



The Strange Silence of Political Theory: Response

Author(s): Seyla Benhabib

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4. On this point, see Robert Skotheim, *Totalitarianism and American Social Thought* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1971).

5. Michael Doyle, "Kant, Liberal Legacies, and Foreign Affairs, Part I," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 12, no. 3 (Summer 1983): 205-35; Doyle, "Liberalism and World Politics," *American Political Science Review* 80, no. 4 (December 1986): 1151-69.

—*Michael Gillespie*
Duke University

Michael Gillespie is professor of political science at Duke University. His books include Hegel, Heidegger, and the Ground of History, Ratifying the Constitution (an edited volume with M. Lienesch), and most recently, Nihilism before Nietzsche. He specializes in political philosophy with a particular interest in continental political philosophy and, secondarily, American political thought.

RESPONSE

JEFFREY C. ISAAC'S PIECE is a heartfelt battle cry. Although the "strange silence" of North American political theory in face of the momentous transformations of 1989 had not escaped my notice, I am genuinely taken aback by the statistics Isaac has compiled: "in the four years following the revolutions of 1989 political theorists published a total of 384 articles, of which a mere 2—roughly one-half of one percent—dealt with dramatic current events of earth-shattering importance" (p. 637). How can we explain this, Isaac asks? His answer ranges over a wide spectrum of considerations, from reflections on the nature of the transformations following 1989 to a defense of the significance for political theory of the output of major Central European writers like Vaclav Havel, Georg Konrad, Adam Michnik, and Jacek Kuron. Turning his gaze home, Isaac indicts American political theory as a thoroughly professionalized academic subdiscipline, caught in scholastic commentary on the past, and adverse to first-order inquiry.

I feel great sympathy for the questions that Isaac is raising, and I applaud the no-nonsense candor with which he has done so. Two issues deserve further reflection: what I shall call the "noncontemporaneous contemporaneity of events of 1989," and what Isaac has named "the aversion of contemporary North American political theory to first-order inquiry."

*THE NONCONTEMPORANEOUS
CONTEMPORANEITY OF 1989*

To position my own thoughts on these matters, let me provide a narrative. Between 1986 and 1992, I was the coeditor-in-chief, together with Sveta Stojanovic, of *Praxis International*. This international journal was reestablished in 1981 by Richard J. Bernstein, Juergen Habermas, Charles Taylor, and Albrecht Wellmer to aid Yugoslav colleagues Mihailo Markovic, Sveta Stojanovic, Zagorka Golubovic, Rudi Supek, and Gajo Petrovic, who, through various means, had been removed from their teaching posts in the universities in the last years of the Tito regime. The original *Praxis International* had been one of the most important European publications, heralding "Marxist humanism" and "democratic socialism" in the European context in the early 1960s. The intellectuals of the then unified Yugoslavia had a particularly important role to play in the formation of this "Marxist humanist" discourse; the revival of the journal in the early 1980s was an act of solidarity with those who had earlier contributed to the emergence of a dissident Marxist discourse.

The all-too-frequent difficulties and tensions we experienced in the course of this publication may shed some light on why it is so trying for North American, and a considerable number of West European, intellectuals to bring together reflections on 1989 with their own contemporary political experiences. From the start, it was clear that great tensions existed among editorial board members regarding the viability and desirability of certain theoretical orientations: many considered the discourse of Marxist humanism obsolete at best, dangerous at worst; others found the heavy critical theory bent of some of us, particularly toward the Habermasian paradigm, too academic and politically irrelevant. There was a large group of women interested in issues of feminism within *Praxis International*; our work was tolerated and at times encouraged, very often in the spirit of old-fashioned "united front progressivist" ideology. Nonetheless, it was in the pages of *Praxis International* that most of the essays constituting the collection *Feminism as Critique*, which I coedited with Drucilla Cornell in 1987, were published.

In 1992, the editorial board of *Praxis International* reached the decision to terminate publication of the journal. By then, the always simmering Yugoslav conflict had burst out into the open and had assumed the proportions of civil war. Many of us felt that the wool was being pulled over our eyes by our colleagues in former Yugoslavia in what they were or were not publishing in the pages of the journal about conditions in their own country. The question of nationalism was too hot to touch; and because of our distance from the

events, on at least one occasion we published a piece on the Kosovo crisis by Mihailo Markovic, which, now in retrospect, I consider racist-nationalist propaganda.¹ Furthermore, conflicts emerged among the various East European intellectuals themselves represented on the board. In particular, intellectuals like Agnes Heller, Ferenc Feher (both of whom subsequently resigned from the board), and Andrew Arato thought that the Marxist humanist discourse of some Yugoslav colleagues was but a front for the continuation of authoritarian, cryptocommunist political tendencies. Unfortunately, the actions and involvements of Mihailo Markovic, at one time one of the leading voices in the journal, subsequently adviser to President Slobodan Milosevic, and a theorist of the "great Serbia" dream, proved the misgivings of these colleagues correct. In 1993, in full recognition of the desirability of continuing some project of collaboration with East Central European intellectuals, some of us started a new journal called *Constellations: An International Journal of Critical and Democratic Theory*. I would like to think that we are trying to do at least some of the things that Jeffrey Isaac identifies as being essential to contemporary political theory.²

Although we should all be seriously reflecting on "the 'meanings' of . . . 1989" (p. 637), nearly ten years of collaboration with East Central European dissidents and intellectuals has proven to me that it is not easy to do so. Isaac minimizes how long and deep historical memories run in these countries, and how difficult it is to attain the knowledge of history, social structure, and culture which frames the discourse of intellectuals like Vaclav Havel, Adam Michnik, Jacek Kuron, and Georg Konrad. We cannot simply wander into these territories, without knowledge of their languages, histories, cultures, and social structures, and extract "meanings out of 1989." Precisely the kind of attention to first-order work that Isaac advocates for political theory in general should make us a little timid in venturing to interpret all too quickly the political experiences and events of these societies.

More significant than issues of cultural-linguistic familiarity, historical memory, and local knowledge, which after all, as Isaac points out, affect all forms of comparative social research and philosophical reflection, is one I would like to name the "noncontemporaneous contemporaneity of 1989." I borrow this phrase from Ernst Bloch, who introduced the term "ungleichzeitige Gleichzeitigkeiten." Our present moment, since 1989, harbors many ironies, contradictions, and perplexities. Looking back and forth across the Atlantic, I am struck by the fact while the cultural and political ideals of modernity, and among them what Richard Rorty has called "the metanarratives of liberal democracies," have become suspect to the political, cultural, and literary avant-garde of Western late-capitalist societies, it seems like people in

Central Eastern Europe took to the streets and fought for the establishment of liberal parliamentary democracies, free-market capitalism, and tolerant societies open to individual ambition and self-unfolding. Let us face it: after two decades of poststructuralist, post-Foucauldian, psychoanalytic, feminist, postcolonial discourse, there is a great deal of suspicion about these ideals among oppositional intellectuals in the United States, and even greater resentment at being told that the world historical mission of 1989 is the restoration of liberal capitalism.

The peculiar form of identity politics and its aftermath, which have dominated in the United States in particular, have created a literature of great distrust toward the legacy and meaning of the rule of law, liberal democracy, and free-market economies. Although this post-Foucauldian, poststructuralist culturalist Left considers itself antiauthoritarian and certainly antitotalitarian, it is deeply distrustful of what appears as the "neoconservative" restorationist spirit of 1989. From the standpoint of the feminist, postcolonial, deconstructive critique of the subject of rights and of the ideal of the democratic citizen, the discourses of Havel, Konrad, Michnik, and Kuron sound indeed as "restorative discourses," articulated at the level of a humanism of which many have grown suspicious.³ Conversely, viewed from the perspective of European intellectuals, the discourse and practice of identity politics in this country sounds like mindless group psychology, the return of a different kind of tribalism, and the rejection of what is best in the American liberal-democratic tradition.⁴ This, I think, is the deeper reason why our radical intellectuals have not been so anxious to reflect on the meanings of 1989. As Gayatri Spivak once said to me, "every time I hear East European intellectuals talk about the ideal of Europe and of defending Europe, I get nervous. Who are they defending this Europe against? Who are they excluding?" Europe has its "others": the guest workers and their children; the Algerian, North African, and other post- and ex-colonials of France, Great Britain, and the Netherlands; the asylum seekers like the Kurds; the war refugees from former Yugoslavia, and so on. So far, we do not know how to put together in theory and practice these divergent and, on the surface, incompatible political moods, movements, and analyses.

Yet it is wrong to interpret the revolutions of 1989 in East Central Europe as an uncritical restoration *tout court* of liberal democracies and free-market economies. Rather, one can follow events in these societies as revealing also the inherent tensions and contradictions among three sociohistorical ideals and projects, which are often listed as if they were one: liberalism, democracy, and a free-market economy. In a recent interview in *Constellations*, Adam Michnik stated, "Democracy is a question of elections, after which the

majority sets up a government. Liberalism is a question of human rights, the rule of law, and the protection of the rights of minorities under majority rule. The culture of democracy is a problem of compromise, agreement on the rules of the game, of the peaceful coexistence of different communities and interests. . . . I am a 'radical democrat,' like Jürgen [Habermas is meant here], because I find that all the values of socialism, of the left, are values that remain relevant today, but the institutional propositions are different. In the new institutional conditions, I want to defend values that are in the left tradition."⁵

The "new institutional conditions" that Michnik is referring to include not only those of the rule of law, a multiparty system, and liberal democracy, but also the *reality of the global capitalist economy*. Michnik's statement is significant because it does not confuse the political project of liberal democracy with the economic project of attaining social justice under conditions of a global capitalist economy. Whereas conservative defenders of capitalism collapse the political and the economic projects into one, the cultural Left critics of capitalism see little possibility of salvaging the project of liberal democracy from its entanglement in the spread of global capitalism. Thoughtful voices from East Central Europe are telling us, though, that we need to distinguish the political project of liberal democracy from a mindless vindication of free-market capitalism.

However, the lessons of identity politics for the project of liberal democracy in East Central Europe are not insignificant either. Many of these societies, like Hungary, the Czech and Slovak republics, Bulgaria, Romania, Poland, and of course, tragically, all the states of former Yugoslavia, have significant ethnic, religious minorities and nationalities living among their borders. The problems of cultural, national, linguistic, and religious difference are posing as significant a challenge to these societies as are the restoration of liberal democracy and the attainment of certain standards of material welfare. The Bulgarians have their Turkish minority; the Czechs and the Slovaks do not quite know what to do with the gypsies within their borders; Poland is still struggling against traditions of clerical as well as popular anti-Semitism; Hungary has, in addition to a gypsy population, German-speaking communities within its borders. At the moment, the discourse of intellectuals in these countries tends to be "civic nationalist"; however, signs of more ultranationalist revival are evident in Hungary as well as Slovakia. Anti-Semitism, confused with frequent anticommunist sentiment, and partially directed against the prominent position played by Jewish intellectuals in the Left parties of these countries since the nineteenth century, is present everywhere. Reflections on the meaning of 1989, for them as well as for us, will have to involve some hard questions about how to attain cultural, ethnic, religious, and linguistic pluralisms. The murderous cycle of

nationalisms, erupting in the former republics of the Soviet Union and still tearing Yugoslavia apart, must end.

THE OBSOLESCENCE OF SOCIAL THEORY

Isaac observes that contemporary political theory is marked by a strong aversion to “first-order inquiry.” This is an important and timely observation. We are experiencing the obsolescence of social theory in the tradition of Durkheim, Marx, Weber, Talcott Parsons, the Frankfurt School, and also of John Stuart Mill and de Tocqueville. Radical discourse appears to have abandoned institutional and societal critique and to have lodged itself in “cultural studies.” The distinction between text and context has collapsed; the lines between history and storytelling are more tenuous than ever. The concept of social structure sounds like a leftover from *Jurassic Park*; representation has swallowed up structure. The kind of reflection upon Left ideals in new and changed institutional contexts, which Michnik talks about, is not taking place, precisely because institutional critique has lost its erotic appeal. Why?

In the first place, the more political and less metaphysical the contemporary project of political liberalism got, all the more did it distance itself from institutional analysis. For better or for worse, the fathers of liberalism like John Stuart Mill worried about institutional design. Mill’s rather naive reliance upon an Auguste Comte-inspired model of positivist social science went hand in hand with his serious reflections on representative government. Contemporary liberalism has lost its moorings in this wider tradition of social science and social theory.

Second, the “poststructuralist” hermeneutics of suspicion were developed initially in France as a reaction to the nausea experienced by French intellectuals vis-à-vis the structuralism of Claude Lévi-Strauss and the Marxist orthodoxies of Louis Althusser. As justifiable as this initial critique of the concept of “structure” may have been, translated into social theory, it harbors disaster. The distinction between social action and social structure, between agency and its constraining conditions, is an analytical one in social theory. Dissolve structure into chains of signification or patterns of representation and what you have is a form of cultural studies radicalism that thinks that all is possible in society under all conditions and at all times.

Last and not least, into the vacuum left by the decline of Marxist and liberal social theory have flown varieties of rational choice models. Combining brilliant pyrotechnics in formal modeling with near contempt for historical

narrative and situated social analyses, this prestigious paradigm is catching like hay fire in social science departments in American universities. But this paradigm also loses social structure from sight in that it proceeds from a model of social motivation divorced from sociohistorical context and explicable in terms of decontextualized and idealized rational choice theorems.

Political theory is not practiced in a vacuum; these trends are deeply affecting our discourse, research, and reflections and are indeed forcing us, even if not always, a good deal of the time, into a new kind of textual scholasticism. Isaac's call to "open ourselves up to the dramatic political experiences of our time" (p. 650), will be heeded only if we can also recuperate this lost tradition of social theory in the contemporary context.

NOTES

1. Cf. Mihailo Markovic, "The Tragedy of National Conflicts in 'Real Socialism' The Case of the Yugoslav Autonomous Province of Kosovo," *Praxis International* 9, no. 4 (January 1990): 408-25. Markovic considers the rights of the Albanian majority in the province of Kosovo; discusses the Serbs' historical attachments to these lands, as well as the long history of these two groups vis-à-vis fascism and communism. He concludes that neither abolishing the autonomous province of Kosovo nor *decoupling* of this province from the then united Yugoslavia would be feasible. He calls for "a coming to one's senses" for the people in the region; a renunciation of Serbian claims over Kosovo, but for a carrot-and-stick approach which would try to encourage "family planning" such as to "prevent overcrowding of Kosovo" for the Albanian majority (p. 424). This "must be done in a gentle, psychologically acceptable way, and by Albanians themselves, using primarily educational means" (p. 424). The Albanian majority in Kosovo, in other words, must limit its size and future growth, and must accept to be administered to in enlightened fashion, with the appropriate educational means of propaganda, by the Serbian-dominated government. This article exhibits the tragic mixture of forward-looking social engineering (use of monetary incentives to control birth rates) with paternalistic racism (if the Moslem Albanians do not stop reproducing at this rate, they will never be able to advance themselves economically).

2. See the last issue of *Praxis International*, "The Rise and Fall of Yugoslavia: Stations of a European Tragedy," ed. Andrew Arato and Seyla Benhabib, vol. 13, no. 4 (January 1994); *Constellations: An International Journal of Critical and Democratic Theory*, special issue on "The Return of the Left in Central Europe?," ed. Andrew Arato and Dick Howard, vol. 2, no. 1 (April 1995).

3. Two volumes best illustrate some of these issues; they portray as well the difficulty of mediating this kind of cultural critical discourse with any concrete analysis of institutions, macrosocial practices, and policies. See the contributions by Helene Cixous, Julia Kristeva, and Edward Said to the volume *Freedom and Interpretation. The Oxford Amnesty Lectures of 1992*, ed. Barbara Johnson (New York: Basic Books, 1993); and *Feminists Theorize the Political*, ed. Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott (New York: Routledge, 1992).

4. See the moving piece by Umberto Eco, "Ur- Fascism," *The New York Review of Books* 42, no. 11 (June 22, 1995): 12-6. Eco ends with the words of F.D.R. from November 4, 1938: "I

venture the challenging statement that if American democracy ceases to move forward as a living force, seeking day and night by peaceful means to better the lot of our citizens, fascism will grow in strength in our land.”

5. Andrew Aarato and Dick Howard, “Interview with Adam Michnik,” *Constellations* 2, no. 1 (April 1995): 10.

—*Seyla Benhabib*
Harvard University

Seyla Benhabib teaches political theory in the Government Department of Harvard University. Her book, The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt, will appear in 1996 from Sage Publications in the Modernity and Political Theory series edited by Morton Schoolman.

REJOINDER BY ISAAC

I WROTE “The Strange Silence of Political Theory” while working on a paper on “The Meanings of 1989,” an effort to come to terms with the “revolutions” in Central Europe, events and processes that I considered of profound importance.¹ I had decided to focus on the significance of the Czech democratic opposition for contemporary democratic politics and, having buried myself beneath Charter 77 documents and historical monographs, I decided to consult political theory journals to play my hunches off against what other theorists were saying. I was shocked to find virtually nothing in the most prominent scholarly journals. In Kirstie McClure’s words, the statistics seemed “certainly damning”; yet upon reflection, my “empirical” discovery appeared unsurprising and explicable in terms of features of academic political theory that have long troubled me. “The Strange Silence” is the result of this reflection. It is not really an “article” or even an “argument” so much as an essay, a foray into some important issues, a set of tentative—but hardly definitive or definitively argued—suggestions.

Seyla Benhabib views it as “a heartfelt battle cry” (p. 674). It is heartfelt, and it is some kind of call to action, or at least an incitement to reconsider the way many of us currently do our intellectual work. If it were a battle cry, it might initiate what Gramsci called a “war of position,” and certainly not a direct, frontal attack on my opponent. But the problem with this way of interpreting it—a point to which I later will return in responding to some of

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