POLITIK – WESEN, WIEDERKEHR, ENTLASTUNG, by Miguel Skirl. Berlin; Duncker & Humblot, 2005. 358pp. Paper. €84. ISBN: 9783428115006.

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Students of political science learn at a relatively early stage in their curriculum that the 'political' has been the province of what are nowadays called political theorists. Yet what students not so often learn is that these very same political theorists were not aloof from the context they were describing. Political theorists were activists, advisers and/or critics that either lobbied for the project of their clients, or lamented about the course of events. Thus the writings of so-called political theorists do not only inform 'the political' but represent viewpoints and positions in struggles for influence and domination. The field of political theory, given that one may actually delimit its boundaries, has always been a repository of normative considerations and practical concerns. It is therefore interesting, and somewhat puzzling, that academics tend to approach the writings of such theorists primarily on the premise that something called 'the political' can be identified and reconstructed in a nominal fashion and without much regard for both the goals that such writings were meant to promote, and the – unintended – consequences that they spurred over time.

To be sure, the fabrication of knowledge about 'the political' and political theory has become the business of academics who are mostly employed by university departments of political science. The production and dissemination of knowledge about 'the political' is thus administrated by bureaucratic agencies and removed from the field of practical politics. The great majority of such bureaucracies are located in the industrialized countries of the OECD world – and here especially in the United States, Great Britain, Australia, Germany, France, and Italy. Re-production of 'the political' occurs through interpretation of writings by specialized academics in Western universities who have learned to focus upon some identifiable object that they take to be coherent over time because this lends their construction of 'the political' the appearance of an intellectual discipline. Conforming however strictly to the rules of their discipline's operational code enables specialized academics to sustain the fundamental ontology of 'the political.' Yet they seldom bear out conceptually how distinct aspects of the 'political' relate to, and perhaps underlie, practical projects and perspectives.

Academic political scientists often seek to delineate aspects and determinants of political authority by tracing texts of great writers for hints regarding the position of the individual *vis-à-vis* society on the one hand and the state on the other. They usually single out great texts, preferably by authors such as Plato, Aristotle, Macchiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, Mill, Marx, Nietzsche, Weber, Schmitt, and, [*817] of course, Rawls, as particularly relevant for this purpose. The conventional convictions of academic political theory, the presentist concerns of academic commentators, and the interrogation of conceptual categories of a handful seminal texts, demarcate the boundaries of a field, or discourse, that serves as a relatively solid ground for inquiry and disagreement. Academic political theory is thus mainly about object-forms called 'the state,' 'the people,' and particular sorts of public order. To be sure, there have been shifts in academic orientations. Questions that had been topical in the first half of the 20th century, such as those concerning the nature and subjects of 'obligation,' for instance, have been broadened so as to include structural and procedural aspects of 'the political.' Yet, the great bulk of literature in academic political theory has not concerned itself with interrogating the purpose, let alone the consequences, of the ontological forms that make up the object domain of politics. Contemporary academics have failed to take issue with the secular eschatology widely assumed to underlie classical and modern theories of 'the

political.' Few academic commentators have begun to reflect about the consequences that the great writers of political theory dissociated 'the political' from the divine and extra-mundane forces.

In short, there has perhaps been a void in the centre of the theory *and* practice of politics, a void that has been filled with nihilism. What aggravates this problem is that it has either gone unnoticed or that it has been denied by academics in Western political science departments. Adamant of getting closer at 'the political' as a conceptual matter, preferably through a literal and systematic interpretation of seminal texts, academic commentators have traced 'the political' back through its authoritative materials, recognized and conceived new political problems, expelled spurious and/or subversive intellectual tendencies, and they have improved existing interpretations. All this they have done in formal idioms and within logical forms of reasoning and interpretation considered suited to this purpose. But, however much the academic reproduction of 'the political' has sought to uncover what lies hidden in the great texts of political theory, it has so far not posed a threat to the fundamental ontological forms, the formal order, and the secularization presumed to underlie the object domain of political theory. This – i.e. that the theory and practice of the political has been nihilistic – is the basic claim of POLITIK – WESEN, WIEDERKEHR, ENTLASTUNG by Miguel Skirl.

It is a critical and highly interesting claim. It is a claim that I see worthy of being treated with care. I have read the entire manuscript twice and have come to find myself puzzled by the fundamentalism that is built into this claim. I have nevertheless enjoyed reading the book because the argument has been formulated in an idiosyncratic fashion that is markedly at odds with many (German) engagements with political theory.

Put most generally, Skirl has indicted the great texts of (Western) political theory for having been haunted by nihilism. In his estimation, the great writers of political theory have mainly been responsible for the fact that the political has more or less completely failed to [*818] respond to exigencies in space and time. This is because, confronted with the task to elaborate rational justifications of political authority and its exercise in the making of political order, political theorists have by and large failed to do precisely this – to conceive and rationalize the political. Seeking to endow the assumption of power with legitimacy, political theorists have done exactly the opposite: they have theorized about 'order,' 'justice,' 'freedom,' or 'property,' in a formal fashion but have ultimately destroyed the rational basis of the political. They have arrived at nihilism – each theorist in a particular way, but all taken together in a manner that is constitutive of a generic phenomenon. Yet what precisely does Skirl mean with nihilism? Or more appropriately: what sort of nihilism has Skirl made the basis of his allegation? There are several versions of it.

One understanding of nihilism, what may be headed 'moral nihilism,' has it that the world is without objective meaning, purpose, comprehensible truth, or essential value. The charge of nihilism consists, then, in the allegation that it leaves no room for the existence of a higher ruler or creator. The lack of meaning and purpose manifests itself in the absence of a 'true' morality and secular ethics. As a consequence, life is devoid of truth and no action is preferable to any other. Another concept of nihilism, 'status nihilism,' sees the beliefs of an accuser as more truthful than those of the accused. The latter's beliefs are portrayed as amounting to nothing. Still another version of nihilism, 'modern nihilism,' refers to a period or epoch. In this sense, modernity, especially as it has been characterised by relativism and pluralist forms of life, has often been dubbed nihilistic by theologians and figures of religious authority. Their claim is that adherents to modern lifestyles tend to reject the authority of God and therefore subscribe to nihilism. Closely related to this idea is still another version of

nihilism, the philosophical stance of 'ontological nihilism,' which is represented by figures such as Friedrich Nietzsche or Martin Heidegger. The former intimated that the exaltation of science and scientism undermined faith in the Christian system of values and morality. The latter has been associated with the claim that, because a being remains unquestioned and forgotten in metaphysics, it is an exemplar of *nihil*.

Skirl has been hesitant to subscribe to the philosophical reading of nihilism. This reading of the problem is too all-embracing and unspecific for his purpose, as it does not easily lend itself to interrogation of the political. The same goes for modern nihilism, even though it captures an important aspect when it alludes to the total loss of evaluative standards. The position that Skirl adopts is moral nihilism. The political has allegedly suffered from the loss of any orientation towards the divine. And, so the argument goes, this is not a recent phenomenon. According to Skirl, it had been characteristic for the modern and the classical epochs. The political came to be emancipated from the divine under Plato. In this respect, Nietzsche was right with his observation that Plato started the dissociation of the political from the divine with his doctrine of two worlds. The ensuing history of political theory has been the progressive displacement of God. The problem that the political has been confronted with results from the [*819] increasing enmity towards the divine, the embrace of atheism in the political field. And what is crucial in this respect, nihilism manifests itself as a practical stance because theory has paved the way for it. After all, political theory underlies and/or informs practice, irrespective of whether the champions of political theory are aware of it. The rejection of the divine in theory translates into pure activism as a practical stance. The expulsion of God from the political in theory makes itself felt in the doing for doing's sake. Singled out as the overarching problem of the political, nihilism shows in the explosion of governance devices and regulatory schemes whose operation has come to be premised solely on their multiplication and perfection. And, similar to how governing elites perceive their highest purpose to lie in the invention and implementation of ever more effective techniques of governance, individuals tend to feel satisfaction only when engaged in activities that confirm their sense of presiding over animate bodies, but that are otherwise devoid of any higher meaning.

So even though nihilism is mainly to be found in the realm of practice, it has only become such a pervasive and problematic real world phenomenon in the political field because of the failure of political theory. The writings of great figures of political thought have mainly been responsible for the fact that the monistic view of the world as an integrated whole, consisting of the mundane and the divine, has been lost. Starting with Plato, and culminating for the moment in Macchiavelli's conception of the political as an art to attain, and retain, a position of superordination and status-power, a theory of the political based on the view of politics as a 'technique of the feasible,' the political has been conceptually more and more dissociated from the divine. The political has come to be identified increasingly with the exercise of power by human beings over other human beings. The political has ultimately been a qualifier for mere arbitrariness. To be sure, the mundanisation of the political has been characterised by several distinct moments. One important moment of the mundane has been brought about by the increasing stratification and the ensuing formation of classes, as in France, which eventually paved the way for the politicisation of societies in the name of property power and other bourgeois values. Another moment of the mundane is associated with the incumbent liberation of what were to become the United States from colonial rule. Yet what is characteristic for all moments of the mundane is that the political dimension of the events in question came to be understood by contemporary political theorists as a contest among worldly forces. The great writers of political theory have occasionally redrawn the conceptual boundaries of the political field by integrating non-political features into the domain of

politics, but they have continuously stripped the political from higher purposes. The political is nihilistic, as it refers merely to how antagonistic forces compete for space in order to realise themselves. And, again, this is the fault of seminal texts of political theory as they have provided the vocabulary with which antagonists justify their strategies to outcompete adversaries.

As I have already hinted, the spatiotemporal frame within which Skirl [*820] locates the problem of nihilism reaches from the writings of ancient authors such as Sophocles, Plato, Aristotle to those of Augustine, from those of early modern contractualists (Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau) and rationalists (Bayle, Leibnitz, Kant, Fichte, and Hegel) to those of Burke and late modern authors such as Nietzsche, Schmitt, and Strauss. His theme is the ubiquity of nihilism in what is known by contemporary academics as political theory as such. Put differently, his claim is that all renowned writers of political theory did it in different ways, but the writings of all famous authors reinforced the nihilism at the very centre of politics. One noteworthy aspect here is that Skirl focuses primarily, but not only, upon texts written by the most widely known representatives of (Western) political theory. Skirl suggests that some writings are of principal importance, which makes sense if one bears in mind that political theory as a (Western) university discipline is rather tightly regulated as far as its disciplinary canons are concerned. The playground of what today goes under political theory is strictly delimited by a list of names that are usually meant to signal authorship of several seminal texts. But Skirl does not only focus upon seminal texts. He also glances at the bulk of secondary literature that has evolved more or less sensible interpretations of political. And the point is that they, too, share in the project of driving out the divine from the political field.

Daniel Defoe and Benjamin Franklin, for instance, arguably pertain to the main point at issue. They blended historical deeds with prominent ideas and made history ‘impact’ and ‘evolve’ as a series of meaningful events. But they, too, confirm Skirl’s diagnosis, namely that the writings of political theory have led politics into nihilism.

It is, of course, nothing new to maintain that writers like Nietzsche and Schmitt arrived at nihilism. As Skirl points out, Nietzsche posited a hierarchy that was neither instituted by some divine source nor by human beings. Nietzsche’s theme revolved around hierarchy as some *deus ex machina* that was not to be altered by practical deeds. Schmitt’s nihilism would come to the fore in his celebration of ‘decisionism,’ in the legitimation of decisions that were to be made in a state of emergency, which means a situation where public law would no longer apply. What is new, however, is the fundamentalism that is built into Skirl’s claim. The failure of political theory is only epitomized in the writings of Nietzsche and Schmitt. The classics and the contractualists are just as important hallmarks of nihilism. What is nihilistic in the writings of, Plato, Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau is their failure to cultivate a language that speaks to politicians of their respective days *and* that provides their programs with higher purposes. They failed to channel information about how to make decisions that met the challenges of the day and that resonated with what is good in a higher sense. They often drove out one sort of nihilism with another.

Plato, for one, sought to correct the failure of historians and tragedians alike; as he saw it, the former accounted for the political as something inevitable, the latter accounted for it as something outrageous, but inevitable all the same. To be more precise, figures like Herodot and Thucydides failed to perceive politics as something more than the [*821] realization of ‘might is right;’ Sophocles and Euripides, in turn, saw the inherent drama of politics but were led astray by their estimation of politics and the political being the ineradicable problem. In Skirl’s view, Plato provided a solution to this sort of nihilism in that he posited alternatives,

normative alternatives as it were, ideal states that were yet to be realized. The *Republic* and then the *Nomoi* were to serve as models, ideals, whose realization could, at least in principle, be aspired to. The political in either community, the state of the *Republic* as well as that of the *Nomoi*, would rest in a particular mode of governance: the practice of visionaries who would make decisions based on their knowledge of the truth. By rooting his political theory in idealism, however, Plato failed not only to address professional decisionmakers at the time. His normative solution came at the prize of being a theology that replaced the notion of divine order with the notion of societal order. In the end, Plato would appeal to an ordering mechanism whose origins lay in a divine-made-mundane. Plato's theory would revolve around the idea of an outerworldly force as ordering mechanism, but one that was stripped of its divine roots. If held against the premise that political theory as such is always to inform and guide political practice in a sense that is good and true, Skirl's estimation of Plato's theory as an instance of nihilism actually appears sensible.

To take another example, Hobbes would scorn idealism and speak, purportedly in the name of science, to the powers-that-be. Yet despite the appearance that he sought to persuade the ruling class of the day to fabricate unity through an authoritarian style of rule, Hobbes simply wrote off the problem of confessionally motivated antagonisms within the 'body politic.' By glossing over the fact of confessional diversity, Hobbes failed completely to provide a practicable solution to the actually existing problem of religiously motivated parties and factions struggling for power. Precisely because Hobbes conceived the solution for the problem with the political at the time to lie in the secular, he, too, succumbed to the temptation of nihilism. As the historiography of events in 17th century England suggests, his would-be scientific solution, the institution of absolute sovereign power, portrayed as the sole embodiment of the political, served above all to depoliticize the ongoing controversies between societal actors – i.e., what Hobbes dubbed non-political 'subjects.' But to the precise extent to which Hobbes denied parties and factions the status of political entities, to the precise extent to which he reduced the political to 'consequences from accidents of politic bodies,' meaning conflicts among absolute sovereigns, Hobbes simply negated the political as it made itself felt in the real world. What is more, by placing so much emphasis upon the effectiveness of government, he ultimately denied the possibility of government being guided by something that is good and true. So we find nihilism in Hobbes, too.

When compared with Hobbes, Locke appears as a writer that was much more willing, and capable, to conceive the political. For he took up the very problem Hobbes simply defined away: the existence of parties and factions competing for power and influence in a differentiated community. As Skirl maintains, Locke presupposed the [*822] ubiquity of conflict in a society that is inevitably composed of role players and their representatives. For all controversies, the one thing that would guarantee some sort of peace among disputants was their predilection for the stability of property. Locke's state was a state of property-owners. The public interest aimed at the preservation of the institution of property. In Skirl's words, the welfare of the community would consist in a '*nomos*' that was favorable to, and favored by, the owners of property – i.e., the politicized citizens in a community where power and influence were based on the ownership of property. Locke recognized the pursuit of material interests as a 'political' source of conflict. But this is telling as regards Locke's nihilism, which manifests itself in the ubiquity of partiality. Everything in Locke's state, ranging from the family to legislation, would be characterized by competition on behalf of property. Nothing would remain outside this spiral. Even the realization of justice through adjudication would be performed against a variety of opinions and contrariety of interests. Every decision would be subject to another round of controversy. Since Locke did not distinguish between political and non-political moves, even the family would be an arena for competition. In the

end, everything was political and exempted from being made subject to, non-material, higher considerations.

According to Skirl, Rousseau's nihilism is similar to and yet different from the one of Hobbes. To be sure, both Hobbes and Rousseau saw the state as a unity that was more than the sum of unfettered individuals. The statally based community was a necessary step beyond 'natural man.' The state was the embodiment of the political that helped to overcome the danger of individuals succumbing to their passions. For Hobbes, the individual, whether in his capacity as a free-lancer or as part of some faction, was not to destabilize the statal order of things under the pretense of the political. The imaginary social contract obligated every citizen to submit to sovereign authority. The state, seen as a hierarchically organized legal space, could then differentiate between legal and criminal behavior, the political being driven out by positive law. Rousseau, too, emphasized a civilizing role of law, which presumably derived from all citizens being implicated in the making of law. Yet, unlike Hobbes, Rousseau did not maintain that the potentially destabilizing relationship between individuals and the state would simply disappear with the passing of law. The constituent members of the state would place much value in the state speaking with one voice, but they would also retain their interests. The *volonté de tous* would always remain there as a threat to the *volonté générale*. This is all familiar. Now, Skirl's argument in this regard is that Rousseau's community would govern itself in public so as to prevent individuals valuing their own private interests higher than that of the community. By government in and through the public, that is, the state would forestall being torn apart by special interests. Seen in this vein, the public would be the host of the political. But, according to Skirl, nihilism resurfaces precisely here. For in the real world, the public would be unable to decide. A person or representative body would have to step in through the backdoor – and the problem of realizing the general will through representation [*823] would make itself felt. Not unlike Plato, Rousseau arrived at an ideal solution that turned out utterly impracticable in the context of concrete circumstances. And what is particularly lamentable, from Skirl's perspective, is the lack of any sensitivity on the side of Rousseau for the importance of guidance by extramundane considerations, on top of community values.

These examples suffice to bear out that, for Skirl, political theory would have to be regarded as a long story of failure inasmuch as the great figures of political thought have all succumbed to the secular moment. The classics, starting with Plato, have abandoned the divine and have cherished reason; the moderns have allegedly renounced the political being grasped from within the belief-system of Catholicism. In my estimation, there is a puzzling fundamentalism built into Skirl's claim as he regards every stance that does not pay reference to Catholicism as nihilistic. I personally find myself in agreement with the argument that there are rather profound intellectual difficulties in political theory, conceptually and normatively speaking. Take only the contractualist project, which is firmly rooted in Protestant values. Modern political theory is in many respects a fundamentalist discourse. But this being so, I consider it debatable whether it is worthwhile to fight and drive out one fundamentalism with another.

Apart from that, there are good reasons to engage with Skirl's text. It shows sensitivity for the importance of historical context. Its reconstruction of classical and modern positions is comprehensive and sophisticated. The attitude that stands behind and drives the project, methodologically and normatively speaking, is a critical one that has become so rare among contemporary writers. What shines through Skirl's engagement with political theory are concerns about what politics has done and for whom. In this sense, Skirl's project is interesting for the fact that it is not one of partisanship or aestheticisation. This is part of the reason why I have developed sympathies with the book, even though its language is not

always transparent and easy to follow; and why I am willing to acknowledge the main claim, even though I do not support the already mentioned conclusion. To the precise extent to which it interrogates (Western) political theory from a perspective that is not already implicated by the writings it takes up, a perspective that represents a standpoint in history and that exhibits a reflected attitude, the claim of the book appears as an original and tenable claim. In my opinion, it sheds some interesting light on the dubious role of (Western) political theory *vis-à-vis* the domain of political practice. For it is in this regard that Skirl is fully on target: political practice has for quite a while shown a complete lack of orientation. Its main protagonists appear overwhelmed by contemporary exigencies and unable to surpass the arbitrariness of their own doing.

Methodologically speaking, Skirl entertains a genealogical sketch that I found very interesting. He traces attempts by renowned writers that, in his opinion, have written off the political from the practice of politics. It occasionally appears as if Skirl offers another reconstruction of the concept of the political from the beginnings of political theory. But Skirl performs more [*824] than a conceptual critique of canonical writings of political theory. This becomes clear in the introductory chapter, where he sets out his view of how politics and political theory relate: the political – the attribute that lends political activities their very name – is inextricably linked with agents, politicians, and what they do. Politics is a distinct form of practice that follows its own inner logic. In this regard, the political is ‘real’ and not solely a matter of formal definition. The political is not to be dissociated from agents and their activities, even though the very same political, and therewith the very practice of politics, originates in textual reflection about what makes for the political in real activities. Following Skirl, activities are political inasmuch as they are performed by a distinct sort of people, namely politicians. At the same time, activities are political as they are being made a subject of political theory – i.e., the discipline that helps to reflect about activities and perceive them as political activities. It may perhaps be said that practitioners do not need political theory in order to perform as politicians. However, only political theory endows the practice of politicians with meaning and thus brings the political into existence. In this sense, political theory is a source of concepts that help to understand what actually happens, politically speaking. But that is not enough. For Skirl emphasizes, too, that political theory is always also a source of non-practical, or normative, considerations. As a repository of norms and values, political theory does not exhaust itself with the endowment of meaning to institutional activities. Political theory may and should transform these activities into ‘good’ political practice. Whether one is inclined to take issue with this claim or not, it is this understanding of how political theory and practice relate that enables Skirl to lay bare what he perceives as nihilistic at the very centre of the political, in theory and practice.

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