

## POLITICAL THEORY

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**Democracy and Decision: The Pure Theory of Electoral Preference.** By Geoffrey Brennan and Loren Lomasky. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993. 237p. \$44.95.

Geoffrey Brennan has coauthored, with James Buchanan, a seminal work in constitutional political economy, *The Reason of Rules*, and *The Power To Tax*. Loren Lomasky is a philosopher interested in questions of authority and rights. After previously coediting a book, *Politics and Process*, together, they have now jointly written an important new book, *Democracy and Decision*, which is a critique of public choice theory as it applies to the electoral arena.

At first blush, this is the best of times for public choice theory and its political science alter ego, positive political theory. With a Nobel Prize in economics to leading practitioner James Buchanan, public choice gained added legitimacy in economics, while in political science, theorem-laden articles appear in the discipline's leading journals with regularity. In the Twenty-Fifth Anniversary edition of *Public Choice*, Dennis Mueller, author of the leading public choice textbook, opines, "It is difficult to believe that political science will not be taken over by formal modeling of rational actors' behavior in the same way that economics has been. Inductive theorizing invariably loses out to deductive; less formal modeling invariably loses out to more formal modeling" (77[1993]: 146).

But all is not roses for rational choice modelers. In political science, the rise of rational choice modeling has led to a reaction of epic proportions, similar in tone to the antibehavioral movement of the late fifties and early sixties and directly comparable to the (unsuccessful) rearguard fight of older economists against the increased use of mathematics in that profession after World War II. According to Mueller, "While [that] takeover was occurring, complaints could be heard that the new techniques 'were not economics', were being used 'to reinvent the wheel', were 'divorced from reality', and the like" (ibid.): by simply substituting *political science* for *economics* in this quote, we obtain the basic argument of the current rational-choice bashing repertoire in political science. All that we need to add is the common accusation that public choice is just a cover for right-wing ideas.

If anti-public-choice sentiment were confined to political scientists of a humanist (or left-wing) persuasion, we might be able to dismiss it as simply old-fogeyism or leftist paranoia; but concern about the lack of realism and lack of explanatory power of rational choice models is widespread and is found even among practitioners of public choice and positive political theory. In particular, there has arisen a concern that public choice models in their purest form (i.e., ones based on a narrow definition of self-interest or a monomaniacal focus on a single goal such as electoral victory) simply miss too many important features of politics. Thus, we have Morris Fiorina titling a 1991 paper "Is Turnout the Paradox That Ate Rational Choice Theory?," while William Niskanen goes even further, suggesting that although public choice has become a recognized field of academic study, "it is not

clear that we have much to tell the rest of the world." Niskanen then goes on to note that public choice theorists not only cannot answer such questions as "Why do people vote?" but "have no satisfactory explanations of the major political developments of our lifetime: the massive expansion of government budgets and regulation, the erosion of the economic constitution, and the progressive spread and recent collapse of communism" (*Public Choice* 77(1993):155).

*Democracy and Decision* is reflective of this critique of public choice from within the subfield. While critical of public choice theories of voter behavior, it does not in any way reject the standard tools of microeconomics and applied decision theory, and, like Howard Margolis' work on altruism, it offers new models to help account for findings that appear largely inexplicable within a framework of pure self-interest narrowly defined. The central contribution of *Democracy and Decision* is the working out of a theory of *expressive voting*, whereby Brennan and Lomasky mean voting behavior that is not connected to an impact on outcome—like cheering for a team while watching them on television, even when you are alone at home.

My economist colleague Ami Glazer, also an exponent of an expressive model of voting, has suggested that "the ballot box is the last place where it is still legal to be a racist." Brennan and Lomasky argue that the ballot box is also a place where it is not particularly costly to be an altruist; that is, they turn the "selfish voter" argument on its head, by pointing out that because a voter is unlikely to be decisive, voters are much freer to vote in a way that makes themselves feel good by enhancing their self-image as ethical, principled beings. The argument is made nontautological by the assertion "All other things being equal, the relative significance of expressive elements increases by a factor equal to the inverse of the probability of being decisive" (p. 24). Thus, Brennan and Lomasky are able to say that *homo economicus* is generally a reasonable model for decisions about personal consumption but is, nonetheless, a bad model for choices in the public arena. Just as recent work by Donald Wittman (on competition for voters) or Norman Schofield (on cabinet formation) models parties as caring about both ideology and about winning, the Brennan and Lomasky book shows that allowing for expressive forms of voter preference and for multiple goals need not mean rejecting the value of formal modeling or of a rational choice approach, broadly speaking.

Brennan and Lomasky are able to trace both empirical and normative implications of viewing politics in terms of expressive choices. Normatively, they note that preferences revealed at the ballot box will not have the same claims to authenticity in terms of what economists call "demand revelation" as do preferences about private goods expressed through market choice. Empirically, they suggest how the expressive voting model can help account for a wide range of phenomena—from why facts and allegations about the private lives of public figures weigh into voter decision making to why public attitudes toward Social Security hinge more on perceptions of fairness than on the incidence of costs and benefits across generations.

There is no such thing as *the* rational choice model of any given phenomena, only *a* rational choice model. For example, even though the minimal winning coalition model does not work well in most countries in explaining cabinet coalition formation, this is no reason to give up on rational choice models of coalition building. The usefulness of any given model—rational choice or other—must be in terms of the insights it provides us to the particular phenomena we are seeking to understand and explain. Informed by common sense and focused on the substance of electoral politics, *Democracy and Decision* carefully steers between the Scylla of abstract rational-choice bashing without the offering of superior alternatives and the Charybdis of confusing degree of technical elegance or mathematical sophistication with likely social science importance.

Whatever your methodological stance, if you are interested in electoral politics, this is a book worth reading. Unlike much positive political theory, sometimes seemingly intentionally written up so as to remain incomprehensible to most political scientists, *Democracy and Decision* is lively and well written. Because the ideas in it suggest potentially testable alternative models in so many substantive domains, it is also a great book to give to graduate students looking for thesis topics.

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**Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought.** By Margaret Canovan. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992. 298p. \$54.95.

**Arendt, Camus, and Modern Rebellion.** By Jeffrey C. Issac. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992. 320p. \$30.00.

Arendt was a theorist of the extraordinary, a philosophical poet of the preternatural: Holocaust and Achilles, concentration camps and ancient spaces of appearance, imperialism and revolutions in search of freedom. In these jarring historical and aesthetic phenomena, she located the massive dangers, as well as the possibilities, in the contemporary human condition. Future politics, in all of its possible senses, would only rise from the ashes of these multiple pasts: the brilliantly human and the hideously inhuman. No other future was an offer.

Arendt's political theory is thus not only intrinsically intriguing but precisely pertinent to many of our concerns and dilemmas. Fully cognizant of this, Canovan and Issac strive hard to unravel her complex theory and connect it to our politics. Yet their distinct readings of Arendt, interesting and suggestive, are too flawed substantively to be fully persuasive. In this sense, neither is cogent as an argument, but Canovan's study is far less compelling than Issac's in its analytic reach and accomplishments.

Long and detailed beyond the call of scholarly duty, Canovan's inquiry is *not* an argument about Arendt or a reinterpretation of her thought: it is an extended commentary on nearly all of her writings based on her assumption that Arendt has been "little understood" (p. 2). Two further claims buttress this one: that the "proper context" of her corpus is totalitarianism (p. 7) and that her real political theory lies hidden in her unpublished writings. No one, according to the intrepid Ms. Canovan, has really got Arendt right.

That Arendt's political theory is rooted in her encoun-

ter and engagement with the totalitarian Holocaust is not a novel theme. Kateb and many other scholars have not only insisted on this for over a decade, they have also analyzed the nuanced pathways that connect her theory and that terrible event. Canovan's stress on this point is puzzling and disingenuous. Far more troubling, however, is Canovan's dotting reliance on Arendt's unpublished papers and her surprisingly uncritical attitude to them.

To Arendt, the private was usually a synonym for fantasy and falsity, a marker for those things not worth revealing to the public. Hence, a scholar who resorts to—and structures a "reinterpretation" (in fact, a commentary) on—Arendt's private, unpublished papers is under some obligation to justify her project. Canovan, however, does not, although she offers the feeble rationale that Arendt's thought is actually "inward-looking" and "esoteric" (pp. 11–12)—contrary to what Arendt herself has said and many interpreters have supposed. No evidence exists to support this outlandish claim, and none is adduced.

Nevertheless, the result of this strategy is ironic: the "insights" that she elicits from the private papers fail to shed any new light on Arendt's political theory. For example, Homer's pivotal role in Arendt's articulation of the nobility of action on which Canovan insists, is plain and patent in the *Human Condition* and in the extant published literature on Arendt. In fact, many of Canovan's breathless, analogous discoveries, based on her reading of the unpublished papers, fall into the familiar category. At best, they signal slight shifts in emphasis and occasionally add clarity, but they do not warrant a radical revision of her thought.

No novel interpretation or substantive reinterpretation of Arendt's political theory is visible in this study. Tracing the "sources" of a range of Arendt's ideas and commenting at length on them is apparently her forté. Canovan is instructive and often illuminating in her discussion of totalitarianism, barbarism and civilization, republicanism, citizenship, human plurality, and the relationship between philosophy and politics, although her tone is frequently cloying and defensive.

This peculiar style of intellectual empathy, in fact, accounts for a number of unusual but untenable claims. In her unlimited passion to "understand," Canovan zealously overreads and misconstrues Arendt's critical reflections. Two morally troubling examples should suffice. First, Canovan resuscitates the hoary canard that Arendt blamed the Jews for the terrible destruction they suffered at the hands of the Nazis (p. 44). (The only interesting question here is why she has revived this accusation.) Canovan asserts that in Arendt's analysis, "the Holocaust could never have happened" if only the European Jews "had a clear grasp of political principles" (p. 55). Not only did Arendt say nothing of the sort, but such a claim would contradict her unceasing theoretical emphasis on the radical contingency of life and politics. No credible textual evidence is produced by Canovan to support either indictment.

No less troubling is her rush to defend Arendt's solicitous analysis of white racist conduct in Africa and characterization of black natives as "savages." Canovan neither objects to, nor avoids, this label in discussing black suffering: on the contrary, she fluently explains it away as a corollary of their natural inferiority, their barbaric "worldlessness" (quoting Arendt). Canovan is not deterred, by the racist undertow in this analysis,