Western political philosophy, which exhibits a recurring tendency to imagine that a life without politics is the best life. This explains the paradox that Plato's "Republic," the fountainhead of political philosophy, is not so much a treatise on politics as an attack on politics. Plato, living in an Athens whose democratic whims had resulted in the disaster of the Peloponnesian War and the execution of Socrates, had little faith in the power of the people to govern wisely or well. When he imagined the perfect city, he entrusted its government to a carefully bred and educated caste of guardians who would rule so intelligently and selflessly that political disagreement would simply never arise.

Ryan observes, "The idea that 'the many' might have a legitimate interest in running their own lives just because they wish to is not one Plato entertains. This is an unpolitical politics, because the idea of legitimate but conflicting interests has no place." The city is conceived not as a forum for competing individuals but as itself a macrocosmic individual, a human soul writ large; and, just as a soul in harmony with itself is happy, so a city in which everyone knows his own role will be happy. The assumptions behind this vision are, Ryan shows, as much metaphysical as they are political, which is one reason "On Politics" ends up being such a long book: in most cases, a thinker's views of politics are indecipherable without his views of man, nature, and God. Only if we know what we are and why we are here can we decide how we should live together.

Perhaps the key division between classical and modern political thought is the pre-modern assumption that we are here for a purpose and have a stable nature. Aristotle, whose teachings were at the heart of Western political thought for two millennia, was much more willing than Plato to acknowledge that politics is a dynamic and historical process. Yet he, too, based his vision of the good city on strong beliefs about what was natural and good for human beings. He had no hesitation about relegating women to the domestic sphere, since only men were naturally fit for politics. He endorsed slavery on the ground that some people are unfit for self-rule. For adult male citizens, on the

other hand, politics was a necessary expression of their nature: “Man is by nature a political animal.” It followed that living in a polis was the best human life, enabling us to fulfill our true natures. The polis “grows for the sake of mere life,” he wrote, “but it *exists* for the sake of a good life.” This did not mean that democracy was the best form of government; on the contrary, Aristotle classified democracy as a corrupt version of politics, in which the resentful many claim power to expropriate the wealthy few. What he advocated was a balance between democracy and aristocracy, in which all the finest men had a chance to rule. Ryan reminds us that our concern for individual rights was alien to Aristotle: his question was not what rights every citizen has by virtue of being a citizen but, rather, what constitutional arrangements will produce a stable, successful government?

The classical idea of politics dominated until the rise of Christianity, which was based on a new idea of what was good for people. Ryan explains how St. Augustine’s “The City of God” radically revised notions of the purpose of existence. For Augustine, we are on earth only as pilgrims, travelling back to the God who placed us here for inscrutable reasons. It follows that nothing we do on earth, especially politics, is of ultimate value: “What difference does it make under what rule a man lives who is soon to die, provided only that those who rule him do not compel him to what is impious and wicked?” Seen from this point of view, the desire for glory and expansion, which the Roman world took for granted, becomes a case of what Augustine called *libido dominandi*, the lust for conquest. The most we can hope for is to live under a just ruler who keeps the peace. Meanwhile, as Ryan puts it, “deep matters, questions of the meaning of life and the ultimate rewards of virtue, must be settled elsewhere.”

Ryan suggests that modern political thought begins when such “deep matters” are not just exiled from the political sphere but deemed altogether unnecessary and fanciful—when politics is conceived not as a realm where human beings perfect their natures but as one where they express the flawed, fearful natures that we actually possess. For many historians, that means modern political philosophy begins with Niccolò Machiavelli, the Renaissance Florentine whose very name has become synonymous with a ruthlessly amoral analysis of human motives.

Machiavelli, who spent his career either in the service of the Florentine government or trying to get back into that service, insisted on “clear-sighted appreciation of how men really *are* as distinct from the moralizing claptrap about how they *ought* to be.” Both classical and Christian political thought held rulers accountable for the well-being of their peoples. Machiavelli, in “The Prince,” focussed entirely on what rulers had to do to get and keep power, which meant exploiting the fears and desires of their subjects—as in his famous maxim that “men should be either caressed or crushed; because they can avenge slight injuries, but not those that are very severe.”

For Ryan, however, Machiavelli is not so much the first modern thinker as the last classical one—he places him at the end of the first volume of “On Politics.” The honor of beginning the second volume belongs to Thomas Hobbes, who is the first philosopher to elicit in Ryan an obvious excitement and admiration. While Machiavelli’s work belonged to the venerable genre of advice manuals for princes—“The Prince” was, in part, a job application addressed to Lorenzo de Medici—Hobbes’s “Leviathan” was a self-conscious attempt to jettison the whole history of thinking about politics and start over. Hobbes intended to bring the demonstrative, deductive logic of geometry and natural science to an all too human field of study.

He started by dismissing all Aristotelian questions about the ultimate goal of politics. There is no greatest good for human beings, but there is, he thinks, a universally agreed-upon greatest evil, “sudden and violent death.” The problem is that we all have the power to inflict that evil on one another—even the strongest man can be murdered while he sleeps—and so we are forced to treat one another as standing threats. (Ryan notes that this logic was replicated on a global scale during the Cold War arms race.) As a result, life in the state of nature is “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.” Thus it is in everyone’s interest to establish a single, superior authority, which will stop us from killing one another. This is the origin of the state: we live politically not, as Aristotle thought, because we are sociable creatures but precisely because we are not.

The state established by such a compact is, by definition, unitary and omnipotent. Hobbes, who lived through the English Civil War, in the mid-seventeenth century, was convinced that any division of sovereignty—as, say, between king and parliament—was a recipe for division and disaster. In the terms of Ryan’s metaphor, Hobbes was a

Persian, not a Greek. Freedom, for him, was a matter not of positive participation in government but of being left to one's own devices: freedom is "the silence of the laws." A subject of the sultan in Constantinople, he argued, was no less free than a citizen of the republic of Lucca, which "wrote the word 'Libertas' in great letters on its walls." Each was free only to the extent that the state allowed him to be.

Ryan persuades us to see all subsequent political thinkers as, to some degree, responding to Hobbes's analysis of politics and of human nature. If we are to avoid Hobbes's conclusion about the necessity of an all-powerful sovereign, we have to come up with some more hopeful understanding of what people are like, and how they naturally interact with one another. For John Locke, later in the seventeenth century, that meant a strong belief in a natural law that human beings could apprehend and which governed their actions even in the absence of a state. For Hegel, it meant seeing history itself as a process with a goal, the achievement of a free and equal society governed by a rational bureaucratic state. For Marx, it meant a faith that human beings, liberated from the reign of private property and exploitation, would be able to live together in spontaneous harmony.

As Ryan approaches the present, rivals to liberal democracy drop out of the running—above all, Fascism and Communism, each of which gets a searching treatment. The book starts to home in on the challenges that face our kind of society. Since 1945, he writes, we have lived in a world where "there was no alternative to liberal democracy, but liberal democracy aroused no enthusiasm." As an admirer of Mill and Tocqueville, Ryan focusses on the danger that both of them saw in a mass democratic society: the likelihood that individuality will shrink before the onslaught of mediocrity and conformity, that we will settle for a "Persian" prosperity instead of demanding a "Greek" politics of active participation. The nineteen-sixties, Ryan argues, was the last time when a mass demand for more participatory democracy could be heard: one of the most recent documents he discusses is the Port Huron Statement, issued by the Students for a Democratic Society in 1962.

This emphasis might lead one to expect that Ryan would sympathize with Occupy Wall Street. Yet the political tradition that values personal independence and civil society above regimentation and the state can also give succor to conservative politics:

it is no coincidence that the Tea Party draws on the republican imagery of the American Revolution. Indeed, one of the valuable functions of a history like “On Politics” is to show how narrow a slice of the intellectual spectrum American politics currently fights over. It took two thousand years for universal suffrage to become even thinkable; today, anyone who challenged it would be considered silly or insane. It took centuries of religious war before the West arrived at a consensus on the separation of religion and politics; today, the party of the Evangelical religious right can coalesce around a ticket made up of a Mormon and a Catholic. Such consensus is a precious achievement, but it can also curb our sense of political possibility. If we are political animals, as Aristotle said, then we can’t understand ourselves without thinking about the way we have lived and might live politically. In that sense, “On Politics,” like the great works of philosophy it examines, constitutes a powerful brief against the unexamined life. ♦

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