

January 2012

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Recommended Citation

Janzen, Monica Greenwell (2012) "Review of "The Primacy of the Political: A History of Political Thought from the Greeks to the French and American Revolutions"," *Essays in Philosophy*: Vol. 13: Iss. 1, Article 24.

Book Review | *The Primacy of the Political: A History of Political Thought from the Greeks to the French and American Revolutions*

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Published online: 30 January 2012
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The Primacy of the Political: A History of Political Thought from the Greeks to the French and American Revolutions. Dick Howard; New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2010; 416 pages + preface, index, and glossary; \$34.50 paperback; 978-0-231-13595-5

The Primacy of the Political aims to cover much historical ground as it describes various political moves toward and away from democracy from the Ancient Greeks through the French and American Revolution. Dick Howard is interested in political thought as it wavers between what he calls “politics” and “antipolitics.” While he never gives a clear definition of these two terms, he implies throughout that politics is that which aims to govern citizens in a way that acknowledges equality and legitimizes its use of force to rule. The “antipolitical” then, denounces or corrodes such moves toward equality and legitimacy. Howard’s emphasis on political thought is couched in concrete examples from political history. In each chapter he focuses on thinkers of the time who seek to explain how authority is legitimized—establishing the elusive political or supporting the antipolitical. In this review I will focus on the main thinkers presented in each chapter. Howard is very thorough and offers many gems of insight. Yet, the book is dense and is more historical than philosophical; Howard often leaves out the analysis or further explanation for which a more serious student of philosophy may yearn. Still, Howard’s contribution is significant; he creates a cohesive picture of political thought as it vacillates between legitimate and illegitimate rule.

Howard sets the foundation for his entire book in chapter one. He outlines both Plato and Aristotle’s political theories and their quest to establish legitimacy. Here, he argues that

Plato's theory is largely antipolitical while Aristotle's is political. He then draws on this foundation throughout the book comparing different theories and thinkers to their Platonic or Aristotelian roots. Howard writes, "Plato's attitude toward democracy was influenced by what appears to be democracy's original sin: the trial and condemnation of Socrates... That verdict seems to prove the incompatibility of the philosophical quest for truth with the equal participation of citizens in the democratic city" (37). This is because for Plato, normal citizens cannot be trusted to decipher what is required for a good life. Knowledge about the good life requires philosophical expertise, or someone who has emerged from the "cave" to see the real world. Because Plato turns away from the participation of all citizens in the governing process, Howard argues that he promotes an antipolitics. Howard provides a masterful summary of Plato's arguments in *The Republic*. He writes:

The major difference between democracy and tyranny [for Plato] lies simply in the number of persons who rule, and the height of freedom coincides with the depth of servitude. The ground of his argument is his philosophical insistence that nothing but the rule of reason can create power that is legitimate and authority that is just. The strength of this philosophical imperative is shown by his ability to criticize all other forms of political life. The philosophical goal (more than his hatred for the regime that killed Socrates) in the last resort explains Plato's critique of democracy. But, his ideal city remains a thought construction; in this sense, it is an antipolitical utopia rather than a positive political form of rule. Plato sets philosophy and democracy, which were born together in Athens, on separate paths that will meet rarely in the course of human history (58).

In the same chapter, Howard turns to Aristotle who also played a powerful role in shaping political thought in Ancient Greece. Aristotle criticizes Plato's antipolitical ideas and aims to move in a different direction that embraces "unity, universality, and lawfulness" (61). As Howard carefully teases out Aristotle's political thought, he draws a rich distinction between Aristotle's rules for the household (the *oikos*) and the political (the polis). This distinction makes Howard's summary particularly insightful. The polis exists to help citizens achieve a good life while the *oikos* exists to help people get the material things they need to live. The poor must manage the day to day details of the *oikos* in order to gather the necessary materials to survive. The rich are able to leave these details to those who serve them and concentrate on fulfilling a good life—more theoretical wisdom. For Aristotle, this generates problems for a democracy, which is rule by all citizens, both wealthy and poor because they will pursue different goals dictated by their economic interests (76). For these reasons, Aristotle advocates a rule by a middle class (a polity) that is neither a democracy nor an oligarchy. His ideas are considered by Howard to be "political"—that is legitimate in the eyes of citizens—because a polity will

balance the needs of actual, particular citizens, despite their economic standing within society. The conclusions of this chapter became more obvious to me only after I had read further in the book. For this reason, I would have liked Howard to more explicitly draw his conclusions at this early point in the book.

In chapter 2 Howard focuses on three main thinkers to help him paint a picture of the rise and fall of the Roman Empire: Titus Livy, Polybius, and Marcus Tullius Cicero. Rome emerges as a world power as a republican democracy that aims to grant its citizens equality before the law and freedom to pursue their own interests. Yet, this political structure does not last and in the end Rome moves toward the antipolitical and to imperial rule. Livy, alive during this transition, writes about “the virtues of a people for whom political freedom was the ultimate value to which all must be sacrificed” (87). Howard explains through Livy that this freedom is grounded in law. While conflict existed between the various political players (patrician and plebian as well as senator and tribune), this conflict was regulated by the law and thus did not get out of hand.

Also in chapter 2, Howard examines Greek historian and philosopher, Polybius, whom he argues compliments Livy’s account. While Livy focuses on virtue, Polybius’s account gives more attention to the institutional structures of the Roman republic and how they balance power and avoid conflict, learning from their interactions, both positive and negative. The government consists of two co-consuls who inherit the powers of the monarch. Yet, this power is limited because each consul is able to veto the other and they have very restricted term limits. The Senate, which had previously been the advisor to the monarch, is made up of the patricians—or the aristocrats—and regulates revenue and expenses as well as construction projects (of which there were many). Polybius, according to Howard, argues that the Senate’s power is legitimized by its “capacity as an established and long serving institution composed of wealthy and admired patricians to look beyond immediate needs and personal political advantage” (106). The people then make up the “democratic element of the constitution” and have the power to ratify treaties as well as serve as jurors (106). Like Livy, Polybius seems to argue that this institutional balance of power works because “Romans accepted individual enrichment only by reputable means” (110). Yet, this reliance on those in power to serve the common good rather than their own individual good ultimately is a weakness of the Roman Empire.

Howard then looks to Cicero and his account of Roman power. Like Livy and Polybius, Cicero discusses both the morality required by the citizens and the structure of the government. Howard examines Cicero’s *On the Commonwealth* as well as *On the Laws*. He argues that, “the basis of both works is a stoic political theory that, in spite of Cicero’s political intent, gives them both an antipolitical orientation. In the first case, the politician is reduced to moral imprecations; in the second, the republic’s legal institutions leave no place for the citizen’s action” (113). Howard explains that Cicero believes that human

laws are only legitimate when they do not contradict natural laws. Because they are based on reason, Cicero seems to believe that everyone will embrace the law and when they do not, a decline in the empire is inevitable. This is another point where I would like to see more analysis by Howard. I can see that if citizens come to divergent conclusions about what is reasonable, they may be at a loss as to how to solve this dilemma. Howard is so familiar with this history; I would find it helpful for him to explain more fully why this is antipolitical.

Howard ends chapter 2 by discussing the turn toward Christianity and the ideas of Paul of Tarsus. As the Roman republic declines, Howard argues that Pauline Christianity steps in “to offer meaning where public life itself was stripped of significance” (118). Paul overturns the Jewish idea that adherence to rules is what gives life meaning and marks one as saved. Rather, for Paul, it is faith in God that leads one to a life rich in meaning and true salvation. Yet, despite his belief in the universality of Christ’s message, Paul does not challenge political structures of taxation or slavery. For Howard, this makes Paul’s political ideas antipolitical because, for Paul, legitimacy now resides in the spiritual world rather than the secular. Howard’s discussion of Paul serves as a bridge to his next chapter where he discusses the conflict between the sacred and the secular.

In chapter 3, Howard wrestles with the role of the church throughout medieval times and how church doctrine affects political life. Perhaps because he has prefaced much of this political thought as antipolitical in his closing remarks in chapter 2, in this chapter, Howard rarely points out when things are antipolitical. While he covers much ground and I find his synthesis of this material excellent, I again would like to see more overt analysis. Howard argues that just as all political institutions must establish some kind of legitimacy in the eyes of their subjects, so too must the church. Yet, the church must work to justify its authority in both spiritual matters as well as its control over secular life. It is in the secular world where things get sticky for the church and conflict arises with the secular authorities and the citizens themselves.

Howard begins chapter 3 by looking at St. Augustine of Hippo’s work *City of God*. Augustine argues that there is value to life and participation in the secular world, yet ultimately the Christian should be concerned with what is to come in the afterlife. On this view, the world is a sinful place that lacks meaning without faith. Yet, secular authorities are necessary to help citizens subdue their sinful nature, exercise virtue, and live according to God’s law. Howard writes, “To live according to God’s law means to love your neighbor not as you would love another person, but to love him in God’s way, universally, as a human being. This divine type of love is expressed also by punishing the sinner, disciplining the lazy student, or persecuting the criminal,” (130). Augustine develops just war theory as a way to explain why Romans initiated some wars—as a way to extend discipline and peace to unruly groups. Also, Augustine is not overly critical of social institutions such as slavery because he believes some people’s sinful nature needs

to be subdued. Howard then turns to those critical of the church—the Pelagians (who argue that people are free to pursue salvation despite original sin) and the Donatists (who argue that the purity of the church is compromised when they interfere with secular affairs). Augustine’s justification of church authority wins out, and the Donatists are outlawed. Still, questions about church authority persist. Howard writes, “Yet the millennium called the ‘Dark Age,’ from around 500 to 1500 CE, was not simply a period of stagnation; it was a span of time when conflicts were ripening, institutions were forming, and social life was being recomposed,” (137). Monasticism develops as a way for those seeking a spiritual life and knowledge to withdraw from the secular world. Yet, this way of life proves to bring prosperity and power to monasteries that sometimes pervert this goal. At the same time, the problem of investiture arises where secular authorities aim to appoint church leaders, universities develop as place to train secular leaders for political functions, and, the rediscovery of Aristotle’s work challenges some of the Platonic ideas of Augustine. St. Thomas emerges as leader of the church who attempts to legitimize its authority and unite the secular and sacred by drawing on this “new” Aristotelian influence. Thomas outlines four types of law—eternal law, natural law, human law, and divine law. Howard writes, “The interrelation of these four types of law apparently permits Thomas to overcome the distinction between the secular and the sacred... human laws regulate only external behavior, not private thoughts and intentions. As a result, human law is limited to the public sphere; the rest of man’s existence...remains the province of divine law,” (149-150). Like Augustine, Thomas believes that human laws are necessary to help humans act virtuously and overcome sin in accord with divine law. Yet, God’s presence in the secular world is also necessary because without it human society would be impossible due to human’s corrupted nature. Howard then turns to those who dissent—John Duns Scotus, William of Ockham, and Marsilius of Padua. He argues that these thinkers reject the unity of the sacred and secular that Thomas worked to achieve and move political theory out of the Dark Age and toward the Reformation, which he takes up in the next chapter.

Chapter 4 deals primarily with the Renaissance and Reformation. Howard notes that while the Renaissance is usually associated with the secular world and political ideals and the Reformation is associated with spiritual renewal and antipolitical ideals, he believes they are both a type of renewal of a purer past. He examines Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Niccolo Machiavelli claiming that all three thinkers “shared the premise that the legitimacy of men’s relations to one another (and to God) was to be sought in their behavior in this world,” (163). Howard first explain the move toward humanism—the belief that people can achieve salvation through their own actions—as a way to provide background for Luther’s ideas. Luther rejects this aspect of humanism and holds that it is through God’s grace that humanity finds redemption. Howard places Luther in the Augustinian-Platonic camp on a “quest for purity rather than the more intellectual Thomist-Aristotelian search for a synthesis of religion and the world,” (166). Luther, tired of corruption and searching for spiritual purity, has two main beliefs that will define

his actions: only faith can bring salvation and truth is found in scriptures only (167-168). This leads Luther to post the *Ninety-five Theses* for which he is famous. When Luther will not take back his beliefs, he is excommunicated by the church. Yet, Luther's message continues to spread due to new printing technology available at the time. Despite the firmness of his beliefs, Luther must still grapple with how this plays out in the world. Howard wonders: "Can worldly power reform sacred institutions?" (170). Like Augustine, Luther concludes that true Christians will act according to the word of God, but secular law is necessary to bind the unjust to God's law. Furthermore, the Christian doctrine to love one's neighbor forces the Christian to accept secular authority which helps rule a neighbor who may not be Christian.

John Calvin, on the other hand, takes up the Thomist-Aristotelian position. Howard writes, "Calvin's theology was built around an ecclesiology that legitimated the reformed church as the mediator between the divine and the profane, the sacred and the secular. In this way, it replaced the one-sidedness of the Lutheran understanding of the political but opened itself to the danger that the Calvinist church would destroy the autonomy of political life by enfolding it in ecclesial life," (181). Calvin's faith was rooted in his belief in predestination, which means a believer is predetermined to be saved regardless of her actions on earth. Instead of leaving the political world to be cared for by others, the Calvinist goes out into this world and is involved in it. Calvin argues that there are three main actors involved in politics: the magistrates (the guardians of the law), the laws themselves, and the people (who follow laws that must not conflict with God's dictates) (183). On this basis, Calvin wonders whether the people have the right to disobey tyrannical laws. Although Calvin ultimately concedes that the best hope for citizens in the face of tyranny is that God will punish the unjust, Howard argues that this idea lays the foundation for John Locke (whom he discusses in chapter 5).

In chapter 4, Howard also examines Machiavelli, whom he argues belongs in chapter 4 because he offers an investigation of "pure theory" (189). Howard claims that Machiavelli is aware that power is distinct from force and that power must be legitimated. He further asserts that Machiavelli's ideas can rightly be claimed to be *amoral*, but not necessarily *immoral*. "Although Machiavelli never states it explicitly, this basic insight guides his thought: politics is necessary because society is never fully reconciled with itself, harmony is never permanent, unity cannot be total. That is why he does not offer political advice to actual or potential rulers, but instead warns against political illusions that blind the rulers or the people to the existence of conflict, passions, and interests," (194). Howard argues that these illusions are the foundation of antipolitics. He claims that for Machiavelli, the prince must avoid these illusions. Howard claims that Machiavelli's aim in *The Discourses* is different: "In the place of the illusory quest for a republican prince who could unify a divided society, freedom is now to be both cause and effect of republican politics," (200). Machiavelli wonders about the role of a modern, civil religion that can bring freedom and political legitimacy to a republic. Howard

adeptly notes that this will be fruit for thought for Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whom he discusses next.

In chapter 5, Howard takes up the philosophies of Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In this chapter, political thinkers turn away from the sacred and attempt to find a way to truly legitimize secular rule. To achieve this end, these thinkers all propose social contract theories; in other words, they imagine what life for humans might be like before civil society (in a state of nature) and under what conditions people might give up their lawless freedom to enter civil society. These theories pivot on self interest rather than appeals to morality or divinity. Natural laws for these thinkers are laws that we determine through our human reason that govern us in state of nature; they are not related to the divine. Yet, as Howard shows, each social contract theory presented in this chapter is very different from the others. I particularly enjoyed Howard's discussion Hobbes and Locke because he does an excellent job of comparing and contrasting their views.

Hobbes, developing a more antipolitical Platonic theory, is both rationalist and materialist. Although humans are roughly equal in Hobbes's state of nature, they live in constant fear and antagonism of one another. They are unable to amass private property and must continually seek to increase their power over others. To escape this state of war, the people create a contract with one another (excluding the sovereign), to live according to the dictates of an absolute, all-powerful ruler who will force them to comply with laws. Locke, on the other hand, follows a more Aristotelian direction. In his *Second Treatise on Government*, Locke describes a more moderate state of nature where humans suffer from inconveniences, rather than all out war. People are even able to acquire property without the help of an organized civil society. Howard writes, "Unity cannot be imposed on a modern political society from above—for instance, by the force of an absolute monarchy; political unity [for Locke] is instead represented by the will of the majority as it emerges from the interplay of diverse interests arising from the coexistence of different kinds of property in the state of nature," (238). Yet, despite its aim toward diversity and away from absolutism, Howard still argues that Locke's theory is antipolitical. Howard claims that while Locke's political theory maintains people's private property and freedoms, it fails to properly address tyranny and how the government can preserve rights in the face of this tyranny (245). Finally, Howard turns to Rousseau's social contract theory, which Howard claims is misinterpreted by the French Revolutionaries who use it to justify the Terror. For Rousseau, humans "alienate" their natural freedom in order to become politically equal to one another. People maintain their own particular wills and desires (the "will of all"), but also gain a perspective as a citizen committed to a common good of the whole (the "general will") which can never err (252). The general will is what makes the laws; the government is charged with carrying out the general precepts of the general will and applying it to particular cases. Rousseau does not argue for a democratic government because the people will be unable to apply the more general precepts to

particular cases without involving their own self interests. Thus, for Rousseau, only the most virtuous citizens should apply the laws to particular cases. Howard argues that this is where the French Revolutionaries misappropriate Rousseau. Revolutionaries claimed that they were virtuous citizens applying the particulars of the unerring general will (267). In this chapter, I would have liked to see more analysis by Howard about whether or not Rousseau's theory was antipolitical or not. While I appreciated his historical analysis of Rousseau and how his theory affected the French Revolution, I am still interested in Howard's insight into how Rousseau measures up with Hobbes and Locke.

Although much new material is presented in chapter 6, Howard begins this chapter by briefly summarizing what he has done so far in the book and linking it to the content of this chapter. Here he gathers the antipolitical strands he has discussed, points to why they are antipolitical, and alludes to how the antipolitical changes with the emergence of new ideas discussed in chapter 6. He writes:

The antipolitical philosophy that began with Plato opposed an ideal world to a real one. Whether Plato's Ideas, Augustine's City of God, Luther's Christian prince, or Hobbes's absolute monarchy, there was always a gap between the fact and the norm, the particular and the universal, the real and the ideal. A similar distinction is present in those aspects of the Aristotelian tradition that were at times tempted by antipolitics. Classical antipolitics was philosophical; whether Platonic or Aristotelian, it enclosed the particular within the universal. As modern individualism became the shared premise of citizens and philosophers alike, a change occurred. Now all of the sources of antipolitics are found within the world itself. Classical transcendence is replaced by modern immanence. As a result, modern antipolitics is antiphilosophical; it tries to universalize the particular, to absolutize the individual, and to value tradition over reason. The invention of political economy [by Adam Smith], the revolutionary overthrow of the ancient regime [in the French Revolution], and the emergence of conservative thought [by Edmund Burke] as a reaction to those two transformations may have brought political thought to the end of its possibilities. (273)

Thus in chapter 6, Howard wonders whether this is the end of political philosophy. He begins this discussion with Adam Smith and the idea of a political economy. He summarizes not only Smith's *Wealth of Nations* but also his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. He explains how Smith develops his ideas about division of labor and how these ideas lead to a change in the role of government. It is the desire for profit and efficiency that unify society and propel it forward. The role of government is only national defense, to create and maintain public works, and to protect citizens from injustice (286). Howard claims that the economy is now political—and this fact is antipolitical. Howard then

examines to the antipolitics of the French Revolution. This section of chapter 6 is a bit complex, as Howard does not track one main political thinker, but the many ideas that influenced this tumultuous time. He discusses the decline of the French monarchy and the ideas that lead up to the Revolution. In particular, he examines Jacobinism led by Robespierre. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the Revolutionaries attempt to follow the general will but tolerate no resistance to this will. They focus on future promises and ignore the means to achieve this future. Howard claims that as citizens grapple with current problems, they are sometimes led to examine the past. This is precisely what Edmund Burke does as he develops conservatism, which Howard also labels as antipolitical. Howard points out that conservatism emerges in conjunction with revolution, as conservatism seeks to critique revolution with the “tools of judgment and prudence, instructed by experience, tempered by tradition, and nurtured by history,” (310). Yet, in the end, Burke’s ideas are antipolitical because they do not promote a political alternative to revolution and they are absolute. Howard now turns to the aftermath of the American Revolution; specifically, he examines the contributions of the Federalists—defenders of the new American constitution. Howard does not specifically state that this is a move toward the political, but he uses this examination as a way to answer the question of chapter 6 in the negative; is this the end of political philosophy? The answer is no. The arguments contained in *The Federalist* (written by James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and John Jay under the name “Publius”) balance the need for individualism and diversity with the unity of a republic. It is political (as opposed to antipolitical) because it explains how a balance of powers is to work in America; it combines “popular sovereignty and political representation” (325). Howard stresses the election of Thomas Jefferson because it is the first peaceful passage of political power between opposed political parties in history. Thus, the new American republic does not fall apart when opposing ideas are presented. Rather, it is strengthened by political dialogue and the emergent theory.

Howard offers only a brief conclusion to his long, detailed book. He argues that his book can serve as a guide to political as well as antipolitical thought as it has emerged through history. He writes, “...the study of the past can free us from illusions about both the possibilities and the limits of the present. Above all, that study makes clear the impossibility of eliminating the political. As a result, it encourages the search for the modern form that the political might adopt...” (330). I wondered at times why Howard focused on certain thinkers while omitting others. While this explanation would be interesting to me, I can also understand why he does not include it here. This text is thick with information and the main thinkers he presents here do tie together to tell a story of how the political gives way to the antipolitical. I liked how they built upon one another and Howard was able to maintain the threads of Platonism and Aristotelianism throughout. As I stated earlier, I would have liked to see conclusions more explicitly drawn and terminology more overtly defined; doing this would have satisfied my desire for a deeper understanding of Howard’s insights. So much historical ground is covered

that the philosophical analysis of this history is sometimes understated or left out. Yet, I do not think it is a fault of the book to have omitted this deeper analysis. Perhaps more analysis may have made this book more complicated and dense. Howard has met his stated goal of outlining many major strands of political theory from ancient times through the French and American Revolutions. I would recommend his book for the serious reader of history who wants to have a comprehensive picture of political thought.