

An aerial photograph of the Acropolis in Athens, Greece, taken at dusk. The Parthenon and other ancient structures are visible on the rocky plateau, with the city of Athens and the surrounding mountains in the background under a colorful twilight sky.

THE ART AND CRAFT OF Political Theory

LESLIE PAUL THIELE



THE ART AND CRAFT OF POLITICAL THEORY

The Art and Craft of Political Theory provides a critical overview of the discipline's core concepts and concerns and highlights its development of critical thinking and practical judgment. The field's interdisciplinary strengths are deployed to grapple with emerging issues and engage afresh enduring ideals and quandaries. While conventional definitions of key concepts are provided, original and controversial perspectives are also explored, revealing continuity in a tradition of thought while emphasizing its diversity and innovations. *The Art and Craft of Political Theory* illustrates the analytic and interpretive skills, the moral and philosophic discernment, and the historical knowledge needed to appreciate a tradition of thought, to contest its claims, and to make good use of its insights.

Topics include:

- science, ideology and normative theory
- biology, culture, human nature, power and violence
- ancient, modern and postmodern political thought
- liberty, equality, justice, reason and democracy
- racial, religious, gender and economic identities
- liberalism, socialism, capitalism, communism, anarchism, feminism and environmentalism
- social media, automation, artificial intelligence and other emerging technologies.

This concise, lively and accessibly written book is essential reading for all students of political theory.

Leslie Paul Thiele is Distinguished Professor of Political Science at the University of Florida and Director of the Center for Adaptive Innovation, Resilience, Ethics and Science. His teaching and interdisciplinary research focuses on political thought, sustainability, emerging technologies and the intersection of political philosophy and the natural sciences. His central concerns are the responsibilities of citizenship and opportunities for leadership in a world of rapid technological, social and ecological change.

“Theory is essential, in navigating politics no less than elsewhere. If you want to know how to read, interpret, assess and craft political theory, this is the book for you. Leslie Thiele is a splendid guide to the world of political theory.”

—*John S. Dryzek, Centre for Deliberative Democracy and
Global Governance, University of Canberra*

“I can think of no one better qualified to write the story of political theory than Leslie Paul Thiele. A long-time practitioner of the art and craft himself, Thiele brings erudition, rigor, clarity and fondness to this comprehensive study of the core and periphery of the field of political theory.”

—*Simone Chambers, University of California, Irvine*

“To many ‘political theory’ sounds like an oxymoron; equated with the brute struggle for power, politics seems far removed from theory or reflection. As is evident from his earlier book *Thinking Politics*, Thiele has never subscribed to this view. Steeped in an older legacy, he has always celebrated politics as a thoughtful civic praxis, linked with prudence, foresight and moral responsibility. His new book *The Art and Craft of Political Theory* elaborates on the many implications of such praxis. May it serve as an antidote and bulwark against the thoughtless ‘will to power’ devotees in our time.”

—*Fred Dallmayr, University of Notre Dame*

THE ART AND CRAFT OF POLITICAL THEORY

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CONTENTS

Introduction	1
1. Theory, Ideology and Irony	3
2. Human Nature, Power and Politics	37
3. Ancient, Modern and Postmodern Political Thought	71
4. The Politics of Identity and Difference	105
5. Enduring Challenges in a Changing World	140
6. Technology and the Human Prospect	174
<i>Index</i>	211



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DETAILED CONTENTS

Introduction	1
1. Theory, Ideology and Irony	3
Setting Our Sights	3
Parsimony, Accuracy and Significance	5
Scientific Theory and Social Science	7
The Interpretive Nature of Political Theory	11
Intersubjective Understanding	13
The Normative Nature of Theory	16
Conceptual and Historical Analysis	20
Ideology	23
Irony	28
Between Ideology and Irony	30
2. Human Nature, Power and Politics	37
Political Animals	37
The Significance of Human Nature	39
Nature and Nurture	44
Genes and Mores	46
Biological and Cultural Reproduction	49
The Public Good and the Private Realm	52
Power, Force and Violence	55
Rule and Resistance	60
Equality and Elites	64
3. Ancient, Modern and Postmodern Political Thought	71
Statecraft and Soulcraft in Ancient Greece	71
Ordering the Soul and State	73
Modern Political Thought	78
Individualist Theories of Politics	82
Structuralist Theories of Politics	84
Postmodern Thought	88

Identity and the Exercise of Power	93
Social Control and Individual Freedom	97
Theorizing at the Edge of Modernity	101
4. The Politics of Identity and Difference	105
We Hold These Truths...	105
Race, Religion and Otherness	108
<i>The Other in America</i>	110
<i>Identity and Difference</i>	113
Gender and Identity	116
<i>Feminism and Gender Justice</i>	117
<i>Equality and Difference</i>	121
<i>Liberalism, Patriarchy and Power Feminism</i>	124
The Politics of Class	127
<i>Alienation and Revolution</i>	128
<i>Materialism and Idealism</i>	130
<i>Communism versus Socialism</i>	134
5. Enduring Challenges in a Changing World	140
The Life of Liberty	140
<i>Positive and Negative Liberty</i>	142
<i>Forced to be Free</i>	146
<i>Freedom in the Balance</i>	148
Rule within Reason	150
<i>Economic Reason</i>	151
<i>Political Reason</i>	154
<i>Ecological Reason</i>	157
The Scales of Justice	159
<i>The Primacy of Justice</i>	160
<i>Equity and Practical Judgment</i>	162
<i>Giving to Each What is Due</i>	165
6. Technology and the Human Prospect	174
Promethean Origins	174
The Machinery of Government and Symbolic Tools	176
Becoming the Tools of Our Tools	178
The Midas Touch	181
Theories of Technology	185
The Politics of Information Technology	190

Automation and Artificial Intelligence	197
The Technology of Theory	202
Conclusion	205
<i>Index</i>	211



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INTRODUCTION

This book introduces and illustrates the art and craft of political theory. Its aim is to foster a sensibility to the ways in which the domain of politics may be intellectually and ethically engaged. The art and craft of political theory is less the invocation of principles or application of techniques than an exercise in critical thinking and practical judgment. To learn political theory is to discover and develop the analytic and interpretive skills, the moral and philosophic discernment, and the social and historical knowledge needed to employ and advance the insights of a tradition of thought and contest its claims.

The study of political theory is often circumscribed within a canon of thinkers that originates in antiquity and proceeds through medieval and modern periods to contemporary times. Yet the canon is largely a retrospective construction. Most of its representative figures did not identify themselves as contributors to a single tradition. Nonetheless, the voices that animate the history of political thought have produced a sustained, if unruly, conversation over the ages. It is a conversation well worth entering.

References to canonical figures in these pages are meant less to invoke authorities than to stimulate and guide thinking about politics. While standard definitions of key political concepts are provided, they are also frequently challenged. In turn, original and controversial perspectives are explored. The point is to illustrate what it means to think theoretically about politics, acknowledging continuity in a tradition of thought without losing sense of its diversity and innovations.

Much of the diversity and innovation within political theory arises from its interdisciplinary nature. Political theory crossed paths with philosophy since ancient times, and is often called political philosophy. Today, the discipline intersects with many fields of study, including anthropology, ecology, economics, evolutionary biology, history, literary criticism, neuroscience, psychology, sociology and technological studies. *The Art and Craft of Political Theory* makes use of these kindred disciplines to grapple with emerging issues and engage afresh enduring concepts, ideals, and quandaries.

Some sections of my book *Thinking Politics* (2003) have been utilized here in a revised form. Much of what follows is wholly new, including the final chapter. There I tie the knot in a unifying thread running through these pages, and provide an original reframing of the mission of political theory. Like the tradition of thought it examines and appraises, this book demonstrates continuity and innovation in its voices. My hope is that the reader finds the conversation more sustained than unruly, and well worth entering.

CHAPTER 1

THEORY, IDEOLOGY AND IRONY

Political theory is an art and craft that cultivates and employs critical thinking and practical judgment. The chapter distinguishes political theory from scientific theory while underlining their shared concern for parsimony, accuracy and significance. The discipline's interpretive, intersubjective, normative, conceptual and historical nature is explored, as well as its fraught relationship with ideology. In turn, the chapter introduces the notion of irony, a kind of skeptical reserve that serves political theorists as a countervailing force to ideology.

SETTING OUR SIGHTS

We all have lenses in our eyes that focus light on our retinas. Many people also wear optical lenses made of glass or plastic to correct poor vision. In turn, microscopes and telescopes have magnifying lenses that bend light in specific ways, allowing one to see very small or very distant objects. Lenses focus light to produce clear images.

Theories are best understood as conceptual lenses. Theories help us put the world in focus. What optical lenses do for our vision, theories do for our understanding. Whereas optical lenses improve our sight, theories improve our insight. Theories help us produce clear mental images.

Most of us can see quite well without artificial lenses. Our unaided vision suffices. Likewise, most of us can get along quite well without engaging in formal theorizing. Our unaided intellect, common sense, and traditional cultural viewpoints prove adequate. Nevertheless, like the lenses we make out of glass or plastic to see more clearly, the theories we fashion out of concepts allow us to understand the world more thoroughly and profoundly. They provide magnified views of various features of the world that otherwise would go unnoticed. By allowing us greater insight, theories take us beyond superficial

overviews. They enable *radical* insight. The word “radical” derives from the Latin word for “root.” Theories help us dig beneath the surface, getting to the roots of things.

We could certainly survive without theories. But science would end, as would philosophy, and cultural life would become greatly impoverished. Many practical affairs, such as agriculture and education would revert to quite primitive levels. A world without theory would be very different from the world we now inhabit.

Theory stands in contrast to practice, and that distinction is often employed to undercut the status of the former. “Principles are one thing, politics another, and even our best efforts to ‘live up’ to our ideals typically founder on the gap between theory and practice,” Michael Sandel acknowledges. Still, theory and practice are engaged in a cyclical rather than hierarchical relationship. There is much more to theory than meets the eye, and much more theory behind practices than we might realize. As Sandel adds, “our practices and institutions are embodiments of theory. To engage in a political practice is already to stand in relation to theory. For all our uncertainties about ultimate questions of political philosophy—of justice and value and the nature of the good life—the one thing we know is that we live *some* answer all the time.”¹ Theory, in one form or other, undergirds our practices, channeling and enabling perceptions, attitudes, opinions, values, judgments and actions.

The French thinker Auguste Comte (1798–1857) was perhaps the first modern social scientist to insist that “no real observation of any kind of phenomenon is possible, except in as far as it is first directed, and finally interpreted, by some theory.”² To say that our most basic perceptions are directed and interpreted by theory is not to suggest that there is no reality out there apart from our theoretical musings about it. Indeed, the problem theorists face is not an absence of facts but an overabundance of them. Theories are the conceptual lenses that allow us to sort through a plethora of data and distill it into something useful. Theories organize the innumerable features and facets of reality. Without theories, we would not be able to tell which bits of reality are most relevant, and how they might be put into order.

As anyone who has worked with optical lenses knows, bringing specific things into clear view means that other things, which lie closer or further away, necessarily remain out of focus. The same principle holds for the lenses in our eyes. After gazing for a time upon some distant object, quickly glance back at the pages of this book. A moment of blurry vision occurs. Muscles in your eyes then rapidly alter the shape of your lens to adjust its focal distance, making the written words legible. Lenses allow us to focus on specific things. The rest of the world remains a blur.

Theories likewise focus our attention on specific clumps of reality, causing us to lose sight of other things that lie nearer or farther away. An economic theory that seeks to explain present levels of unemployment may focus expansively on the history of industrial cycles over large time scales. To do so, however, it would have to forego an in-depth psychological investigation of whether there has been a breakdown of the work ethic in

recent generations. Likewise, a biological theory might suggest the inevitability of war based on an analysis of human hormones that induce aggression. In doing so, it might ignore evidence that collective violence may be decreased if not eliminated through the creation of political institutions. By organizing ideas, principles, and facts in specific ways, theories give us insight into parts of the world that otherwise would remain too complex and too chaotic to comprehend. In producing such focused images, however, theories necessarily leave a good deal out of the picture.

Lenses bend light to create focused images. But not all available light is used. The apertures of cameras and the irises perforated by the pupils in our eyes restrict the amount of light that passes through the lens. Too much light leads to overexposure, with much detail lost in the glare. Too little light leads to underexposure, with much detail lost in the gloom. As anyone knows who has walked into a dark theater from a well-lit lobby or out of a matinee performance into the brilliant afternoon sunshine, one can be blinded not only by darkness but by light.

Theories have analogous characteristics. They effectively regulate the amount of information we receive and the conceptual networks we form. Too little data or a dearth of conceptual linkages lead to dim, underexposed and impoverished images of the world. Yet too much data and a glut of conceptual linkages are no better. They produce overexposed images, a confusing hodgepodge of phenomena that is difficult to decipher. To produce a clear image, shadows are as necessary as well-lit surfaces.

Theories, like optical lenses, also direct our vision. They determine not only *how* we perceive but *where* we look. Those armed with telescopes do not point their lenses at bacteria, just as those equipped with microscopes do not chart planetary motion. Our conceptual lenses likewise influence what parts of the world we engage. Theories not only focus vision, they determine its direction.

Like photographers, theorists choose different lenses to do different jobs. In turn, they select the correct aperture, avoiding both underexposed and overexposed images. And the themes and topics they explore are largely products of the sorts of lenses theorists have at hand. Like optical lenses, theories are tools that help us better perceive and navigate the world. To best refract light and produce clear images, optical lenses must be carefully designed and manufactured to minimize distortions or aberrations. Likewise, to develop a good theory, three qualities must be in evidence.

PARSIMONY, ACCURACY AND SIGNIFICANCE

There are no hard and fast rules for what makes a good theory. Still, three qualities are widely recognized to be crucial. The first is *parsimony*. To be parsimonious is to be sparing or frugal. To be theoretically parsimonious is to forgo all unnecessary speculation and detail. A good theory is thrifty: its descriptions, interpretations, explanations, and predictions are not cluttered with unnecessary facts or assumptions.

Theorizing, in this sense, is like mapmaking. Maps offer us outlines. The more details included in these outlines, the better they represent the actual geography. But too much detail is a problem. Lewis Carroll, the whimsical author of *Alice in Wonderland*, once told of a map of the German countryside that had a scale of one to one. It was, of course, a wonderfully detailed representation. But it could not be used because when unfolded it covered all the crops.

The pursuit of parsimony goes too far if it makes a theory not only simple but simplistic. If the map we create is simplified to the point where crucial details are lost, it will not help us find our way about. A map that reveals mountain ranges and major bodies of water but leaves out all highways and thoroughfares might be wonderfully simple and compact, but it will not help us travel from city to city. Accordingly, the second quality that makes for a good theory is *accuracy*. An accurate theory reveals those parts of the world it is targeting with precision and without distortion. Theories should be sufficiently accurate to allow for fine-grained analysis.

If a theory is both parsimonious and accurate, it is deemed elegant. An elegant theory concisely and precisely interprets, describes, explains, or predicts. It simplifies reality enough to make it comprehensible but remains detailed enough to avoid ambiguity.

The third quality for which theorists strive is *significance*. Significant theories illuminate an important part of the world. If we create maps of places no one ever visits, wants to visit, or ever will visit, we theorize in vain. If we do not point our conceptual lenses at interesting and important things, there is not much point in looking through them. However parsimonious and accurate they might be, if our theories fail to offer significant insights, they fail as theories.

There are two key threats to significance. The first is tautology. To say that all bachelors are unmarried is to speak tautologically. It is simply to utter a definition. A theory becomes tautological when it offers nothing more than a reiteration of accepted terms. The important work of reasoning is foregone. A theory that predicts that all political science majors will, at some point during their college careers, enroll in political science courses is tautological. By “political science major” we mean a student taking courses in political science. This theory does not interpret, describe, explain, or predict. It simply (re)defines.

Tautological theories cannot be falsified. No evidence could be presented that would repudiate their claims. No gathering of new facts, no elucidation of principles or ideas, and no subsequent reasoning could undermine it. A tautological theory may provide a set of useful definitions that simply and accurately label features of the world. But its definitions do not challenge or reorganize our common understandings or illuminate the world in an original way.

To avoid tautology, a set of propositions must make itself vulnerable to refutation or falsification. Good theories are open to challenge, either from argument or evidence. One should be able to construct or at least imagine a set of reasons or an empirical

test that would disconfirm it. Far from constituting a shortcoming, being susceptible to refutation or falsification is a prerequisite for good theory. If a set of propositions is not open to contestation by reasoned argument or gathered evidence then it is not a theory but a dogma, which is to say, an article of faith wrapped up in a circular series of definitions.

The second threat to significance occurs if our theories become trite. Something is trite when it is commonplace or self-evident. Trite propositions or theories affirm the obvious. To suggest that every student of political theory, regardless of race, gender or class, will take a breath at least once every five minutes is to say something trite. Because the statement could be falsified by a very determined student with excellent lung capacity, it is not a tautology. But we do not need a sophisticated theory to make such a banal statement. Simple observation and common sense tells us as much. To avoid triteness, theories must help us better understand a complex world. They must be insightful.

SCIENTIFIC THEORY AND SOCIAL SCIENCE

Parsimony, accuracy and significance are qualities of any good theory. But they are typically identified as qualities of scientific theories. Scientific theories expound the laws or regularities that describe the behavior of things. Originally, the word *science*, from the Latin *scientia*, simply meant knowledge. Eventually, science came to mean knowledge of a certain sort, namely, a body of related physical laws combined with trusted methods for obtaining and testing such laws. These laws pertain to the regular, recurrent, and ideally invariant associations between and among events and things within the natural world.

A scientific theory is a set of hypotheses with robust explanatory force. It elucidates the way things behave with such parsimony and accuracy that a thorough explanation of the past and prediction of the future becomes possible. Still, scientific theories are never proven true. Their explanations and predictions might always be falsified based on further evidence or experimentation. While a scientific theory is never proven, it can be validated. Indeed, it is validated every time it survives an attempt to refute it. After many such validations, a scientific theory comes to be accepted as provisionally confirmed.

The typical method of confirmation in the natural sciences is the methodologically rigorous replication of the experimental process. This entails very precise forms of measurement. To the extent that human beings may be studied as mechanical objects or biological organisms, they are subject to scientific theorizing, rigorous experimentation, and the precise measurement this entails. Much modern medical research, for example, proceeds under these conditions. After all, the laws of physics, chemistry and biology apply to human beings no less than to rocks, trees, and other animals. Nevertheless, the farther one moves from the purely physical aspects of human life, the more difficult it becomes to study it scientifically.

Employing physiological and evolutionary theories, one may with great accuracy explain why and predict how a person will cry out and pull away suddenly if jabbed with a sharp pencil. With somewhat less accuracy, employing economic theories and accounting for cultural traits, one may be able to explain why and predict how a person will react if offered \$1,000 to break a pencil in two. In this case, the laws of physiology find an approximate analog in the demands of economic life that stimulate people to act in the light of perceived costs and benefits. While economic incentives do not produce as predictable a reaction as acute physical pain, certain regularities are nonetheless observable. But science cannot accurately predict how a person will react when given a pencil and paper and asked to respond to the question “How should liberty in a political community be balanced with the pursuit of justice?” Investigating the differences between political theory and scientific theory helps us understand why.

Certain social sciences (also known as behavioral sciences), including some forms of political science, strive to duplicate in the study of culture what has been achieved in the study of nature. Behavioral social sciences often employ statistical methods of analysis to quantitatively measure the attitudes and actions of individuals and social groups. Their theories attempt to explain and predict human behavior based on the statistical regularities observed. These empirical theories are testable through repeated observation and precise measurement, if not repeated experimentation.

The term *social science* first came into use during the French Revolution, as intellectuals attempted to ground the political changes sweeping France on scientific principles. One of the most prominent advocates of a science of politics was the French philosopher Claude Henri de Saint-Simon (1760–1825). Saint-Simon wrote:

Hitherto, the method of the sciences of observation has not been introduced into political questions; every man has imported his point of view, method of reasoning and judging, and hence there is not yet any precision in the answers, or universality in the results. The time has come when this infancy of the science should cease, and certainly it is desirable it should cease, for the troubles of the social order arise from the obscurities in political theory.³

Likewise, the English political theorist and philosopher John Stuart Mill (1806–73) wrote in his *System of Logic* that “the backward state of the moral sciences can only be remedied by applying to them the methods of physical science, duly extended and generalized.”⁴ Saint-Simon’s and Mill’s vision is shared by certain social scientists today who believe that “we are in the political sciences where the natural sciences were two hundred years ago.” The task at hand is to “apply scientific methods to the management of society as we have been learning to apply them in the natural world.”⁵ Most social scientists acknowledge that they will never attain the explanatory or predictive power currently enjoyed by natural scientists. Nonetheless, many social scientists approximate the methods of natural science as closely as possible.

Will social science eventually produce laws that are as robust as those of physics or chemistry? Efforts have certainly been made. These attempts have all fallen short of the mark, but their achievements have not been negligible. The political sociologist Robert Michels (1876–1936), for instance, developed the famous “iron law of oligarchy” after studying political parties in Europe at the turn of the century. Oligarchy means rule by the few. The iron law of oligarchy states that an essential characteristic of all human groups is a hierarchical structure wherein a minority exercises most of the power and effectively rules over a majority.

Michels writes: “It is organization which gives birth to the dominion of the elected over the electors, of the mandataries over the mandators, of the delegates over the delegators. Who says organization, says oligarchy.”⁶ Michels’ law, like scientific law, is predictive and testable. Given an organization (and particularly a political party), one may predict its rule by an oligarchy. Like most “laws” of social science, however, the iron law of oligarchy is not very precise. The law supplies us with no way of knowing, or even guessing, how soon an oligarchy will form, how strong an oligarchy will become once it forms, how long it will last, or how and why it will decrease in strength, dissipate, or change form. Unlike Isaac Newton’s law of physics, which stipulates that force is equal to mass multiplied by acceleration ($F = ma$), the iron law of oligarchy is not a precise equation. Unlike Newton’s law, which makes for quite exact measurements, calculations, and predictions, Michels’ law allows only very general statements about the social world. Moreover, Michels’ law does not apply equally to all organizations. Small organizations whose members have close, friendly relations are frequent exceptions.

One reason why social science falls short of achieving the parsimony, accuracy and predictive power of natural science is that the methods of scientific theory are not easily adapted to social and political concerns. Outside the laboratory, too many uncontrolled and unforeseen forces affect social and political life to allow for precise measurement. And the study of political life cannot be carried out in controlled laboratory conditions. In the social sciences, experimentation, let alone repeated experimentation, is very difficult if not impossible to arrange. Often experimentation would be morally repugnant if it could be arranged. One might adequately observe the reaction of a democratic people to a coup d’état, for example, and subsequently develop a theory to account for such behavior. Yet it would be ethically unacceptable to stage a second coup d’état under similar circumstances to verify the results.

Social and political practices are seldom if ever replicable. Comparative studies of different people, organizations, or countries, or the same people, organizations or countries at different times, can be very informative. But they cannot duplicate the precise experimental conditions of the natural sciences. Humans learn from history and from each other. Repeated observations of social phenomena, therefore, are not observations of the same phenomena. The actors involved have thought about themselves and their world in the meantime and, in all likelihood, have changed their conditions and behavior as a result.

Experimental observation allows for the construction of scientific theory because the objects of study operate in relatively fixed patterns and display regularities that accord with ascertainable physical laws. For the political scientist, in contrast, the objects of study are thinking human beings whose behavior is far more irregular and unpredictable than that of other species or of inorganic forms of matter. While social scientific theories may systematically chart human behavior, they seldom, if ever, fully explain or predict it. Their subject matter is simply too complex and variable.

Given these challenges, the German economist and sociologist Max Weber (1864–1920) argued that social scientists should not search for laws that fully explain and predict human behavior. Rather, they should insightfully describe historical correlations and tendencies. Weber held that the mandate of social science was to understand human behavior profoundly not to predict it precisely.⁷

Despite his reluctance to mimic the natural sciences, Weber was opposed to any historical description of events that made no systematic attempt at explanation. He suggested that explanatory theories be developed and actively employed in the social sciences. These social scientific theories would be based on the observed correlations of human events, institutions, attitudes and values.

Weber called these correlations “ideal types.” An ideal type is not a moral category but a conceptual construct that accentuates specific features of social phenomena to explain them efficiently and elegantly. One might, for instance, accentuate the role played by the president or prime minister of a country to make sense of that country’s foreign policy. Perhaps a strong correlation can be found between foreign policy and the top executive’s psychological type, personal history, or ideological orientation. This conceptual framework may allow one to explain foreign policy neatly without muddying the waters with complicated analyses of the role played by advisers, bureaucracies, the economic climate, election cycles, or international institutions.

Ideal types put historical events, institutions, or (sets of) attitudes and values into their “most consistent and logical forms.”⁸ Achieving this consistency and logic, Weber admitted, entails doing a certain amount of “violence to historical reality.”⁹ Ideal types are “one-sided.” Without ideal types to simplify matters, however, the social scientist could not understand or portray the complex interplay of cultural and material forces that produce human history. The task at hand, according to Weber, was to do as little violence as possible to a complex reality while still illuminating it by way of a theory.

Many social scientists adopt a Weberian approach in their efforts to understand and explain political phenomena. Others mingle elements of Weber’s insights with methods more prominent in the natural sciences. The discipline of political science is varied in its methodologies. Nonetheless, each of its traditional fields (such as comparative politics, international relations, and public policy), aims to develop good theories that are confirmed by reliable data. Their practitioners, regardless of methodological approach, strive to construct theories that produce parsimonious, accurate and significant accounts of

political reality. In turn, they empirically investigate the political world to confirm, or disconfirm, their theories.

THE INTERPRETIVE NATURE OF POLITICAL THEORY

Political theory stands out among the traditional fields of political science by focusing less on prediction and more on interpretation, less on the collection of empirical data and more on the conceptual and historical analysis of texts, less on the precise measurement of political phenomena and more on their normative assessment.

Human beings consciously distinguish themselves from their environment, think about themselves and others, and often organize and distill these thoughts into concepts and theories. This spiral of self-reflective thought, and the behavior it stimulates, has no foreseeable pathway or conclusion. Accordingly, the political theorist generally does not aim at prediction. Rather, the political theorist *interprets* human thought and action in ways that are illuminating and promote understanding.

This brings us to a major difference between scientific theory and political theory. Scientific theory strives for objectivity. The scientist is an impartial observer whose personal predilections are best left outside the laboratory. She employs tools of analysis and measurement that anyone with similar skills could employ. Only in this way can repeated experimentation confirm theory, since any other scientist, employing the same procedures under the same conditions, should arrive at the same results.

For theorists of social and political life, in contrast, the ability to feel and think in ways similar to the object of study is a crucial component of their work. The analysis of responses to the question about the appropriate balance between liberty and justice, for example, is necessarily grounded in the theorist's own reflective experiences of the challenges and compromises associated with political life. Without such resonance between the theorist and the theorized, little of interest can be said. To make sense of a form of behavior, one needs to understand the motivations that underlie it. Humans, unlike plants and rocks, interpret themselves and take actions based on their interpretations. To understand a self-interpreting being, one has to be a self-interpreting being.¹⁰

A central task of political theory is to understand how humans understand themselves and their world. The theorist is concerned with meaning, with what matters. The value of a political theory, therefore, is not primarily based on its generation of verifiable predictions. Its value is found in its capacity to interrogate, inform, illuminate and inspire political life. For these reasons, political theory is an art or craft more than a science. Political theories are not so much confirmed or disconfirmed as they are shown to be helpful or unhelpful in understanding and navigating political life, a phenomenon rife with meaning but short on truth.

This is not to say that political theorists need not worry about truth. All too often, political theorists get historical, demographic or scientific facts wrong, make faulty

arguments, and neglect evidence. Their theories suffer as a result. Even absent these unfortunate mistakes, however, the task remains fundamentally interpretive. To this end, political theory entails the exercise of practical judgment.

Sheldon Wolin observes that “a political theory is, among many other things, a sum of judgments, shaped by the theorist’s notion of what matters, and embodying a series of discriminations about where one province begins and another leaves off.”¹¹ Likewise, Philip Pettit writes: “The aim of political theory is to find a yardstick for political institutions . . . an ideal that proves, on reflection and perhaps after revision . . . to equilibrate with our judgements ...and to help in the extrapolation of those judgments to new cases.”¹² The theorist’s capacity for good judgment develops by way of worldly experience, as she interpretively navigates political life. It also develops by way of what might be called second-hand experience, as the theorist learns how other citizens and statespeople, either historically or more recently, have navigated political life. Any fool can learn from his mistakes, the adage goes, but it takes a wise person to learn from the mistakes of others. Practical judgment requires learning from one’s own and others’ mistakes—and successes—in the world of politics.¹³ This learning is a reflective, interpretive endeavor.

Political theorists vary in the degree to which they tend toward the interpretive or scientific end of the social science spectrum. Some, like Weber, try to steer a middle course, taking what they can from science and balancing it with interpretive insight. Strict social scientists are often critical of interpretive theorists for producing ambiguous descriptions and lofty concepts with little empirical application. The charge is that the interpretive approach is too speculative and too subjective to aid us in explaining, predicting, or controlling concrete reality. For their part, interpretive political theorists are often critical of their social scientific colleagues for misunderstanding the nature of political life and the task of those who study it. They claim that social scientists too often view citizens as objects to be measured and efficiently managed instead of subjects to be critically understood and morally engaged.

Often it is appropriate to measure and manage people. Measuring the habits of automobile drivers and controlling their behavior is crucial to avoiding accidents and congestion. But measuring and managing commuters does not unduly detract from, and generally enhances, the experience of driving. Measuring and managing citizens may not always be so benign. For example, ever-increasing data is gathered about citizens through governmental offices, commercial internet sites and social media platforms. Much of this data is gathered without the knowledge or consent of the subjects, and is employed for purposes they may not endorse. As we will see in Chapter 6, the mining and analytics of “big data” have a significant impact on social and political life.

The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle (384–322 B.C.) suggests that politics is a realm of freedom in which citizens mutually coordinate their activities in pursuit of the good life. If this is true, then a crucial characteristic of citizens, namely, their autonomy