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Questions and Problems

This is an unashamedly ‘old-fashioned’ book. I am here self-consciously distancing myself from current intellectual fashions, in the belief that the essential issues of social and political theory have been obscured in recent academic debates, beyond all normal comprehension. This may be a good moment to strip things down to common sense simplicity, even deliberate naiveté, since the questions – let alone the answers – are threatening to become invisible.

My argument is old-fashioned in three broad substantive ways: it emphasizes the crucial importance of the state; it stresses the social and material contexts of ideas, at a time when ‘historical’ contexts are identified with ‘discourse’, not only by poststructuralist or postmodernist currents but by more conventional historians of political thought; and it insists not only on the utility of political theory but on its critical and subversive power, at a time when ‘politics’ itself is out of fashion and when the history of political theory is typically treated as a story of disembodied ‘discourses’ or repudiated altogether as an oppressive ‘canon’. My argument certainly departs from some major ‘postmodern’ assumptions and values: their particularism and localism, their opposition to universals, ‘totalizing’ knowledge and ‘grand narratives’, their linguistic reductionism, their insistence on the fragmented and ‘decentred’ subject, their repudiation of collective agency and any general project of human emancipation.

Apart from the substantive emphases, my style of thinking will possibly appear old-fashioned and unfashionable because it is directed to renewing the Enlightenment project in a single intellectual sphere in opposition to what is taken to be the obscurantism and nihilism of a
world increasingly subject to a failure of nerve in confronting recent catastrophic events. I might be labelled a philosophical realist and ‘empiricist’ who endeavours to apply common sense to the assessment of social and political phenomena. If asked to justify my position, I would reply pragmatically: see what happens if you jump off the top of a ten-storey building on to the street below or drive at reckless speed the wrong way on a one way street. Or more poignantly consider: the survivors of the holocaust, the people of Bosnia and Kosovo, the homeless begging on every street corner, the bulging bellies of the African victims of starvation. My empiricism rejects the mind as a passive register of sense impressions, involving instead an active intellect and creative imagination.1 I strive to inject common sense in a forthright, tentative, and down-to-earth way into issues that seem in recent debates to have been distorted and confused. Before leaving the confessional, I should say that because political theory can only be treated seriously from the perspective of a self-consciously held conception of history, my own, which is the leitmotif of the book, will be clear after reading this chapter.

Let us turn to the subject in hand. At one time or another many of us have probably read several of the great works of political theory: Plato's *Republic*, Machiavelli’s *Prince*, More’s *Utopia*, Marx and Engels’ *Communist Manifesto*, and Mill’s *On Liberty*. Fewer may be familiar with Aristotle’s *Politics*, Cicero’s *De re publica*, Hobbes’s *Leviathan*, Locke’s *Second Treatise*, Rousseau’s *Social Contract*, and Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*. The informed reader, however, once the authors and titles are enumerated, will have a general notion of the meaning of political theory, without necessarily having studied it systematically. But the precise characterization of such a body of literature, beyond the obvious focus upon state, government, and politics, may prove to be more problematic. What do the relevant works of thinkers as remote from each other in time and culture as Aristotle and Burke, or Cicero and Bodin have in common? What were they attempting to do? What did they mean by state and politics in comparison to what we mean? Do their works exhibit similar traits? Among past political thinkers are some of the supreme literary stylists of our culture – Plato, Cicero, Machiavelli, More, Hobbes, Rousseau, Burke – and many of the others are not without literary merit. Aside from such virtuosity and the common topic of their speculations, how can their intellectual endeavours best be defined