Political Theory, Philosophy, and the Social Sciences: Five Chichele Professors[1]

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Political theory has long been a significant presence in the academic life of Oxford, and still today it remains one of the fields for which the University is chiefly known. In one way this might not seem surprising given the prominence of the PPE (Philosophy, Politics and Economics) degree in the undergraduate curriculum, since political theory seems to hold a pivotal position between its first two components, and might in principle be able to unite these two disciplines at least. But whether this can be done, and if so how, has proved to be a contentious matter, not least in Oxford itself. My investigation here is going to focus on the five political theorists who have held the Chichele Chair of Social and Political Theory prior to the present incumbent: Douglas Cole (1944-57), Isaiah Berlin (1957-67), John Plamenatz (1967-75), Charles Taylor (1976-81) and Jerry Cohen (1985-2008). These represent only a fraction of the large number of scholars who have contributed to political theory in Oxford over the last 100 years (in various sub-faculties and departments), but I single them out mainly for two reasons.[2] First, as holders of the senior chair in this field, their election may be held to reflect the prevailing view (though doubtless not a complete consensus) among the relevant faculty about the direction that political theory should take; and second, by virtue of occupying this position, each of them felt it incumbent to explain the nature and purpose of their work in political theory, and in particular how it was related to philosophy on the one side and to the social sciences on the other. So by studying their contributions, we can gain some sense of the way in which the debate about the nature of political theory evolved over the course of the

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[2] Similar intuitions lie behind Robert Wokler's study of an earlier generation of professors of political thought, which focuses on Cambridge, the London School of Economics and Oxford. See R. Wokler, 'The Professoriate of Political Thought in England since 1914: a tale of three chairs' in D. Castiglione and I Hampsher-Monk (eds.), *The History of Political Thought in National Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

20th century and into the 21st. Although the Chichele Chair itself was only established in 1944, following the division of the earlier Gladstone Chair of Political Theory and Institutions, it is fortuitous that the first incumbent, G.D.H. Cole had done his main work in political theory further back in time, especially in the period from about 1915-1925. So by including this earlier work within the scope of my analysis, approximately the last 100 years of political theory at Oxford can be covered in outline.

As will already be clear, my investigation will focus on the tripartite relationship between political theory, philosophy and the social sciences – in other words, my approach will be methodological in a broad sense rather than substantive.[3] I have both negative and positive reasons for taking this approach. The negative reason is that I am not sure we would learn very much by comparing the substantive political theories developed by these five figures. I do not think that it would be possible to display a pattern of development or progress, for example. Political theory does not work like that. It is formulated in response to practical concerns that shift somewhat from one period to the next, even though it uses concepts and principles that may have a much longer history behind them. If we look at their theories, we can see Cole responding to the aspirations of the working class in the 1920s and 30s, Berlin to liberal anxieties at the time of the Cold War, Plamenatz to demands for self-government by colonised peoples, Taylor to the problems of Canadian federalism, and Cohen to the collapse of socialism, but it is much harder to find a driving concern that animates them all. *In some sense*, one might say, they are all liberals, but the character of their liberalism is so varied that it would be hard to present them as engaging more or less successfully in a common quest (say, to establish what freedom really means).

[3] This may be the point at which to say that I shall not be making use of the distinction between political theory and political philosophy in my analysis. A number of people have thought, and continue to think, that this is an important distinction to draw. My own view is that it may once have been, but no longer is, at least if we are talking about normative political theory/philosophy (there can of course be other ways of theorising about politics). For the purposes of the present exercise, where what is at issue is precisely how the relationships between political theory and philosophy, on the one hand, and political theory and social science, on the other, should be understood, it is unhelpful, because depending on the position one adopts in that debate, it will seem natural to apply one or other label to our subject. So I will follow the various protagonists' own usage in discussing their views.

The positive reason for my focus is this. Over the period we are considering, political theory has had to respond to the growth of the social sciences, in the sense of disciplines constructed around the systematic formulation of hypotheses and the gathering of empirical data to test those hypotheses. Traditionally political theory had occupied much of the space that the social sciences now claim to own. Although of course always guided by its normative aims, and involving philosophical reflection on its defining concepts – justice, freedom, authority, and so forth – political theorists were engaged in informal social science, speculating, for example, about how people were likely to behave in certain counterfactual circumstances, or about the consequences that would follow from adopting different forms of government. They drew eclectically on history, travellers' tales, personal experience, and so on in different proportions. Once the social sciences began to take shape – as they certainly had by the time that the Chichele Chair was established – political theorists could no longer continue to operate in their familiar mode, or at least not without looking hopelessly amateurish. How should they respond? I shall lay out a series of possible responses as a kind of matrix within which the authors being studied can then be placed. Here, then, are five strategies that political theorists may adopt when confronted by empirically grounded, explanatory social science.

Capitulation

This may hardly deserve to be called a strategy, and it is certainly not one that a practising political theorist is likely to choose, but it needs to be included as a default option if the alternatives all fail; it may also represent the view of a number of those outside of political theory itself. This is the view that political theory has been superseded by social science; once sociology and especially political science had developed on proper empirical foundations, there was no justification for political theory as traditionally conceived to continue. On this view, social science could not of course directly play the normative, action-guiding role that political theory had traditionally set for itself, but this was no disadvantage. Its job was to provide citizens and decision-makers with the best possible evidence about the consequences of decisions they might take. The decisions themselves would still need to be guided by value-judgements, but these were the responsibility of citizens and their

representatives. What was left over once the social sciences had gone about their work was not something that could constitute an academic discipline.

This mood of capitulation was best expressed in the introductory essay by Peter Laslett to his edited volume *Philosophy, Politics and Society*, published in 1956. According to Laslett, political philosophy as it had been written, in English, 'from Hobbes to Bosanquet' (and in other languages before that) was now 'dead'.[4] It had been killed partly by developments in the social sciences, and partly by the view that had emerged within philosophy, as a side-effect of logical positivism, that ethical statements of all kinds had no truth value. Consequently 'since political philosophy is, or was, an extension of ethics, the question has been raised whether political philosophy is possible at all'.[5] Laslett wrote in a spirit of regret, and was on the lookout for 'small signs' that 'philosophers were preparing to take up their responsibilities towards political discussions once more', but he clearly did not anticipate a full-dress revival of political theory in its classical form.[6]

Laslett wrote from Cambridge and his remarks bear chiefly on the state of political theory in the United Kingdom. That his essay captured the prevailing mood in the mid 1950s is suggested by the fact that both Berlin and Plamenatz shortly afterwards felt impelled to write essays defending political theory against the developments that had encouraged capitulation.[7] I shall examine these essays in greater detail shortly. But an alternative to capitulation was:

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[4] P. Laslett, 'Introduction' in P. Laslett (ed.), *Philosophy, Politics and Society* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1956), p. vii.

[5] Laslett, 'Introduction', p. ix.

[6] Laslett, 'Introduction', p. x.

[7] I. Berlin, 'Does Political Theory Still Exist?' in P. Laslett and W, G. Runciman (eds.), *Philosophy, Politics and Society: Second Series* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962); J. Plamenatz, 'The Use of Political Theory', *Political Studies*, 8 (1960), 37-47. See also Anthony Quinton's Introduction to A. Quinton (ed.), *Political Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967). According to Quinton 'It has been widely held, indeed, that there is no such subject as political philosophy apart from the negative business of revealing the conceptual errors and methodological misunderstandings of those who have addressed themselves in a very general way to political issues' (p. 2).

Retreat

Recognizing that much of the work of political theory had now been taken over by the social sciences, the aim here was to recast the field so that it became entirely non-empirical in content. This is equivalent to saying that political theory should become wholly philosophical in nature, where philosophy in turn is understood in such a way that it is emptied of empirical content. A popular version of this, in mid-century, was the view that the business of philosophy was conceptual clarification. When applied to political theory, this led to the view, made famous by T. D. Weldon in *The Vocabulary of Politics*, that political philosophers from Plato onwards had erroneously believed that questions such as 'What is the proper relation between the State and the Individual?' could be answered by investigating the essential meanings of the words ('State', 'Citizen') contained in them.[8] Instead, what was necessary was to disentangle the various meanings that these words might bear, with the result that many political controversies would be revealed to be cases of people with conflicting aims or preferences using concepts like 'freedom' is different ways, thereby simply talking past each other and disguising the real nature of their disagreement.[9] Other versions of Retreat were also possible: one could hold, Kantian-fashion, that political philosophy should take the form of spelling out the logical implications of a priori axioms, such as the principle of equal freedom. The point, in all cases, was that the development of the social sciences still left space for political theory, since political theory, now explicitly in the guise of political philosophy, had been re-defined in such a way that it was no longer even partly an empirical discipline.

Command

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[8] T.D. Weldon, *The Vocabulary of Politics* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1953), p. 11.

[9] See Weldon, *Vocabulary*, pp. 69-75. Weldon's position sometimes hovers dangerously between retreat and capitulation. At the end of this section of the book he writes: 'I fear that what I have written…..may give the impression that the traditional political philosophers have for the most part been wasting time by asking and attempting to answer general questions to which no answers can be given because they lack any precise meaning. To put it crudely, they have formulated questions of a type to which no empirically testable answers could be given, and such questions are nonsensical' (p. 74).

At the other end of the spectrum lies the strategy I shall call Command, which seeks to portray political theory – or more strictly *social* and political theory - as the master science which can incorporate and guide all of the more specific social sciences.[10] Political theory, on this view, is the general theory of social and political institutions. It is both descriptive and normative, because it depicts, in more abstract terms, the various component parts of a modern society, but also in doing so identifies those that are in some sense 'dysfunctional' and therefore in need of reform. How this strategy is meant to operate will become clearer when I examine the ideas of its main exponent, G.D.H. Cole. But plainly, on this view, the growth of empirical social science poses no challenge to political theory, other than the challenge of having to master a rapidly expanding body of empirical information. Specific branches of the social sciences are foot soldiers to be enlisted under the general command of political theory, which because it is able to take a synoptic view of how the various components of a modern society – economy, civil associations, the state, etc. – should relate to one another, can correct the myopia of these individual disciplines. From this perspective, political theory is threatened, not by the development of social science as such, but only by particular branches making over-ambitious claims about the scope of the explanations they can provide.

Attack

If command fails and retreat is not a satisfactory option, another strategy is to attack the social sciences themselves, or more precisely perhaps to attack the claims that they make on their own behalf. This attack can be carried out on at least two different fronts. One involves challenging the social sciences' claim to be value-neutral. If social scientific explanations do in fact rely upon concealed normative assumptions,

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[10] 'Social' needs to be inserted if the Command strategy is to make sense, since its aim is precisely to integrate all of the social sciences, political science being regarded as simply one among several. Indeed Cole, my exemplar of the Command strategy, was insistent that the resulting theory should not pay excessive attention to the political as such – the institutions of the state – which he saw as an error of traditional political theory. It seems likely that Cole had a hand in naming the Chair that he was elected to hold, with 'Social' preceding 'Political' in its title: see L. P. Carpenter, *G.D.H. Cole: an intellectual biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), pp. 219-20.

then what social scientists are doing is not in the end so different from what social and political theorists have always done, despite their newly-introduced techniques. In fact in one respect it is less defensible, because whereas political theory makes its normative premises explicit, and thereby allows its readers to accept or reject what is being said on the basis of their own commitments, social science introduces them surreptitiously, under the veil of objectivity. The other challenge focuses attention on the scope of the explanations that social science can provide: is it able to establish universal laws of human behaviour? If not – if the best it can do is provide partial explanations of human behaviour in particular social settings – then it cannot displace political theory itself, whose aim is to explore all of the political possibilities that the human condition presents. A student of political sociology might be able to explain how voters behave in modern mass democracies, but this cannot tell us very much about whether a Rousseau-style republic would be possible under changed circumstances, for instance. The attack strategy, then, involves attempting to cut the social sciences down to size: they are not value-neutral, despite what they claim, and their explanatory power is far weaker than they suppose. If the attack succeeds, political theory is left with plenty of room to operate in something like its traditional mode.

Collaboration

The final strategy that I wish to delineate involves political theory in a constructive engagement with social science. It accepts that once the social sciences have developed, political theory cannot continue as it did in pre-scientific times; it has to take social science seriously – more seriously than the Attack strategy supposes. So now when a theory in the course of construction makes what seems to be an empirical claim, it is incumbent to see whether the claim is supported by the best available evidence. Because the aim of political theory is primarily normative – it aims to provide grounds for judging which practices and institutions to adopt and so forth – it can't be reduced to social science. There is still a gap between explanation and prescription which is wider than the Command strategy imagines it to be. But nor on the other hand should it become purely philosophical, in the sense of becoming wholly concerned with conceptual questions to which empirical evidence is irrelevant, as the Retreat strategy suggests. Furthermore while drawing on social science in the

course of theory construction, political theory may also contribute to it by suggesting which questions, from a normative point of view, are most in need of answer – it can play an agenda-setting role. Hence the description of this strategy as Collaboration rather than merely as borrowing.

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That concludes the matrix. Now we must try to place our different characters within it. Let me begin by noticing two features that they had in common. First, they were all initially trained in philosophy. Cole and Berlin both read Greats at Oxford (though Berlin supplemented this with a final year of PPE). Plamenatz read PPE (though in this case supplemented with a final year of history). Taylor studied PPE as a second degree, and wrote a D. Phil in philosophy. Cohen read philosophy and political science at McGill, and the B. Phil in philosophy at Oxford. Second, they were all deeply engaged in teaching and studying the history of political thought, which however they regarded not as something to be approached in a purely scholarly or historical fashion, but as source of ideas that could be applied in the present day. In that respect they saw themselves as continuing the work of authors in the tradition they were examining. Capitulation, therefore, was something to be avoided. But which of the other strategies was to be preferred?

I begin with Cole, most of whose work in political theory was done many years before he acquired the Chair (and who was less exposed in that earlier period to the same forces that led to the alleged 'death' of political philosophy). Cole's main aim was to defend a version of pluralism that challenged the pre-eminence of the state and championed the many forms of voluntary association that flourished in a modern democratic society. Each of these, he argued, embodied a general will of its own, and aspired to contribute to the common good of the wider society; which was not, however, to rule out the possibility of conflict between them. The means to bring them into harmony, however, was to be found in 'the principle of function':

> In so far as the various associations fulfil their respective social purposes, and in so far as these purposes are themselves complementary and necessary for social well-being, the welter of associations in the community is converted into a coherent Society. In so

> far as the associations work irrespective of their function in a social whole, or set before themselves purposes which are mutually contradictory and irreconcilable with the good of the whole, the development out of the welter of associations of a coherent Society is thwarted and retarded[11]

For Cole, this aspiration for social coherence or harmony explained the nature and purpose of social theory (his preferred term).[12] It should study the major institutions to be found in a modern society, treating each as the embodiment of a distinct form of association whose proper function could be discerned. But having done so, it should switch into more normative mode and identify the 'social goods' that the institutions promoted. From this perspective it could propose institutional reform. But might there not be dispute about these social goods, or about their ranking relative to one another? At least by the time that he took up the Chichele Chair, Cole was willing to concede that such conflict was unavoidable, and could not be resolved through empirical study alone.

> I therefore arrive at no Utopian conception of a single best of all possible combinations of my different goods: nor do I believe it is feasible to measure in exact quantities how much of any of them a society either possesses or should seek to achieve. Nor, again, do I believe that they can all be resolved into, or caught up into, a single kind of good, which includes them all. On the contrary, I am sure they can and do conflict, and that there are many possible combinations of them that may be equally worthy of respect, but no combination that is clearly and demonstrably superior to all others.[13]

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[11] G.D.H. Cole, *Social Theory* (London: Methuen, 1920), p. 50.

[12] On taking up the Chichele Chair, Cole delivered his inaugural lecture, of which the first eleven pages are devoted to explaining the nature and purpose of social theory and the final two-and-a-quarter to political theory. As he moves from one to the other he remarks: 'There are no doubt some in this University who think that I ought to regard myself primarily as Professor of Political Theory, and to treat the 'Social' aspect as a mere frill. I think I have made it clear that this is not my view of what I have been appointed to do.' (G.D.H. Cole , *Scope and Method in Political Theory: An Inaugural Lecture* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1945), p. 14)

[13] Cole, *Scope and Method in Political Theory*, p. 9. I have cited this passage also to point out the perhaps surprising extent to which Cole's value-pluralism anticipated Berlin's.

Since Cole admitted that listing and ranking these goods was a personal matter ('My list of goods is both personal to me and drawn up under the influences of the scales of value which exist in the society to which I belong'[14]), he does not fit neatly within the Command box in my matrix, even though that was the box that he aspired, particularly in his earlier work, to occupy. His later concession opens the way to rival political theories each seeking to provide the best normative map of the same set of social institutions. What remains the case for Cole, even very late on, is his belief that empirical social science and normative social and political theory are indissolubly linked, and should be practised at least to some extent by the same pair of hands.

> [T]here is nothing inconsistent in holding both that it is desirable to observe and analyse social facts objectively and that there is a place for the study of social values and for the making of value judgements about society and its affairs. As a matter of plain commonsense, these are complementary and not rival studies…..I believe it to be of the greatest importance for us all to know as clearly as possible when we are simply collecting and analysing facts and when we are making value judgments; but I deny both that there is no place for the latter in political studies and that it is desirable for the two kinds of study to be pursued entirely by different specialists.[15]

When we move on to consider the next holder of the Chichele Chair, Isaiah Berlin, we encounter a very different understanding of the relationship between political theory and social science. In terms of my matrix, Berlin combines elements of Retreat with elements of Attack, while above all insisting on both the autonomy and necessity of political theory as an intellectual activity. He conceives of it centrally as philosophical in nature, although as I shall try to show with a very different understanding of the nature and scope of philosophy from that held by full blown Retreatists such as Weldon.

One rather obvious clue is provided by Berlin's main defence of political theory in the essay 'Does Political Theory Still Exist?' which begins by explaining how

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[14] Cole, *Scope and Method in Political Theory*, p. 10.

[15] G.D.H. Cole 'The Status of Political Theory', *Universities Quarterly*, 8 (1953), pp. 27-28.

philosophical questions differs from both empirical and formal (e.g. logical) questions in a manner that exactly parallels a paper written at the same time called 'The Purpose of Philosophy'.[16] Berlin's claim is that once the concepts and techniques for answering questions develop to the point where it is possible to solve them either by empirical or formal methods, they cease to be philosophical, and new specialist sciences are born. So in principle this could happen to political theory once political science takes shape – and in fact in various places Berlin concedes that this has indeed happened with the growth of social science, hence the element of Retreat: political theory must become less ambitious in scope than it once was, by allowing that some of the issues that it had previously addressed are now better addressed by more technically advanced methods of social and political research. But, he argues, this cannot lead to its extinction, because of the existence of deep and pervasive disagreement about what the goals of society should be. He develops this argument by inviting us to consider the opposite (hypothetical) possibility: a society in which there were was universal agreement on a single overriding goal:

> In such a society, whatever its other characteristics, we should expect to find intensive study of social causation, especially of what types of political organization yield the best results, that is, are best at advancing society towards the overriding goal. Political thought in such a society would be fed by all the evidence that can be supplied by the empirical sciences of history, psychology, anthropology, sociology, comparative law, penology, biology, physiology and so forth.

But only under this counterfactual assumption of a widely agreed-upon overriding goal, Berlin argued, could political theory 'be converted into an applied science'.[17]

So what, more positively, was the large remaining task that political theory found itself needing to perform? Berlin claimed that the deep conflicts of value that exist in all really-existing societies were not merely conceptual disagreements which might be

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[16] I. Berlin, 'The Purpose of Philosophy' in I. Berlin, *The Power of Ideas*, ed. H. Hardy (London: Pimlico, 2001). By an 'overriding goal' Berlin must mean not only that the society has a single agreed-upon final aim, but also that it recognizes no constraints on the way which that aim is to be pursued.

[17] Berlin, 'Does Political Theory Still Exist?', p. 11.

cleared up by attending to the use of language as Weldon, for example, had claimed. They arose from rival 'models' of man in his relation to society (and indeed to the universe as a whole), which according to Berlin played a pervasive, though often unacknowledged, part in human thinking. These models also conflict with one another:

> It is seldom, moreover, that there is only one model that determines our thought….Most men wander hither and thither, guided and, at times, hypnotized by more than one model, which they seldom trouble to make consistent, or even fragments of models which themselves form a part of some none too coherent or firm pattern or patterns. To drag them into the light makes it possible to explain them and sometimes to explain them away. The purpose of such analysis is to clarify; but clarification may expose shortcomings and subvert what it describes.[18]

Therein for Berlin lies the nature and purpose of political theory: to bring to light, clarify and test the underlying models of man and society which stand behind the concepts and principles that we use to make political judgements – the concept or concepts of liberty, for example, to give the example for which Berlin became especially famous.[19] But how, ultimately, should such a model, once clarified, be tested? According to Berlin, by 'the only test that common sense or the sciences afford, namely, whether it fits in with the general lines on which we think and communicate…..In this sense, political theory, like any other form of thought that deals with the real world, rests on empirical experience, though in what sense of 'empirical' still remains to be discussed'. [20] This may appear to let social science back into the picture as the ultimate validator of political theory, but the sting lies in the tail of the last quoted sentence. For Berlin goes on to argue that the 'experience' which forms the ultimate basis on which a political theory is to be accepted or rejected is not to be understood as 'empirical evidence' in the sense in which a social scientist would understand that phrase. According to Berlin, there are certain basic categories in

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[18] Berlin, 'Does Political Theory Still Exist?', pp. 19-20.

[19] I. Berlin, 'Two Concept of Liberty' in I. Berlin, *Liberty*, ed. H. Hardy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

[20] Berlin, 'Does Political Theory Still Exist?', p. 20.

terms of which we understand what it means to be human that are prior to our discovering any particular facts about human beings. And it is these categories that are crucial when it comes to determining how plausible any given model of social and political relationships actually is. Social scientists overreach themselves – this is the element of Attack in Berlin's position – if they believe that scientific methods alone are sufficient to answer the questions that political theory addresses. For instance 'no amount of careful empirical observation and bold and fruitful hypothesis will explain to us what those men see who see the state as a divine institution, or what their words mean and how they relate to reality'.[21] If we want to reject that model of the state, we need to show how it violates some essential part of what we understand human beings, intuitively, to be like.

Of the five holders of the Chichele Chair, Berlin's successor, John Plamenatz, was perhaps most fully conscious of the threat that the rise of social science appeared to pose to the tradition of political theory that he studied and identified with.[22] Often we find him defending the thinkers who belong to this tradition against the charge, which he puts in the mouth of the social scientist, that they have become redundant.

> These theories…. flourished, it is said, before the scientific study of man, of society and of government had properly begun; they pretended to a knowledge they did not possess. But now that men are beginning to see how to get this knowledge, how to study themselves and society to good purpose, they can do without these pretentious theories.[23]

Plamenatz also believed that the aim of political theory was to explain as well as to justify. So full-blown Retreat – to a purely philosophical understanding of the nature of political theory – was not an option worth considering. Admittedly his first book, *Consent, Freedom and Political Obligation*, written under the influence of his philosophical mentors in pre-war Oxford, had taken a much narrower view. He

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[21] Berlin, 'Does Political Theory Still Exist?', p. 28.

[22] For Plamenatz, this was primarily the tradition that ran 'from Machiavelli to Marx', as the subtitle of *Man and Society* explained.

[23] J. Plamenatz, *Man and Society* (London: Longmans, 1963), vol. I, p. xiv.

described its aim as being 'purely theoretical. It is concerned to do nothing more than to attempt definitions of several words often used in political discussion, and to discover in what ways the facts which they mean are related to each other.'[24] Its only practical relevance was that it might help to avoid the confused thinking of practical politicians – 'some of them, like Lenin, being apparently incapable of expressing themselves on theoretical matters with even an ordinary amount of clarity and sense'. At this stage, then, Plamenatz had a conception of political philosophy much like Weldon's. But when thirty years later he returned to the book to add a postscript to the second edition, he was unsparing in his self-criticism:

> As an essay on political obligation in representative democracies it leaves too much that is important out of account, and such merits as it may have belong to it mostly as an essay in conceptual analysis…The book is often unfair, at times to the point of absurdity…..The sociologist, the social psychologist, and the historian of ideas are all better equipped to discern what is valuable in the political and social theories of a Rousseau or a Hegel than is the mere student of philosophy with a taste for looking closely at how words are used.[25]

For the mature Plamenatz, 'analytical philosophy' was something to be contrasted with political theory. But how was the latter to be defended against rise of the empirical social sciences, since he freely admittedly that much of what political theory had done in the past occupied the same explanatory terrain as social scientists were now claiming for themselves? He deployed two arguments. One had to do with the purpose that political theory played in a modern society, which Plamenatz saw as enabling the members of such a society to make sense of their social environment and orient themselves towards it practically. Modern man, he argued,

> …. lives in a society where men strive deliberately to change their institutions. If he is not to feel lost in society, he needs to be able to take his bearings in it; which involves more than understanding what society is like and how it is changing. It also involves having a coherent set of values and knowing how to use them to estimate what is

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[24] J. Plamenatz, *Consent, Freedom and Political Obligation*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. x.

[25] Plamenatz, *Consent, Freedom and Political Obligation*, pp. 163-4.

> happening; it involves having a practical philosophy, which cannot, in the modern world, be adequate unless it is also a social and political philosophy.[26]

But this argument suffers from one obvious flaw. Underlining the need a person may feel for a political theory that allows him to 'take his bearings' in modern society does nothing to establish the intellectual credentials of such a theory. If, as Plamenatz envisages, the critic's charge is that political philosophy 'not only pretends to give us knowledge but also stands in the way of our getting it',[27] explaining the psychological function that political theory serves to discharge is no sort of answer. After all many people apparently need to consult their horoscopes on a daily basis, but this tells us nothing about the validity of their predictions. Plamenatz may in this essay succeed in showing that political theory can serve a purpose that empirical social science cannot, but he leaves it vulnerable to the charge that the guidance it offers is essentially bogus.

The second argument is more promising, though it is not spelt out at length in Plamenatz's defence of political theory.[28] This begins from the claim that the human behaviour studied by social scientists is itself theory-laden behaviour. As he puts it, 'man, being self-conscious and rational, has theories about himself and his social condition which profoundly affect his behaviour; theories which have not been, are not, and never will be merely scientific'.[29] The implication of this is that we cannot fully understand human behaviour, including political behaviour, without engaging with these theories. Observation and data-gathering alone might, for example, enable us to say how likely it is that a person with a particular demographic profile will turn

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[26] J. Plamenatz, 'The Use of Political Theory', *Political Studies*, 8 (1960), pp. 42-3. This article also sees Plamenatz self-consciously distancing himself from Weldon's version of political philosophy.

[27] Plamenatz, 'The Use of Political Theory', p. 38.

[28] It is more apparent in Plamenatz's practice than in the account that he gives of it: see my earlier discussion (with Larry Siedentop) in D. Miller and L. Siedentop, 'Introduction' in D. Miller and L. Siedentop (eds.), *The Nature of Political Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), pp. 12-13.

[29] Plamenatz, *Man and Society*, p. xx.

out to vote, but it cannot explain what voting means to the person who engages in it, or more generally what it means to be a citizen. When we ask these latter questions, we are engaging in interpretation, and we need to draw upon some implicit understanding of the kind of creatures human beings are. What political theories do, on this view, is to spell these implicit understandings out more openly, enabling us to decide which of them makes best sense of our experience. We can ask, for example, whether Hobbes or Rousseau gives a better answer to the question 'What is man?', which, Plamenatz claims, is not a question that social science can answer.[30]

Here Plamenatz exposes the limitations of a social science constructed along positivist lines. But he did not pursue the Attack strategy very far. In particular, he did not challenge the objectivity of social science by claiming that it could not avoid engaging in interpretation, and therefore could not be value-neutral. Indeed in his book *Ideology*, he argued at some length against the thesis that explanations in the social sciences were inevitably value-laden in a way that those in the natural sciences were not.[31] For a more robust version of Attack we need to move to the next player in our cast of characters, Charles Taylor.

Of the five members of the cast, Taylor had by a considerable margin the most to say about social and political science and its relation to political theory. He had shown a lifelong interest in the nature of explanation in the social sciences. Indeed the first book he wrote, *The Explanation of Behaviour* (London and Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964), contained an extended critique of behaviourism in psychology. In papers written in the decade before he took up the Chichele Chair – and partly in response to the 'death of political philosophy' debate – he engaged critically with political science, particularly as manifested in the work of American authors such as Almond, Easton, Lasswell and Lipset. Taylor's line of attack was that this version of social science attempted to model itself upon the natural sciences, with empirically observable 'behaviour' and 'attitudes' serving as the raw data out of which theories might be constructed. Yet this overlooked the fact that the behaviour being studied

[30] Plamenatz, *Man and Society,* p. xxi. Plamenatz acknowledged that the answers given to such questions 'differ from age to age and, perhaps even more, from person to person'.

[31] J. Plamenatz, *Ideology* (London: Pall Mall, 1970), ch. 3.

was interpreted in a certain way by the agents who engaged in it.[32] Furthermore, beyond these individual-level interpretations lay a further level of what Taylor called 'inter-subjective meanings' which were shared throughout a society and which were necessary if social practices such as 'voting' and 'negotiation' were going to exist. Thus a person entering a voting booth will understand what he is doing in a certain way – 'supporting party X', for instance – but over and above this individual interpretation there must be a common social understanding of the meaning of voting itself. For that reason, Taylor concluded, social science must have a hermeneutic character – it must supply a second-order interpretation of social behaviour that was already endowed with meaning by the agents who engaged in it. And this meant that political scientists who modelled what they were doing on the natural sciences simply failed to see how theory-laden (in the hermeneutic sense) their research actually was. Political theory was unavoidable because anyone who sought to understand the political world in a systematic way – going beyond low-level observation – was bound to engage in it either openly or covertly.

There was a further implication of this critical appraisal of social science as unavoidably theory-laden: it could not avoid having an impact, for better or worse, on the practices it was studying. For it must either endorse or criticize the prevailing interpretations on which these practices were based. As Taylor put it:

> This is the striking disanalogy between natural science and political theories. The latter can undermine, strengthen or shape the practice that they bear on. And that is because (a) they are theories about practices, which (b) are partly constituted by certain self-understandings. To the extent that (c) theories transform this self-understanding, they undercut, bolster or transform the constitutive features of practices. We could put this another way by saying that political theories are not about independent objects in the way that theories are in natural science.[33]

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[32] See especially C. Taylor, 'Interpretation and the Sciences of Man' in C. Taylor, *Philosophy and the Human Sciences: Philosophical Papers 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

[33] C. Taylor 'Social Theory as Practice' in Taylor, *Philosophy and the Human Sciences*, p. 101.

Taylor accordingly challenged the idea that political science could be value-neutral.[34] He pointed out similarities between, for example, the work of Aristotle and that of S.M. Lipset on the role of class conflict in political life, and argued that what they shared was an 'explanatory framework' which also had a 'value slope' in that it made certain ways of organizing a society look plausible and others completely unacceptable:

> Once we accept Lipset's analysis concerning the fundamental role of class in politics, that it always operates even when division is not overt, and that it can never be surmounted in unanimity, then we have no choice but to accept democracy as he defines it…..[35]

The upshot of all this is that Taylor sees no sharp dividing line between social science and political theory. Indeed he goes further in this direction even than Cole, for Cole as we saw held on to the basic distinction between empirical propositions and value judgements, even while he argued that social science and social/political theory should be practised in tandem. Taylor challenges this distinction when he argues that explanatory frameworks have clear normative implications.[36] So for him there is really only a single set of interpretive enterprises, which one might call 'human sciences', that are simultaneously explanatory and normative. In terms of my original matrix, it might therefore be tempting to classify Taylor as a Collaborator, since he leaves the door of political theory open to (the right kind of) social science. But because of his root-and-branch critique of mainstream political science, he is not a Collaborator in the sense I intended – he does not argue that political theory should join forces with social sciences in the form in which they are now mainly practised. He is calling instead for a revolution in the way in which social science is conducted. That is why I label him primarily as an Attacker – and the form of his attack is more fundamental than that of either Berlin or Plamenatz.

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[34] C. Taylor, 'Neutrality in Political Science' in Taylor, *Philosophy and the Human Sciences.*

[35] Taylor, 'Neutrality in Political Science', p. 70.

[36] To be clear, what Taylor challenges is not the distinction between empirical and normative propositions itself, but the claim that they are mutually irrelevant – that there is no way of moving from empirical premises to normative conclusions.

In this respect, the contrast with the last of the past Chicheles, Jerry Cohen, could not be sharper. For Cohen, although he did not directly address the relationship between political science and political philosophy in the way that his predecessors did, had a quite explicit understanding of the latter as a purely philosophical activity, while showing little or no inclination to challenge the social sciences on their own terrain. This then was definitely an example of Retreat, to a position not so far from that of Weldon, even if Cohen's conception of political philosophy itself was rather different from Weldon's. That conception is spelt out in a late paper in which Cohen presents political philosophy as a sub-branch of philosophy in general and as employing the same analytical techniques as would be employed in its other branches.[37] For example, he stresses the need to distinguish between an argument that supports a position that you hold and an argument that undercuts a rival position, but only supports your own in a negative way by making that rival less attractive. And he illustrates political philosophy at work by presenting various triads of propositions each of which have some plausibility, but taken together are inconsistent – the political philosopher's job, he suggests, is first to notice the inconsistency and then to work out which of the three propositions it is most plausible to sacrifice. Its aim, then, is to bring clarity to our thinking about political questions by identifying the fundamental principles that we want to hold on to even when confronted by implications of those principles that we had not previously considered.

Cohen rejected the idea that empirical evidence could be used either to support or to undermine those fundamental principles.[38] This was central to the charge that he levelled against John Rawls and those associated with him whom he referred to as 'constructivists'. Rawls had suggested that valid principles of justice were those that

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[37] G. A. Cohen, 'How to Do Political Philosophy' in G. A. Cohen, *On the Currency of Egalitarian Justice and Other Essays in Political Philosophy*, ed. M. Otsuka (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2011).

[38] This was the central argument of his paper 'Facts and Principles', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 31 (2003), 211-45, reproduced in revised form as chapter 6 of G.A. Cohen, *Rescuing Justice and Equality* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 2008). I have discussed this paper critically in 'Political Philosophy for Earthlings' in D. Leopold and M. Stears (eds.), *Political Theory: Methods and Approaches* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

would be chosen in an 'original position' by people deprived of certain kinds of knowledge of their own personal features; on the other hand they were said to be equipped with knowledge of 'the general facts about human society' and it was in the light of these facts that they would choose the principles that Rawls proposed.[39] So Rawls willingly conceded that where social science was able to establish well-founded generalisations – for example about the way in which economic markets operated – these should be taken into account when principles of justice were formulated. For Cohen this was a fundamental mistake. He contrasted 'principles of justice' whose validity or invalidity in no way depended on social facts, and the 'rules of regulation' that a particular society might adopt by combining those principles with facts about the circumstances in which they were going to be applied.[40] The proper business of political philosophy, he implied, was with the higher-level, fact-independent principles.[41]

This was not, however, because of any doubts that Cohen harboured about the objectivity or explanatory power of social science itself. He was not tempted down the path followed by Taylor, and to a lesser extent by Berlin and Plamenatz, which involved drawing a fundamental distinction between explanation in the natural and in the social sciences, with the latter construed as interpretive in nature. In his painstaking reconstruction of the Marxist theory of history, for example, he proposed that historical materialism used a functional form of explanation (of the legal superstructure, for instance) that was isomorphic to functional explanation in natural science,[42] and although later he came to doubt the substance of some of Marx's

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[39] According to Rawls, '….there is no objection to resting the choice of first principles upon the general facts of economics and psychology. As we have seen, the parties in the original position are assumed to know the general facts about human society. Since this knowledge enters into the premises of their deliberations, their choice of principles is relative to these facts.' (J. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 158)

[40] Cohen, *Rescuing Justice and Equality*, esp. ch. 7.

[41] This of course did not prevent anybody, including political philosophers, from engaging in applied political theory where the principles that has been established were used to justify or recommend particular laws or institutions, but this activity should not be confused with political philosophy proper.

explanatory claims, he never questioned the form that they took. In particular, he challenged Plamenatz's argument that man's 'social being' could not determine his consciousness, because 'social being' was in part constituted by ideas, by showing that a causal reading of Marx's claim remained possible.[43] In other words, he resisted any suggestion that interpretation should replace causal explanation in the social sciences. For Cohen, then, political philosophy and social science could co-exist happily but independently from one another, the contribution of social science (from a philosophical point of view) being to provide information about the best way to implement normative principles that the philosopher had devised without its aid.

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What is perhaps most striking, as we conclude this survey of the nature of political theory as understood by the five Chichele Professors, is that with the partial exception of Cole, none chose to inhabit the box in the matrix that I labelled Collaboration, where political theory would draw upon social science to substantiate its claims. This was not because the box was uninhabitable, even in Oxford. Without trying to survey the wide range of approaches followed by the current generation of political theorists,[44] prominent past members, most notably Brian Barry, Steven Lukes and Alan Ryan were perfectly comfortable acting as Collaborators. What explains this? Why did the Chichele Professors feel impelled to keep social science at arm's length, through some combination of Retreat and Attack, rather than devising a form of political theory that would embrace with enthusiasm the large advances made in the social sciences over the course of our century? As I noted earlier, all were trained in philosophy – but so, on the other hand, were those who were willing Collaborators. As holders of the Chair, their college location in All Souls perhaps gave them less direct exposure to social science than those who were based elsewhere. Possibly more relevant, all were deeply committed to studying aspects of the history of

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[42] See G.A. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), chs. 9-10.

[43] G. A. Cohen, 'Being, Consciousness, and Roles' in G.A. Cohen, *History, Labour, and Freedom: Themes from Marx* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988).

[44] These are well represented in the collection by Leopold and Stears, *Political Theory: Methods and Approaches*, all of whose contributors held posts in Oxford.

political thought, and were therefore perhaps extremely sensitive to the claim, often made by social scientists, that the growth of rigorous social science had made social and political theory as traditionally practised redundant. To some degree, they saw themselves as conducting a rearguard action against the main intellectual currents of twentieth century thought, crystallised in the mid-century debate over the death of political philosophy. And this, though not quite a tragedy, was in one respect at least a shame, because, as I noted at the outset, in a university famous for its PPE degree, a social-science friendly version of political theory would have made a natural lynch-pin for that degree.