



JEAN HARDY A Wiser Politics

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Reviewed by Jean Boulton

You must read this book. If you are interested in political philosophy you will find it fascinating. If you are not interested in political philosophy you soon will be. This is a book written as books should be written. Jean combines her usual clarity with an engaging use of poems and quotations. You get to know first hand the characters who shaped our theories of politics, often by engaging with their own words; and you get the feeling for what they were about through Jean's judicious choice of poems to illuminate and elucidate each chapter.

Despite the unquestionable scholarship and wide-ranging sources, the book has the feel of a set of stories or vignettes which help the reader to explore and roam around the ideas and get to know the people who developed them. It allows the reader really to reflect on what politics is about: what is it for, who is it for, what is included and what tends to be left out.

In the first part of the book, Jean introduces us to a number of political philosophers who she feels are key to the development of political thinking. These vignettes are light and straightforward and yet authoritative and engaging. They make me want to find out more. Jean also includes in this political patchwork one very unusual name, that of Charles Darwin. I wholeheartedly concur that Darwin changed the face of many disciplines; his ideas of indeterminacy – the fact that the future cannot be predicted

– and the importance of variation and diversity influenced physics and biology and philosophy, psychology and economics as well as politics. One can argue that Darwin has had more influence on intellectual discourse than anyone since Isaac Newton. Some of that influence has been to the good, in that he emphasised the importance of collaboration as much as the role of competition and the importance of diversity rather than of standardisation; equally, some of his ideas were distorted as a way to support eugenics and the primacy of competition. It is a great choice to include Darwin amongst the political philosophers.

Jean makes it clear that a central theme that drives politics is how you view 'The Nature of Man'. Rousseau thought Man is largely Good and so a political system needs to give room for this goodness to flourish. Machiavelli thought Man is largely Bad and thus needs controlling by the state, or, as Jean (p26) puts it, "the Government exists to restrain the imperfections springing from this negative characteristic".

Whilst Jean does a wonderful job of considering the impact of differing assumptions regarding the Nature of Man, she could perhaps have given more prominence to the differing assumptions about the way the world works, about theories of society. She does mention the idea of society as a series of market relations and the need for political society to maintain orderly relationships (p33). But perhaps she could have taken this further? So, I would have been interested in her views as to how Newton's ideas (translated into French by the Marquise de Chatelet, who was the mathematical brains behind the better-known Voltaire, her lover) influenced the philosophy of the French Enlightenment. Newton's laws offered a vision of the world as a place of predictability, rationality, objectivity and control that was very beguiling; Voltaire introduced these ideas to France, in *Elements of the Philosophy of Newton* written in 1736. What underpinned the

French Enlightenment was this doctrine of determinism and the belief that society could be designed as from a blank sheet of paper and a belief that society would then operate as designed. So the ways in which this image – of society as a machine which political and economic systems could control – has influenced subsequent political thought might be a theme to explore in more depth in a later edition of this wonderful book.

Incidentally, Hayek (1958), a 20th century economist and philosopher who Jean was moved to include, contrasts this Newtonian machine view with the view of the Scottish tradition of the Enlightenment – led by David Hume, Adam Smith and Adam Ferguson. Hayek explains that they described their theory as one "which showed how... complex and orderly and, in a very definite sense, purposive structures might grow up which owed little or nothing to design, which were not invented by a contriving mind but arose from the separate actions of many men who did not know what they were doing". This tension between *laissez-faire* and design and control which still underpins political and economic thought, emerged from this Enlightenment period. And indeed, whether *laissez-faire* leads to the greatest good for the greatest number, or, in practice leads to the increasing domination of the powerful, remains a moot point (see, for example, Boulton, 2010).

The second part of the book, which draws on a quite marvellous breadth of literature, focuses on themes that politics tends to ignore. This includes women, feminine qualities, the Earth, the unconscious, the spiritual, native wisdom. So it invites us both to stray away from traditional and mainstream sources of wisdom and ways of thinking as well as exhorting us to reconsider what politics is for – in the sense that political systems surely need to protect the weak, create economic equity, work to sustain the planet and uphold human rights. Jean calls on a lifetime's exploration of psychology, feminism, spirituality, as

well as politics, to provide new angles and provocations and unsettle us from the idea that politics is what it is because that is how things are. These same interconnected themes, this holistic view of social life, are relevant to any social enterprise and hence the inclusion of this eclectic and riveting range of perspectives is itself a political act, as it gets us, in the most interesting and engaging way, to review our worldview, challenge ourselves to see things differently – whether we are designing political systems or bringing up children or running a charity, or running a bank – or, indeed, just going shopping.

And where else would you, on the one hand, get to know, through pithy original quotes, how seventeenth century parents were exhorted to discipline children, seen as born evil, due to their original sin (p148); and on the other hand see how children's intrinsic badness legitimated institutional obedience in the political climate of the times? Where else would you find a poem by Thomas Hardy which captures the way he felt Man was a threat to the natural world (p119) in the same book as a question set in a 1907 examination at the London School of Economics (p106) "give facts illustrating the savage's personality, and consider how far this differs from the fully developed concept". Jean uses her extremely wide breadth of sources to provide an almost visceral sense of earlier attitudes and reflections, thus minimising the need for long explanations or justifications. She leaves it to the reader to be moved by the material and yet the approach lacks nothing in clarity. Jean is clear about her arguments, follows through on themes

and uses illustrative material in a most effective and affecting way.

One additional source of material that Jean could maybe explore for a second edition of the book is greater focus on the overlap of politics with economics and ecology. In the same way that political systems often seek to benefit those already with power, the same criticism is often aimed at economic systems; and what economic theories governments choose is itself a political act.

For example, the Radical Economics movement in America in the late 1960s asked (Tiago Mata, 2006): "How frequent are articles which deal with the economics of racism, poverty in the American economy, international imperialism, or the real economics of defence?"

Mata goes on to say: "Radicals called for empathy with society and its ills. Radicals corresponded objectivity with the objectification of subjects which benefited the interests of the status quo by constructing and maintaining a 'machine-like' social system."

There may also be some useful material to explore in the green economics movement (Cato, 2009), the theories of evolutionary economics and ecological economics and the whole movement of limits to growth (Meadows, 2004 and Daly, 2007). Jean mentions capitalism and its interplay with individual freedom (p36) and I would have liked to have understood this better from her perspective.

But these are small suggestions. This book does not seek to be comprehensive; it seeks to entice, provoke, send us off in new directions, integrate themes and weave new connections. This book is about Jean's life and her own political and intellectual journey as much as it is about political philosophy and I was very moved by her dedication of this book to her father and her discussion about her own experiences and influences. Read this book. Dip into it; read it backwards; buy it for your friends; emulate its style; read its references; learn its poems. You will not be disappointed [publication date: April 2011].

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