SYMPOSIUM

Political Theorists

Editor's Introduction

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POLITICAL THEORY TODAY

The question of the role of normative or historical political theory within the broader discipline of political science has been controversial at least since the founding of the American Political Science Association (see Gunnell 2006 for a brief overview). Perhaps it goes without saying that during that same period people who think of themselves as engaged in political theory have disagreed among themselves about the core concerns of the field, the appropriate kinds of graduate training, the relative value of various authors and texts, and, of course, about theory's role within political science.

Yet, largely absent from these discussions has been any systematic information about who political theorists are, what their experiences within the profession have been, who they teach (and who they don't), which journals they find most useful, and so on.[1] In 2008 I decided to gather some of that information. As explained in my essay in this symposium, I attempted to identify and contact every political theorist teaching at an accredited, four-year college or university in the United States for the purpose of inviting them to complete an online survey. Nearly 50% of the political theorists I identified and contacted completed some or all of the survey, giving us the most complete picture yet of the field of political theory as it is practiced today.

However, as we know, statistics are never merely raw information; they are created and deployed within an existing set of relationships, expectations, and understandings. Thus, while it is genuinely my hope that these data will help continue a conversation within the discipline about the proper role of political theory, some have worried about the role that the data themselves might play. Indeed, several eligible respondents declined to complete the survey on the grounds that its findings were likely to be damaging to political theory.

The four essays included in this symposium address these questions directly. My own essay, "Political Theory Today: Results of a National Survey," reports some of the survey's findings and offers a few brief comments about their possible significance.[2] Jodi Dean's "Theory Survey or Survey Theory?" raises what Dean calls the "reflexive" or "paranoid" concern that the survey opens political theory as a subfield to unwanted scrutiny and quantification, while possibly also arming theory's critics. Kennan Ferguson's "Sub-Field Hockey" detects in the survey and its publication a genuinely "disciplinary" project—an effort to define, normalize, and perhaps tame political theory—which may be good academic politics but is antithetical to the spirit of theory itself. Finally, Martha Ackelsberg's "Political Theory Today: Who's Teaching What to Whom?" places the question of the role of theory within political science into the larger context of the goals of undergraduate (and especially liberal arts) education, while also engaging in deeper analysis about the gendered nature of some of the survey's rankings of political thinkers.

The three essays by Dean, Ferguson, and Ackelsberg do what an essay reporting the results could not do alone—they add a critical (indeed, theoretical) reflexivity to the questions of the place of normative and historical theory within the broader discipline and how we might best go about discussing that issue. In that way, they are first forays into precisely the kind of further reflection that the survey was intended to both enable and provoke. ■

NOTES

This symposium is based on papers presented at the 2009 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association in Toronto.

1. One notable exception is the 1978 survey done by Hajjar and Brzezinski. Such information does exist for some of the other subfields of political science, especially the excellent Teaching, Research and International Politics (TRIP) surveys carried out by the Institute for the Theory and Practice of International Relations at the College of William & Mary (http://irtheoryandpractice.wm.edu/projects/trip/).
2. A second set of findings, related specifically to teaching, was presented at the 2009 APSA Teaching & Learning Conference in Baltimore, and will be published separately.

REFERENCES

Gunnell, John G. 2006. "The Founding of the American Political Science Association: Discipline, Profession, Political Theory, and Politics." *American Political Science Review* 100 (4): 479–486.

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Kennan Ferguson *teaches political theory at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee. He is the author of* The Politics of Judgment *and* William James: Politics in the Pluriverse, *as well as the forthcoming* All in the Family: On Community and Incommensurability.

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