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### Review of Transforming Political Discourse

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*TRANSFORMING POLITICAL DISCOURSE: POLITICAL THEORY & CRITICAL CONCEPTUAL HISTORY* by Terence Ball. Oxford: Blackwell, 1988. Pp. xiii, 199. \$43.95.

Political theorists are almost always fond of giving each other homework assignments but not generally fond of completing them. The opening salvo in a promised three-volume campaign to redefine the tasks of political theory, *Transforming Political Discourse* might seem to invite more weary shrugs. Surely, we have too many manifestos already. Well, yes – but this one, happily, is modest, sensible, and mercifully brief. Better yet, its brevity is positively austere in sketching the metadescription of what the promised land looks like. The argument actually hangs on a series of show-and-tell exercises, which are supposed to be applications of the general method.

Ball wants to take very seriously two familiar insights: one from Weber, and the other from Wittgenstein. The Weberian point, already made much of by Quentin Skinner, is that political actors need to be able to exhibit their projects as legitimate; but what can be shown to be legitimate depends in part on the concepts and categories at hand. The Wittgensteinian point, already made much of by Alasdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor, is that when it comes to social life, our language is not just a neutral medium at arm's length from some independent reality but instead, is partly constitutive of that reality. Our political concepts, then, are inevitably a battleground – sometimes I suspect Ball wants to say the only or the definitive battleground – of political life.

Now, all this has an importantly historical dimension. Concepts shift their meaning over time, in part, because clever political actors deliberately set out to transform them. When they do, they open up dramatically new possibilities. And they change the world. Critical conceptual history, while a bit of a mouthful, is just the project of tracing such conceptual shifts. Doing

so, Ball urges, will give us a deeper understanding not just of past political struggles but of our own vocabularies — and therefore of our own political lives. Sometimes, I must note, Ball presses the claims for the political payoffs of such history way too far, as when he writes, “bad conceptual history makes for inept and politically pernicious conceptual transformations” (p. 130). This is at least overmoralized and misses the mischievous Nietzschean possibility that genuine historical knowledge is incapacitating, as well as the more workaday point that it is often sensible for political actors to tell lies, including lies about their conceptual heritage.

Doubtless some will protest that this agenda for theory is invidiously relativist, others that it blurs the history of ideas and our own theoretical dilemmas in confounding ways. I confess, though, that I am wholly sympathetic to (what I take to be) Ball’s project. What follow are not criticisms but, rather, arguments on behalf of making the project more deeply historical. At least in the form it takes in this volume, critical conceptual history is incomplete and unstable. Consider three points.

First, Ball wants to sharply distinguish his own task from that of conceptual analysis, the sort of thing turned out by Oxbridge analytic philosophers. The show-and-tell exercises, though — studies of party, the debate over republics at the American founding, power, authority, the economic understanding of democracy — are, for the most part, too episodic. (The last essay, a study of the possibility of intergenerational justice, is not any kind of history at all.) Ball himself repeatedly emphasizes that they are sketchy, partial, the mere beginnings of a full account, but then they cannot do the work of demonstrating what critical conceptual history is really about. When he shows, for instance, that Herbert Simon is unconsciously echoing the likes of Hume, it is a mere accident of chronology that Hume came first. All that matters is the resemblance between their views. Here, the distinction between critical conceptual history and conceptual analysis is vanishingly small and not only because Ball’s own prose style is remarkably close to Oxbridge.

Second, both the Weberian and the Wittgensteinian points might be rendered in a more systematically historical way. It is not timelessly true that political actors need to exhibit their projects as legitimate. An absolute monarch, to take a stylized example, can simply announce what his royal pleasure is; he need not enter the game of justification at all. It is more characteristic of parliamentary democracies, glorified talkshops that they are, to put such an emphasis on public justification. Or again, consider the competing audience one faces. A medieval church father may well need the best arguments he can muster in dealing with his fellow bishops, but when confronting the loyal flock, he does not make an argument on the merits, he

issues a decree. Less obviously, I do not know any human societies that are not partly constituted by language, but there still could be (and are) differences in just how that goes. For instance, some social actors may gain an awareness of this recondite point in social theory. But then, thanks to some familiar points about reflexivity, we should expect it to go differently. (Ball himself makes a closely connected point in examining Madison's discussion of language in *The Federalist*.) Or again, think of social formations in their decadent stages, where people go through the motions winking or smirking, ironically distanced from the concepts they brandish.

Third, it has always been easy to deride the kind of political theory turned out by analytic philosophers, for all its commendable smarts and precision. Not only is it radically unhistorical; more generally, it is radically unempirical. Take some intuitions, add some fiendishly clever arguments, stir well, and halfbake. But this looks dreadfully like a strategy for getting something for nothing or for getting truth on the cheap. Critical conceptual historians, though, will have to get their hands dirty. They have to read extensively among primary texts, as Ball's footnotes suggest, even to draft a sketch of a history. But will they get their hands dirty enough? Can they simultaneously pledge allegiance to the Wittgensteinian insight about the interpenetration of language and social life *and* write something perilously close to a very old-fashioned history of ideas, making only the most cursory bows toward the rest of social life? Political concepts, I would argue, are not just challenged by the arguments of would-be innovators. They are also ravaged by other kinds of social change, by things that actually happen in the world, not just in books, pamphlets, and newspapers.

Son of critical conceptual history, then, may be a more deeply historical fellow than his father. And he may be inclined to deride his father as a mere waystation on the road to himself. But that looks like yet another case of Harold Bloom's anxiety of influence, and I have no desire to overplay these picayune disagreements. Ball's is a tantalizing assignment, as homework goes, one promising fun and illumination. Any takers?

—Don Herzog  
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