

Political theory in the Australian Journal of Political Science: A review

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The place of political theory in *AJPS* has historically been a fairly marginal one, partly because Australia does not seem to have a strong national tradition of political theorizing. This is thought to be a function of living in a nation that never produced a great political theorist and was born neither in revolution or utopianism. Yet, although there has been a marked absence of high theory or exegetically-inclined history of ideas over the life of the journal, theorists have responded by contributing work that usefully illuminates applied problems with theoretical insight. Further, it may be the case that there is a peculiarly Australian style of political theory that is pragmatic and self-consciously embedded within our institutions and political culture. The paper explores this and other means by which Australian theorists have adapted in order to retain a presence within the journal.

Keywords: political theory; history of political thought; political science

Overview

The story of the place of political theory in the *Australian Journal of Political Science* (*AJPS*) is a complicated one. This is partly because of the sub-discipline's intermittently marginal status within political science and partly because of its often contested and blurred boundaries, overlapping as it does with political philosophy, analytic philosophy, legal theory, sociological theory and history of political thought. What exactly is political theory? What is the scope of its subject matter? What are its methods? What does it actually mean to *do* political theory? In order to answer these sorts of questions political theory has gone through periods of reflecting on itself. This has given rise to a 'lively methodological sub-literature' (Condren 1985: 42) that has featured in the *AJPS* as well as more specialist journals. This literature has variously explored the alleged imminent 'death' of theory (Condren 1974), its place within political science (Armstrong 1995; Kellow 1981; Marsh 2009) its contours and character (Cook 1991), its method and historiography (Francis 1983; King 1981; Massingham 1981; Morgan 1975; Springborg 1975)

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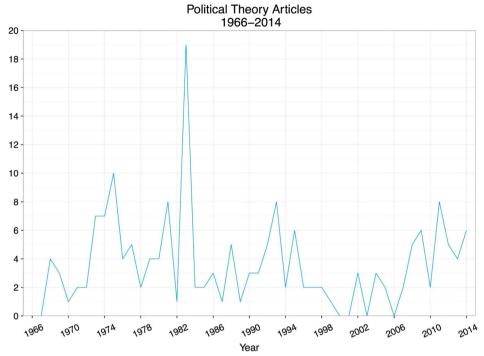


Figure 1. Political theory articles, 1966–2014.

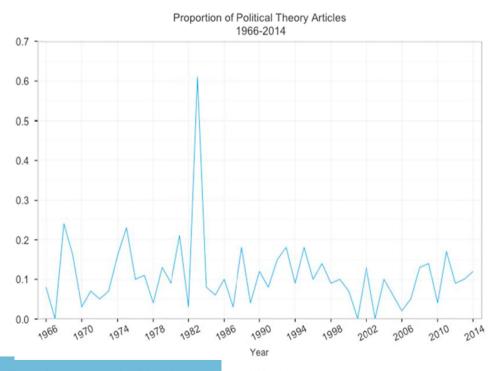


Figure 2. Proportion of political theory articles, 1966–2014.



and the existence or otherwise of a peculiarly Australian body of political thought (Docker 1972; Emy and Hughes 1988; Milner 1983; Stokes 1994; 2004).

In the following discussion I define theory rather broadly as encompassing political philosophy, history of political thought and theoretical explorations of method. In tracking and quantifying the theory represented in the journal I have taken a broad approach and included articles with either a substantial theory component or that have brought theory to bear on a practical policy issue.

From a quantitative point of view, as can be seen in Figure 1, political theory – even broadly defined – has not been a major presence in the AJPS (note that in 1983 there was a large spike in the number of political theory articles; this is because issue 2 of that year was a special edition on political theory).

Figure 2 depicts the incidence of political theory articles relative to all other genres of articles published in the journal. Even taking into account the broad definition of theory applied here, the proportion of articles has been relatively low - and unfluctuating – averaging around 10 per cent of all articles published in the AJPS over the last 50 years.

'High' theory: classical, early and late modern political theory

The amount of what might be described as 'high theory', that is, mainly theoretical or abstract discussions of political themes and thinkers, has been fairly thin over the life of the journal. Nevertheless, there have been some fine reflections on democracy and democratic theory (Axtmann 2013; Hindess 1997; Kane and Patapan 2010; Maddox 1974; 1986; Pettit 1994; Uhr 1984), liberalism (Crowder 2002; Levy 1994) and key concepts like democratic freedom (Walsh 2009), popular sovereignty (Crozier and Little 2012), the state (Barbalet 1986; Head 1984; Springborg 1987), individualism (Tucker 1979), libertarianism (Tier 1975) toleration (James 1977) and particular democratic rights and duties such as the right to commit acts of resistance and civil disobedience (Beran 1983; Francis 1981; Jackson 1975; Walzer 1975), the duty to vote (Hill 2015) and the right to free speech (Chesterman 2001; Gelber and McNamara 2013). There have also been studies from a mainly theoretical perspective on issues like nuclear deterrence (Okin 1983) and the prisoner's dilemma (Pettit 1985), as well as the occasional paper on feminist theory (Helling 1973; Thornton 1982).

As far as classical political theory is concerned, there has been only one original article discussing an aspect of Plato's political thought (Brownlee 1977), one that draws on Aristotle (Uhr 1995) and another on antique political iconography (Springborg 1991). In relation to early and late modern political theory, two articles have engaged with the thought of Hobbes (James 1977; Trainor 1977) and a handful of others have focused on the thought of Hume, Bentham, Coleridge, T. H. Green, the Webbs, Marcuse, Hayek, Beauvoir and Foucault. It took Quentin Skinner (1983) to publish the first, and so far only, article devoted to the thought of Machiavelli.

Much of the engagement with history of political thought occurred via the longer descriptive review essays that were published in the earlier issues, but over time these slowly disappeared. The theorist to receive the most attention has been J.S. Mill, largely, it seems, because he is relevant to debates about representative democracy, the theme that has received the lion's share of theorising in the journal (Duncan 1969; Jacobs 1993; Kleinig 1983; Mayer 1968). The second most popular theorist



has been Marx whose thought has been frequently enlisted to explore concrete issues (Barbalet 1974; Coram 1983). This, I believe, reflects the journal's focus on more instrumental and applied uses of political theory. For example, in a special edition of the journal on the protection of human rights in 2009 there was not a single theory article; instead all the contributions were either applied or comparative in nature. Attention to classical political theory is, perhaps understandably, relatively meagre largely because the centre of gravity of those conversations lies in journals published in Europe and North America. Australians wishing to contribute to those conversations must publish in journals that reach the intended audience. I say more about this presently.

Some may perhaps lament the lack of high theorising on questions of justice. Instead, there have been a number of studies with an applied focus (Gans 1981; Goodin 1983; Travers 1988; Young 1975). It seems as though Australian political science has largely ignored the developments in Rawlsian theorising (except for Kearns 1983), at least in the *AJPS*. For example, recent work on refugees almost always only appeals to international law norms, without any theorising on the justice of free movement.

It is not only political philosophy that has been under-represented in the *AJPS*. So too, for a long time, was theory-informed political science in general. In the 1980s local political scientists appealed to theorists to bring their expertise to bear on Australian issues (Brugger and Jaensch 1985; Emy 1997) while many agreed with Campbell Sharman when he reflected in 1990 on 'the lack of theory, both analytical and normative, to explain and justify our system of government'. Sharman lamented that there was no theoretically coherent picture of some of the central features of the Australian political system, such as the tension between the liberal and collectivist strains, the dispersal of power between institutions, a constitutional theory tailored for the Australian system and the real place of parliament in the political process, especially in relation to the executive (Sharman 1990: 1; see also Colebatch 1992: 1). That issue has been partly remedied in recent decades, as is discussed below.

The status of political theory over time

Editors and contributors to the *AJPS* have long been aware that political theory suffered from weak representation in the journal and it has been a regular cause for reflection and sometimes concern. In 1979 the Australasian Political Studies Association (APSA) produced an index of all the articles that the journal had published from 1966, its inaugural year, to 1978. Commenting on the index, Marian Sawer pointed out that 'no major work of contemporary political or social theory was reviewed in *Politics*' (1981: 82). John Rawls' *A theory of justice* and Robert Nozick's *Anarchy, state and Utopia* had appeared in 1971 and 1974 respectively, and both went unremarked on in the review pages of the time, although Nozick received some belated attention (Tucker 1979). Since then, only one article has substantively engaged with Rawlsian political philosophy (Kearns 1983). Writing in 1983, as the guest editor of a special issue devoted to political theory, Carol Pateman related the story of how the decision to produce such a volume was taken in an early meeting of the Political Theory Group of APSA, formed in 1975. The motivation for the proposal was that political theorists believed they had something of



importance to say, yet 'felt that political theory had been poorly represented in *Poli*tics' (Pateman 1983: 1).

Paternan struck an optimistic note, remarking that Australian 'political theory is now flourishing ... strongly' (1983: 2). Similarly, in his chapter on 'Political theory' published in Surveys of Australian Political Science in 1985, Conal Condren observed that 'political theory is alive and well living in Australia'. Condren (1985: xx) conceded that 'the uninterrupted growth of political theory in and around departments of political science in Australia' would probably come as a surprise to many considering 'the financially straitened circumstances of academia' at the time, coupled with the fact that 'Australia does not form a natural focus of attention for a subject shaped in Europe and North America'.

Yet, if political theory ever did have a heyday in the journal it has probably passed, at least for now. This does not mean that theory per se here is down for the count. Indeed, Ian Tregenza has noted that in the last several decades political theory has been 'an area of undoubted strength in Australian political studies. Across fields such as deliberative democracy, republicanism, feminist theory and environmental theory, the Australian contribution to international debates has been considerable' (2009:69).

History of political thought has also survived, albeit largely in outlets other than the AJPS. As Graham Maddox has noted (2009: 374–75), Australians like Richard Mulgan (originally a New Zealander), 'Conal Condren, John Uhr, Haig Patapan and Lisa Hill' have made substantial contributions in their respective areas of specialisation. The work of others like Ian Hunter and Patricia Springborg also bears notice here. But these contributions have not generally appeared in the AJPS.

The special issue edited by Pateman in 1983 did not obviously succeed in spurring more Australian theorists to publish in the AJPS. In 1990, when the journal changed its name from Politics to Australian Journal of Political Science, the editorial team announcing the change took the opportunity to declare its desire for increased contributions in fields that had so far received only marginal coverage, including 'political theory and political philosophy' (McAllister, Lovell and Maley 1990). This declaration did not change the fortunes of political theory much, if at all, as the figures above indicate. This may have been partly related to the fact that in 1989 a new outlet for Australian political theorists became available. This was the year the *Political theory* newsletter (the name of which belied its substantial content) began publishing important contributions to high theory debates from both local and international theorists. As if to underline the comparatively small market for political theory in Australia, however, the journal was relatively short-lived and ceased publication in 1998.

Explanations

How can we account for this two-pronged 'theory deficit' (i.e., a lack of high theory and a lack of theory-informed Australianist work) in our flagship journal? I suggest that the relative absence of theory in the AJPS is not altogether sinister. It may be, as Maddox has suggested, the historical legacy of living in a nation that lacked a strong 'foundation in political thought' (2009: 369). Australia was not founded in revolution or utopianism, and it has always seemed too pragmatic to have much time for more speculative or exegetically-oriented political theory. It is fair to say that there has been no national theory tradition in Australia and we have not produced a great political theorist to focus attention (Condren 1985; Maddox 2009; Walter 1988).



Perhaps however, as Geoff Stokes points out in his challenge to the received view, this is the wrong way of looking at the issue. First of all, Australia has, in fact, experienced 'one of the most profound revolutions of modern times' in which its original inhabitants were 'violently eliminated or displaced'. This event, he suggests, is riven with ideology: a 'struggle between competing philosophies of life and land' (Stokes 1994: 252). Second, Stokes rejects the idea that Australia lacks a 'self-consciously idealised conception of the nature and purpose of social life' (as per Emy and Hughes 1988: 39) and questions the 'universalist tradition of political theory' that is blind to Australia's unique contribution to political theory. For Stokes, Australian political theory needs no apology because the line between thought and practice has never been bright in Australian political culture. The very embeddedness of home-grown political thought is what makes it Australian. Neither abstract nor universalist, it is implicitly embodied in 'practices within key parts of the governmental structure ... which operate to set the practical terms of government debate and action' (Stokes 1994: 247). The constitution, federalism and cabinet government are all ideas in practice while Australian republicanism mines a rich yet barely articulated body of anti-monarchist sentiment. Similarly, Australian political parties are not just institutions constituted by their practices but are thoroughly imbued with ideas to which Australians are particularly attached such as 'unity, loyalty ... leadership ... and consensus' (Stokes 1994: 246–47).

In any case, other factors, have exerted a deadening effect on a domestic species of high political theory. To begin, the field has been gradually squeezed out by the internationalisation of the study of politics that seems to have been at least partly instigated by the 9/11 attacks. In the last one or two decades, political science departments in Australia have expanded their international studies programs at the expense of other sub-disciplines like political theory and even Australian politics. That trend now seems to be tapering off but the legacy remains. Another pressure is the absence of a large and receptive-enough audience that is simply a function of a comparatively small population. As a consequence political theorists have had to be cosmopolitan in targeting their intended audience and have looked to specialist journals mainly in Europe and North America rather than generalist ones with a more of a local focus like the *AJPS*. This behaviour has no doubt been encouraged by the fact that, as Condren (1985) noted, political theory in Australia is 'dominated by the exiled or exotically educated' who are naturally disposed to focus 'their attentions on an overseas *agora* of debate'.

Another pressure is undoubtedly the globalisation of academia which has brought with it pressure on those who are able do so to publish in international rather than domestic journals. In order to be appointed or promoted, theorists have not only been expected to publish in European and North American journals, they have also chosen to do so, for the sake of recognition and in order to find interested, engaged (and engaging) readers. In addition, more than one experienced theorist has suggested to me that it is a matter of good manners to refrain from taking up too much space in the journal at the expense of scholarship with a more Australian flavour and where alternative outlets are readily at hand. Therefore theorists are more likely to take their message to such journals as *Political Theory*, *Journal of Political Philosophy*, *Journal of Politics*, *Journal of Theoretical Politics*, *History of Political Thought*, *Review of Politics* or *European Journal of Political Theory*. Together the above-mentioned trends and attitudes has meant that high political theory must continue to fight for its right to exist. Theorists have also had to be strategic in training



their doctoral students, advising them to hone the art of scholarly adaptation and survival

In any case, if articles in the journal have a more local than theoretical flavour this is hardly a bad thing. After all, every nation needs a journal that reflects on its own concerns, providing coverage of domestic events. The AJPS does this well. And it not as though the journal has ignored political theory altogether nor that theorists have not found ways to adapt.

Australian political theory: a story of adaptation and survival

The representation of political theory in the AJPS serves as a kind of magnified litmus test of the health of political theory in the Anglosphere more generally. Theorists in Australia strike me as a rather lonely breed especially vulnerable to the longstanding sense of insecurity experienced by theorists worldwide. This insecurity finds its roots in the US context where the applied subfields have long overshadowed theory but has been exacerbated here by the sorts of factors mentioned above. Panic about the alleged imminent 'death of theory' in the 1970s (e.g., Condren 1974) seems to have lapsed into a combination of resignation and creative guerrilla warfare for the time being. Most Australian theorists will tell you that years go by between advertised theory jobs. So its practitioners have had to be adaptable in order to keep theory (and careers) alive. They have tended to do this in two ways: first to develop expertise in other subdisciplinary fields. Many theorists have moved sideways into theoryenriched second strings in such sub-fields as international studies, migration studies, terrorism studies, democratic innovation, public law, electoral studies, democratic practice and processes, public policy and constitutional theory. Second, others have made theory useful and more accessible by irrigating Australian problems and concerns with high theory and classical sources (Maddox 2009: 374). It is primarily through these survival strategies that political theorists have been able to make their presence felt in the journal and the journal has certainly welcomed these overtures.

Much of the political theory published has been applied instrumentally to the central democratic institutions and practices of Australian politics. For example, a special edition of the journal on Australian republicanism elicited a number of theoretical explorations of the topic (Maddox 1993; Pettit 1993; Uhr 1993). A theory lens has also been fruitfully applied to local issues, processes and institutions like compulsory voting (Hill 2002; Pringle 2012), the welfare state (Fenna and Tapper 2012; Travers 1988), native title (Patton 1995; Ritter 2010), reconciliation (Schaap 2006), human rights (Gelber 2005; Hill and Koch 2011; Langlois 2014; Patapan 1996; Trainor 1979), the Australian settlement (Stokes 2004), Australian constitutionalism (Eckersley and Zifcak 2001; Emy 1997; Staveley 1976), public law (Gelber and McNamara 2013), representation (Clark 1971; Tanasescu 2014), the Australian state (Galligan 1984); the separation of powers (Gelber 2006; Patapan 1999), the doctrine of responsible government (Archer 1980; Galligan 1980; Parker 1976), multiculturalism (Smits 2011), federalism (Smullen 2014; Vile 1977), Australian discourses of democracy (Dryzek 1994), Australian political culture (Johnson 1992) and even the peculiarly Australian conception of politics itself (Archer and Maddox 1976).

This strategy of approaching substantive moral and political problems through a theory lens has usefully brought theory into mainstream political science and has therefore enabled theorists to partly to address Sharman's concern mentioned



above. But at the same time it seems to have pushed more speculative, historical or exegetical work into an international *agora* that to a certain extent has obscured the work of theorists from their Australian colleagues. I get the sense that Australian political science is often unaware of what its theorists have been up to, even those highly-cited theorists with conspicuous international profiles (e.g., Dryzek, Hindess, Pettit, Keith Dowding and Goodin). This recognition is something to be celebrated but it nevertheless underlines that Australian theorists need to work extra hard and creatively, not only in order to find their audiences but more importantly to keep the field alive here. The *AJPS* has shown that it can play an important role in this project.

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