

Tracing the Political

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In this paper I attempt a delineation of the political through a tentative use of what I call a regulative analysis. Through this delineation I suggest a perspective in which the political is regarded as constituting the insidious factor which warps the structure of human practices and institutions along the axis of power transactions.

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Philosophical tradition has familiarized us with two approaches to conceptual questions: the descriptive and the prescriptive. The descriptive approach, favoured by the ordinary language philosophers, emphasizes the analysis of concepts as they are found in ordinary usage. The prescriptive approach, putatively practised by metaphysicians, consists in recommending new usages of concepts, often through propounding new schemata. This is perhaps not a very accurate description of these approaches, but I think it gives an adequate idea of the general drift of these approaches. The important point is that while there has been a good deal of debate as to the relative merits of these two approaches, it has generally been thought that these two approaches are mutually exclusive and together exhaustive. I wish to suggest that these two approaches are not exhaustive and that there is a third approach to conceptual issues, which, in at least certain cases, is equally, if not more, important. This I call the approach of regulative analysis.

By regulative analysis I mean an analysis in which one tries to delineate the basic structure of a concept, but, in the process of delineating it, also intervenes in it through an historically aware negotiation of those extensions of that concept which are a result of semantic inertia, and need regulation to avoid confusion. By semantic inertia I mean such cases as when a concept is taken over by an academic discipline and modified in subtle but important ways for better amenability to systematic use, but due to its continuity in ordinary usage in its original form, ambiguity of connotation results; or when a concept shifts within a paradigm due to the gradual filling up of the paradigm; or when the paradigm itself has changed and a concept from the old paradigm

persists in use due to habit or it is heuristically a bridge between the old paradigm and the new often incompletely articulated paradigm resulting in ambiguity of reference; as also those very important cases in the human studies, overlapping with the above, where the phenomenon to which a concept refers undergoes a transformation in terms of its internal structure as well as its relation to other phenomena, but the use of the concept is based on an inadequate grasp of the transformation or an ideologically grounded refusal to acknowledge that transformation. In such cases, I think, neither the attempt at a 'neutral' analysis which is purely descriptive nor at an arbitrary but 'ideal' prescriptive analysis can help in clarifying the structure of a concept. What is required in such contexts, in my view, is a kind of analysis which is sensitive to such vicissitudes a concept undergoes as I have instanced above, and which does not hesitate to sort out the irrelevancies that have crept into, or remain clinging to, a concept. To do so is to proceed by respecting the historicity of concepts by recognizing, to paraphrase a Sartrean slogan, that historicity precedes essence. I must clarify that by historicity I do not mean the history of a concept in the sense of its etymological past (although this can be a helpful tool in regulative analysis), but the dynamics of the participation of a concept in the succession of historical situations leading to the present historical context. It follows that this kind of analysis is a more or less perpetual task, more acutely required during the crises of paradigms. However, I do not by any means imagine that I am suggesting an altogether new approach. I think social scientists are very frequently called upon to engage in it, as are those philosophers who follow the complex trajectories of concepts in their historical ambience. All I am doing is to draw attention to the importance of this kind of analysis and suggest that it may be more profitable to engage in it more explicitly.

At all events, I propose to try here to engage in this regulative analysis of the concept of the political, since I believe that this concept typifies the conditions when a regulative analysis is called for. There is hardly any other concept which figures more frequently and more prominently in contemporary discourse and yet is so hopelessly tangled in a maze of conflicting reference and confused connotations. In view of the fact that our perception of the presence of the political factor in different social contexts has important implications for the freedom of mankind, there is a certain urgency to the task of restoring the focus of this concept from a coherent perspective.

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There seem to be broadly two ways in which the concept of the political is used. The first is that which is denoted by the term 'politics'. In this sense, the term denotes the activities and institutions associated with the governance of communities and with the efforts to secure positions from which to engage in such governance. According to this usage, politics is a domain of public life, related to such domains of societal existence as the economic, social (whatever that may mean), cultural, etc., but distinct from them.

The second way in which the concept of the political has increasingly been used is through the phrase 'the politics of ...'. In this usage the political appears to denote a certain element present in different kinds of social or interpersonal situations. Popular usage identifies this element in terms of manipulation and intrigue. According to a more sophisticated perception, this element consists of power transaction of some sort.

Now, how do we co-ordinate the various intuitions in which these different usages are grounded? One way, of course, is to suggest that politics as referring to the domain of governance is the primary meaning and that the other usages are derivative, based upon a perception of some rather accidental features of that domain. The merits of this approach are that, firstly, it has the virtue of being faithful to the etymology of the word, and secondly, it fits in with our common-sense understanding of how words shift their meaning metonymically. But it has, in my view, a grave drawback: it fails to do justice to the groping intuition behind the usage which tries to grasp a significant but little-understood determinant of social existence. A second way, in contrast to the above diachronic approach, is the synchronic approach which consists of appealing to the Wittgensteinian theory of family resemblance. But this approach, I feel, only defers understanding, since the point is, at least in this context, to understand the precise relations between the different members of the family of concepts called the political. The third way, which I hold to be the most fruitful, consists of treating the relation between the different usages as an indication of the evolution of a perspective in which the increasing primacy of power transaction in different contexts, including the domain of governance, is a crucial fact. But I want to emphasize that in advocating a greater recognition for the shift in the centre of gravity of the concept of the political, I am not engaging in mere linguistic reform, but advocating a more consistent recognition of an emerging perspective as a more adequate instrument

of understanding social phenomena. This essay is a modest attempt to strengthen that perspective, by suggesting that the political is not an incidental dimension of social existence, but a constitutive element, in a foundational way, of almost all social, inter-personal situations, practices, and institutions.

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Every inter-subjective situation involves an encounter of wills which generates a field of existential tension. This tension is attendant upon any interaction of wills including the interaction of two viewpoints. Even simple mutual perception is not without it, since even to perceive the other is to have a perspective on him/her which involves an appropriation of him as an object with a particular status and role in the projects of one's will. This field of tension represents the space in which the dynamics of the inequilibrium of power operate. By power I mean the fundamental operation of the will – the will to decide, to determine, to control, or to adopt a more felicitous formulation of Max Weber, 'the capacity of one unit in a system to realize its goals against the opposition of other units'.

There are several forms of power such as economic, religious, bureaucratic and so on, and each form of power has a distinct mode of the dynamics of power transaction. However, regardless of form, all power allocation has a pyramidal structure in which the tip of the pyramid represents the concentration of maximum power among a few and the base of the pyramid represents the majority with scant power at their disposal, who bear the oppressive weight of the whole power structure. This pyramidal structure embodies the logic of power, in the sense that power has the tendency to form this structure in the state of equilibrium. Attempts to invert this pyramid through revolutions or other means are invariably doomed to failure, or worse still, to illusory success, since power reallocates itself in some different form in order to form the same structure again.

What civilized communities have done to counter this logic of power is to erect distinct, if necessarily interactive, pyramids of different forms of power, such that the imbalance of power allocation in one pyramid were neutralized by those in the others. As long as the different power pyramids counter-balance each other, we have the semblance of an open society. But, unfortunately, the power centres in the different pyramids soon begin to form symbiotic relationships resulting in an effective single pyramid, and the whole system returns to its oppressive form. The success and the necessarily attendant evils of capitalism, including international

capitalism, are the result of the fact that economic power, being the most fluid, the most versatile form of power, has a greater ability to appropriate other power pyramids to form its own oppressively steep, grand pyramid of illimitable power.

However, the power pyramid is not without its internal tensions. There is a centrifugal force which constantly tends to upset the economy of this structure. This force is represented by the resistance offered by the lower levels of the power pyramid. In order to effectively meet this resistance, the controlling part of the structure, which essentially means the regions close to the apex of the pyramid, evolve a system of power transaction, which by camouflaging power in various guises, distracts and dissipates the energies that go into the resistance. The mechanism by which this system of disguised power transaction is effected constitutes the political. This mechanism involves the creation of new institutions as well as the subversion of already existing or presently forming institutions towards eliminating resistance. An important component of this mechanism is the creation of discursive practices which construct and operate the conceptual apparatus that disguises the real structure of power transaction. Their fundamental function is one of mystification, of creating a ghost structure consisting of sublimated images of power transactions. It is this metaphysic of power which sustains the reality of power by constructing a structure of appearance that constitutes the essence of the political. Its logic is the logic of duplicity, of ambiguity, of subversion. To understand the structure of this metaphysic, one must engage in a practice of interrogation, in a type of hermeneutics of suspicion. Contemporary thought exhibits several trends that have been working precisely in this direction. But there is perhaps a need to focus those reflections to specifically converge on the political. What I am attempting here can be seen as an attempt to roughly draw the angles of that convergence by briefly exploring the structure of the operation of the political in a few domains.

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Let us begin with language. This would be an appropriate starting point, since language represents the most basic element of the social dimension of inter-subjectivity, and the deepest intervention of the political is at the level of language. Therefore, the best opening into the structure of the political is through an understanding of how language is subverted into serving as an instrument of the political in the discursive domain.

The basic function of language is to facilitate a sharing of reality. It is

through language that the subjective vision is shared to form the inter-subjective pool of a public reality. However, when the play of power enters into language, it becomes an instrument through which one's perspective is imposed on others, to determine their conceptual organization of reality. That is to say, language becomes the battleground for the reclamation of reality. Rhetoric represents the weapon with which this battle is fought. But what is rhetoric? The ambiguity of the answers to this question itself indicates how rhetoric constitutes the mechanism of the intervention of the political in language. On the one hand, rhetoric is just an aid to the effective communication of truth. On the other hand, it is the art of persuasion *par excellence* through which the favoured opinion is disseminated in the guise of truth. This ambivalence to truth – it is an instrument of truth and it makes an instrument of truth – constitutes the duplicitous essence of rhetoric. This contradiction governs the entire career of rhetoric. It always functions concealed behind the façade of another function to which in fact it is inimical. It cannot reveal its truth that it is a channel of power and not a channel of truth, since to reveal its truth is to lose its own power, to negate itself structurally as well as functionally. A further paradox of rhetoric is that it cannot claim success when it is successful, since to admit success would rob it of its success.

Rhetoric represents the political in language by virtue of the manner of its coming into being as well as the purpose for which it is brought into being. It comes into being through a characteristically metaphysical manoeuvre, by positing a duality of domains: the inner and the outer, the private and the public, the reality and the appearance, in language. This metaphysical structure constitutes the mechanism through which manipulation of belief, so essential for the manipulation of wills, is carried out. The presence of this structure can be unearthed in all instances of the use of language as the instrument of the political. In the domain of commerce, advertisement is the apparent means of providing information to the consumer, which in reality functions as the instrument of power by creating a universe of need and manipulating desire. Similarly, in the domain of governance, election campaigns, in the guise of providing information, affect the manipulation of choice. The examples can easily be multiplied. However, these instances represent only the more obvious operations of the political. The site of the truly insidious operations of the political is the network of concepts through which we organize our thought and behaviour. Let us briefly see how this happens in such domains as morality and governance.

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Morality as an institution is the means through which the inter-personal impulses of the members of a community are regulated through the exercise of social pressure. Now, this definition must appear somewhat negative, at any rate reductive. It appears to ignore that we have values, and ethics is a framework for organizing those values into rules and principles to guide our conduct. My reason for starting with the definition I have offered is to draw attention to how the space between two facets of the ethical is invaded by the political to appropriate the network of moral concepts for the facilitation of power transaction.

There is a sense in which ethics is a codification of our innate intuitions of what is good and what is evil. It is the set of guidelines with the help of which we manage our spiritual economy, by organizing our limited emotional resources. But the institution of morality is not identical with ethics, although it is grounded in the latter. In the formation of the institution of morality, the root ideas that guide our spiritual economy are given a sharper outline, given a more objective content and arranged into a coherent framework of laws and principles. However, in that very process of institutionalization, these ideas are appropriated by the power structures and transformed into instruments of the economy of power. This appropriation is a political operation in the sense that it facilitates the transactions of power unhampered by resistance. The importance of this operation lies in the fact that the overt use of power to control behaviour is not viable. Hence, a mechanism which ensures voluntary compliance is a valuable tool. This tool is forged by injecting a new content into such ethical concepts as conscience, ought, duty, etc.. Conscience, which is originally the expression of the inner conflict between opposite impulses, is turned into a vehicle of social pressure. The still, small voice inside becomes the echo of the warning shout from the outside. Similarly, the Kantian *sense* of duty is given the content of obedience to commands which originate from the concerns of social order as desired by the dominant elements of the power pyramid. In the same way, the notion of 'ought', which is the expression of an inner impulse prompted by a perception of rightness is converted into the formal aspect of commands. Thus, the ethical becomes a function of the metaphysic of power. A similar but more complicated metaphysical manoeuvre can be seen to be in operation in the domain of governance. Here the power transactions are conducted through the overt channel of 'authority' on the one hand, and the intangible, repressed, subterranean channel of 'influence', in such a way that power as such remains an

abstraction. This diversion of power is managed through the concept of legitimacy. Let me give a brief outline of this phenomenon.

The best way to approach it is to note the points of contrast between authority and influence. The first point of contrast is visibility. Authority is necessarily visible, since its exercise depends on recognition (in all senses of the word). In order to facilitate this recognition, authority equips itself with a variety of symbolic structures. In contrast, influence is not only invisible but mysterious (the very word carries its etymological connotation of something occult). Indeed, it is effective in proportion to its appearance of mysteriousness, to the point that the centres of great influence are often felt to be in some awesome way anonymous. If kings represent authority, the king-makers – who are but shadowy figures, more felt than seen, behind the throne – embody influence. A related point of contrast is that while authority is meticulously well defined, authority is like a field of force, fuzzy in outline with an indefinite extension. Further, whereas authority is closely bound up with rules, influence is untouched by rules of any sort. In fact, its effectiveness lies in its capacity to transcend rules. Finally, while the channels of authority are clearcut and follow a hierarchical route, the channels of influence are as mysterious as its source. Influence is, what you may call, action at a distance.

I have drawn the contrast between these two concepts in such detail to show how parallel the contrast runs, along presence and absence respectively. This diversion of power transaction into these two modes is necessitated by the fact that the reality of power as such cannot be negated since it is experienced by those on whom it is exerted. Therefore, it has to be diverted into two modes – one innocuously present and the other absent as a fact – with something like the status of a rumour. The structure of this operation is common to all domains and in all cases it is conducted through the crucial concept of 'legitimacy'. Authority is defined in terms of legitimacy. But the fact is that no matter how we define it, legitimacy already presupposes authority. It is evident that if two things appear to mutually presuppose each other, they must be grounded in something else. The alternating levels of authority and legitimation are being generated by the play of power, and set into the motion of reinforcing each other. It is imagined that the source of power at this point is popular consent. This is an illusion created and managed by the same metaphysic of power. It is the illusion, on which democratic societies are sustained, that the power pyramid is inverted. But as I have pointed out, such an inversion represents a state of unstable equilibrium.

In no time, the pyramid returns to its original position. Popular consent, insofar as it exists, is the consent to the subsequent, systematic manipulation of consent. In other words, authority is not a function of the social contract, but a function of the subversion of that contract.

Let me explain this point by bringing into focus the context in which the question of the implications of the ubiquity of the political for civilization is seen.

Civilization is itself a process whose movement is essentially governed by the play of the political. It is based upon the notion of restructuring power transactions in a manageable way. But the crux of the matter lies in the notion of management. We tend to forget that civilization as a process has come to its present stage by a continuous insistence on the idea that human beings need to be managed. There is, of course, a sense in which management, in the sense of a coordination of energies to optimize the possibilities of survival and growth of the race, is necessary. The play of the political subtly transforms this notion of management into the notion of governance. The social contract is a contract with regard to management and not governance. It is in this move that the social contract is subverted. Now, I am not suggesting that the social contract is formed and then it is subverted. My point is that the very fashion in which the social contract is shaped, articulated, is determined by the play of the political. The political is the fine print of the social contract.

The subversion of the social contract is sustained with the help of a number of factors, but two of them play a central role. These are reason and religion. The manner of their appropriation is once again characteristic. A domain of desire is marked off as reason and forced into an opposition with desire. This posited dichotomy is used to project reason as constituting the deferment of desire. From this it is a small step to the notion that control and governance are essential for well-being, both within the psyche and the level of community. This notion in turn is reinforced by presenting the psyche and the society as structurally identical and locking them in an embrace of mutual metaphoricity. Religion supplements this operation with the doctrines of original sin and imbalance of the soul, a recovery from which is made out to be possible only through 'self-control'. Thus, civilization is transformed into the embodiment of control. To be civilized is to be controlled in the right way; in the colonial context it is the voluntary acceptance of control by the colonizer, and in the post-industrial world of today it is consenting to be controlled by those agencies which are projected as the symbols of good life, to live by the proposition that to be civilized is to buy the right

things.

Let me conclude by drawing attention to another feature of the political by making explicit the thrust of the exposition I have attempted here. It must be made clear that no exposition of the political can be neutral. It is itself political in the sense that it is grounded in a particular stance towards the political. This need to use the word 'political' to describe this perspective points to that feature of the political which I mentioned above. The political, in order to conceal its dynamics, presents itself as a neutral phenomenon, as just another dimension of social existence. It conceals the fact that it radically determines the structure of all domains. This is well brought out by the linguistic fact that we have such terms as 'nonpolitical' denoting a putative, neutral outside of the political, but no such terms as 'antipolitical' or 'counter-political' denoting perspectives concerned with the political but in positive conflict with it. The absence of these terms indicates the fact that one of the basic manoeuvres of the political is to insinuate itself into those domains which are potentially antithetical to its dynamics, and neutralize their opposition by appropriating their discourse. Therefore, I think what is required is to create a discursive space for the counterpolitical.

By counterpolitical discourse I mean a discourse that not only works against the play of the political by exposing its metaphysic, but it itself remains free from such a metaphysic. The urgency of this task, of creating a counterpolitical discourse consists in the fact that it fundamentally involves the question of freedom. As I said at the beginning, the political is the real agent of unfreedom. By rendering the real transactions of power invisible, it stifles the very possibility of resistance. It is necessary to realize that 'political freedom' is a meaningless term. It only expresses the myth created and sustained by the political which substitutes real freedom with an impoverished image of freedom as the cramped space in the meshes of the network of power transactions. Real freedom is freedom from the political. In this sense, there is only counterpolitical freedom. This freedom can be attained only by countering the dynamics of power pyramids, by intervening at all their nodal points, and instituting mechanisms of resistance into the power structures. This may be an extremely difficult task. But to give it up as too Utopian a task is to give up the struggle for human dignity.