

DECLINE AND RESURGENCE OF POLITICAL THEORY

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Abstract:

The paper tries to delineate the journey of politics from traditional to contemporary period. It has examined the shortcomings of value-loaded interpretations and the drawbacks of empiricism. The paper focuses upon the current anti-foundational themes giving a new direction to politics.

Introduction:

Theory in general is a logical construct, which involves deep introspection, preparation and explanation of the events taking place around us. It is needed by all the disciplines for a logical exploration. Political theory is an endeavor to understand the present political reality and to evolve a mechanism to change the imperfect society into a just order. During the process, it provides alternative models for the realization of best political existence. History has proved that crises provide fertile ground for its growth. Plamenatz believes “It is a study of theories which have historically powerfully influenced men’s images of themselves and of society and profoundly determined their social and political behavior.” Thus, the evolution of political theory coincides with the growth of political thought. It reflects views of thinkers on individual–state relationship, giving shape to political concepts like Rights, Liberty, Equality, Justice and Political obligations. As a derivative of Political Thought, it has two essential components such as concepts and ideologies. The later is framed in a context by linking the above concepts. Sabine opines, ‘Political Theory includes three elements such as a factual statement about the present political situation, a causal view on what may happen and a valuational interpretation on what ought to happen.’¹

Political theory has been articulated differently in different ages, giving rise to various speculations about its dynamism from a mere study on politics to theorization of ‘Political’ and from classical to contemporary deliberations. As a result, it overlaps sometimes with political philosophy and on some other occasion with Political Science. Andrew Hacker rightly defends it as ‘dispassionate and disinterested. As Science, it will describe Political reality without trying to pass judgments on what is being depicted either implicitly or explicitly. As philosophy, it will prescribe rules of conduct which will secure good life for all of society and not simply for certain individuals or classes’.²

The journey of political Theory began during the Greek Period with sole focus on ‘Politics’. The very assumption that man is a social animal had made it society centric and comprehensive. Termed as political philosophy, it involves a preoccupation with essentially ethical, prescriptive and normative questions reflecting a concern with what, should, and ought.³ Individual, devoid of a personal space for

himself, developed an unconditional bonding with the City State. The search for 'Good life' made politics moral. During the medieval period, the obsession for salvation restricted the growth of political theory to a large extent. The onset of Renaissance and emergence of state as a distinct political unit independent of the society, gave an institutional coverage to politics. Despite the effort of Montesquieu to develop a science of Government, politics continued to be normative. It became more and more formal, conservative patriarchal and Eurocentric over the years.

It was for the first time, on the wake of the Behavioural Revolution in America, persons such as Robert Dahl, David Easton, Cobban and Laslett concluded that with traditional approach, dominated by a value-laden framework and historical analysis, political theory had died or declined.⁴ In fact, the traditional political theory has been taking challenge since the time of 'Karl Marx, when he started advocating a 'programme' to change the course of history. Germino says 'Marx produced an anti-theory, offering to humankind the most radical form of messianic and ideological thinking.'⁵

The major blow to the traditional political theory came from the Logical Positivists, in the early 20th century. This group, led by the Vienna circle, was a revitalized form of the positivism of August Comte. While rejecting the philosophical approach of the traditional group, it emphasised on empiricism and phenomenalism —restricting the experience of sensation as the basis of science. ⁶ This became the starting point of a new orientation of political theory in America led by eminent persons such as Charles Merriam, Graham Wallas and Arthur Bentley. Their endeavors ultimately resulted in the Behavioural Revolution in America in the 50's. The major credos of this revolution were Regularities, Verification, Techniques, Quantification, Value-free approach, Systematization, Pure Science and Integration. It criticised the traditional approach for reducing political theory into mere historicism. Emphasis was changed from introspection to observation of 'reality' in order to make the discipline relevant and as scientific as the natural sciences. The system analysis of Easton and the structural- Functional analysis of Almond were the important landmarks of the period. Mid twentieth century had witnessed the replacement of an age old traditional theory with that of a modern political tradition. Political theory had shifted its attention from the study of the state and its structures to that of political process. Political scientists such as David Easton had popularized the grand role of the political system as the 'authoritative allocation of value'. Later on, in the 20th century, the Behavioural Revolution helped in the formulation of new institutionalism, advocating study of structure in relation to individual behaviour. Further, it has motivated the Rational choice theory to analyze politics in terms of preference of actors.

But the mindless empiricism made the subject dull and drab. One of its supporters, David Easton while realizing the mistake of extracting 'value' from a subject, which was supposed to study the individual's behaviour, rectified himself through the Post-Behavioural Revolution of the 70's. This latter version placed less emphasis on the scientific method and gave more stress on the public responsibilities of the discipline. Later on, while writing in the context of the Neo-Behaviouralism in the 90's, Easton

commented the need for a 'revival' of interpretative understanding and historical analysis.⁷

Thus, there has been a trend of 'revivalism' of earlier traditional form of political theory in some way or other. Here persons such as Thomas Kuhn, associated with the new Philosophies of Science' needs special attention, who had pointed out the flaws of the positivist model that it would be erroneous to separate science as a form of human activity from the interpretative endeavour of the individual.⁸ The structural-marxism of Gramsci and the critical Theory of the Frankfurt School had also challenged the 'economic-determinism' of Marx for its marginalization of role of individual.⁹ In this context, Rawl's concept of 'Distributive Justice' can never be overlooked. His effort to protect the 'shelf' of an individual from an overarching state through 'social structure' such as civil society has energized the Philosophical Orientation of the political theory.¹⁰ Besides this, the writings of Leo Strauss, Hannah Arendt, Oakshott etc. reiterate the leaning towards a type of theorization as followed by the traditionalists.

This has been opposed today by the so called Postmodernists who prefer to opt for the subaltern approach. Instead of going for any grand theorization, which they call as metanarrative they want to glorify the local issues.¹¹ Keeping an eye on all possible dissenting voices, Issiah Berlin has gone to the extent of saying that any attempt to harmonise the divergences that exist among human beings would lead to violence only.

However, the approach of the postmodernism is still in a fluid shape. It sounds nice for a country like USA, where the very nature of the emergence of the state and its socio-economic conditions can afford to have plurality of identities to such an extent. But it is very much incongruous for many Afro-Asian countries including that of India, where the cultural pluralities operate within a common norm. These countries, while still fighting for many basic opportunities may find this approach as putting threat to their very existence.

Francis Fukuyama's assumption in 'End of History and the Last Man' (1992) has created a new debate in political theory. Though by end of History, he has not predicted the end of politics, but he has assumed the fulfillment of politics within a liberal-democratic framework. The decline of the Communist bloc and the gradual popularity of liberal democratic values as he claims have enabled him to conclude so. Thus, there has been an attempt to equate theory with an ideology.

But soon after one year, Samuel Huntington in his thesis 'Clash of civilization' (1993) has challenged the assumption. He has pointed out that the liberal democratic order would be challenged by the Islamic Fundamentalism. Hence political philosophy can not be confined to one ideology only. All these assumptions attack the foundationalist argument of Oakshott and Leo Strauss. The 'universal' proposition of classical study has been given a new shape by Nozick's Libertarianism and Kymlica's Multiculturalism. All of them focus on social pluralism and identity politics. Thus, the present narrative analytical analysis of politics though believes in the same age old 'interpretation', focuses on intuition of a community which provides a new get up to the classical political philosophy developed in the backdrop of universal truth.

Despite the existence of so many debates in political theory, need of a theorization process is felt. Irrespective of their nature and forms, all of them agree that the matter of 'substance' has to be recognised. A study of substance, which revolves round the individual needs a logical construct in the form of a political theory, where a political theorist has to play the role of a Scientist and that of a Philosopher in order to solve the problems of humankind of all the ages.

Germino has rightly pointed out the rebirth of political theory would not lead to the, neglect of empirical research, but to the correction of claims that such studies constitute the whole of Political Science.¹² Such a rebirth would focus again on the need for elaborating criteria, in order to evaluate political behaviour, the importance of paradigm, the crucial question of the highest good and best society for man.



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