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Political Theory, Styles and Problems¹⁾

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Introduction

Legal, political and social theorists theorise. Sometimes we theorists are asked ‘why theorise?’ I am not sure how to answer that question other than by asking in return ‘how could you not theorise?’ Even the most empirical of empirical research, and even the most descriptive of descriptive research, engages in theorising when identifying an event as relevant, when determining an object of analysis, or when hypothesising a relationship. Theorising or not theorising is not a relevant choice because you cannot choose not to theorise.

How might we nonetheless make sense of what legal, political and social theorists do when they theorise? To answer that question, I will start by examining a proposal from Thomas Donahue and Paulina Ochoa Espejo.³⁾ They propose to think of the diversity of contemporary political theory and philosophy as a matter of different styles of dealing with problems or, to be precise, different styles of dealing with intellectual problems.⁴⁾ Donahue and Ochoa Espejo’s article was written in response to a question of how to conceive of the analytic-Continental divide in political theory and philosophy, but their map of political theory in terms of styles of dealing with problems goes beyond the analytic-Continental divide.⁵⁾ Indeed, while the context of their proposal is the analytic-Continental divide, their

1) I first presented some of the ideas in this article at the Global Theory Forum launch event at Queen Mary University of London on 2 October 2024, and I later developed some of the ideas in a different way in Lasse Thomassen, *Derrida, Deconstruction and Political Theory* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2026), Conclusion.

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3) Thomas J. Donahue and Paulina Ochoa Espejo, ‘The Analytical-Continental Divide: Styles of Dealing with Problems’, *European Journal of Political Theory* 15:2 (2016): 138-54.

4) While I do not object to calling them ‘intellectual’ problems, I would avoid this qualifier because it may suggest a certain detachment from what are legal, political and social problems.

proposal contextualises and challenges the nature and importance of that divide.

Four Styles of Dealing with Problems

Donahue and Ochoa Espejo identify four ‘styles of dealing with intellectual problems’ in contemporary political theory.⁶⁾ The four styles are solving, pressing, resolving and dissolving a problem. They define ‘style’ as ‘a repetition of patterning that results from a series of choices made within a set of constraints.’⁷⁾ Their answer to the question ‘why theorise?’ is, thus, that we theorise in order to deal with problems: ‘All inquiry, we argue, and certainly all theorising or philosophising, is a wrestling with intellectual problems.’⁸⁾

When solving a problem, political theorists are ‘offering an answer to the problem’s question while providing reasons for thinking that the answer is correct’.⁹⁾ Their examples of solving a problem include Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s solution to the problem of legitimacy in *The Social Contract*,¹⁰⁾ Jürgen Habermas’s conceptualisation of the relationship between constitutionalism and democracy,¹¹⁾ and John Rawls’s *A Theory of Justice*.¹²⁾ The latter is a particularly good example. Rawls solved the problem ‘what is justice?’ by determining a procedure that will tell us once and for all what justice is, and he provided an elaborate justification for the procedure. Later – in *Political Liberalism* and other places – he modified his solution, but that did not change the intent, which was to close once and for all the problem of ‘what is justice?’.¹³⁾

The theorist who presses a problem ‘first poses an intellectual problem, and

5) Lasse Thomassen and Clayton Chin, ‘Introduction: Analytic, Continental and the Question of a Bridge’, *European Journal of Political Theory* 15:2 (2016): 133-7. On this, see also Thomas J. Donahue-Ochoa, ‘Deconstructing the Divides’, *Journal of Social and Political Philosophy* 1:2 (2022): 212-15. I do not distinguish between political theory and political philosophy, and in the following I shall use ‘political theory’ to refer to both.

6) Donahue and Ochoa Espejo, ‘The Analytical-Continental Divide’, 140.

7) Donahue and Ochoa Espejo, ‘The Analytical-Continental Divide’, 142.

8) Donahue and Ochoa Espejo, ‘The Analytical-Continental Divide’, 142.

9) Donahue and Ochoa Espejo, ‘The Analytical-Continental Divide’, 144.

10) Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract and Other Later Political Writings*, ed. Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 39-152.

11) Jürgen Habermas, ‘Constitutional Democracy: A Paradoxical Union of Contradictory Principles?’, *Political Theory* 29:6 (2001): 766-81.

12) John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1971).

then argues that it can never be solved. Instead, [the problem] will press itself upon us and haunt us until the end of time.’¹⁴⁾ Donahue and Ochoa Espejo’s examples of pressing the problem include Bonnie Honig’s work¹⁵⁾ as well as Jacques Derrida’s deconstruction. In the case of the latter, Derrida identified an aporia of justice because justice is only possible insofar as it is instituted in law backed by the threat of force and institutional power, yet justice always exceeds law. Justice requires decisions (by judges, by political activists, etc.) about what justice is in a particular situation, yet justice always exceeds those decisions because it is always possible to ask critical questions in the name of justice. This is why justice is aporetic, and why justice is what Derrida calls to-come, which means that we can never close the problem ‘what is justice?’¹⁶⁾ The problem will never be solved. The distinction between solving and pressing the problem is particularly important because Donahue and Ochoa Espejo argue – I think correctly – that this is the deepest divide in contemporary political theory, and it encapsulates well how many scholars think about the analytic-Continental divide.¹⁷⁾

Unlike those theorists who solve problems, theorists who seek to resolve a problem believe that ‘the problem will never be solved. Yet, unlike the pressing style, the resolving style also shows how we can reconcile ourselves to the problem’s eternal presence.’¹⁸⁾ Donahue and Ochoa Espejo cite Thomas Nagel’s *Equality and Partiality* and Sofia Näsström work on the boundary problem as examples of this style of dealing with problems.¹⁹⁾ The fourth and final style of dealing with problems in political theory is dissolving a problem where the

13) John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993). Whether he was able to do so is another matter. Miriam Bankovsky, *Perfecting Justice in Rawls, Habermas and Honneth: A Deconstructive Perspective* (London: Continuum, 2012); and Lasse Thomassen, *Derrida, Deconstruction and Political Theory* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2026), pp. 35-6.

14) Donahue and Ochoa Espejo, ‘The Analytical-Continental Divide’, 146.

15) Bonnie Honig, ‘Arendt and Derrida on the Problem of Founding a Republic’, *American Political Science Review* 85:1 (1991): 97-113.

16) Jacques Derrida, ‘Force of Law: The “Mystical Foundation of Authority”’, in *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, eds. Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld and David Gray Carlson (New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 3-67 at pp. 3-29; Thomassen, *Derrida, Deconstruction and Political Theory*, Chapter 1.

17) See also Jeremy Arnold, *Across the Great Divide: Between Analytic and Continental Political Theory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020), Chapter 6.

18) Donahue and Ochoa Espejo, ‘The Analytical-Continental Divide’, 146.

theorist ‘first poses a problem and then argues that the problem is not a genuine problem. It is rather a pseudo-problem, resting on a false presupposition.’²⁰⁾ Examples of this style of dissolving problems include Robert Paul Wolff’s *In Defense of Anarchism* and Paulina Ochoa Espejo’s work on the boundary problem.²¹⁾

One may blur the distinctions between the four styles of political theorising. For example, pressing a problem in the style of deconstruction could also be a way to more knowledge and to deal better with a problem. Take, for instance, Derrida’s deconstruction of justice, which may be taken to shed light on what judges and political activists and others actually do when they act in the name of justice, thus highlighting the responsibility they must take for their decisions, which in turn raises the question of how we might institutionalise that responsibility. This is so even if justice and responsibility may be aporetic, and even if we may never be able to solve problems of justice and responsibility in any final sense. Even if justice and responsibility are to-come, in Derrida’s sense of the term, Derrida argues that we still have to act in the present – for instance, by making decisions about what justice entails.²²⁾ We might think of pressing a problem as a form of world disclosure as opposed to problem solving. Yet, world disclosure can also be a path to better problem solving, and it is difficult to think of problem solving without some redescription of the world and of the problems we face, that is, without some world disclosure. Irrespective of this caveat, however, Donahue and Ochoa Espejo’s proposal to think of political theory as divided by different styles of dealing with problems is helpful because it draws attention to political theory as a discipline that deals with problems.

The Notion of Problems

For Donahue and Ochoa Espejo, problems come before styles. In the beginning there are problems, and then different styles of dealing with those problems emerge.²³⁾ The nature of the problems do not determine the nature of the styles, which are simply the styles that have evolved over time.²⁴⁾ Styles are historically

19) Thomas Nagel, *Equality and Partiality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991); Sofia Näsström, ‘The Legitimacy of the People’, *Political Theory* 35:5 (2007): 624-58.

20) Donahue and Ochoa Espejo, ‘The Analytical-Continental Divide’, 147.

21) Robert Paul Wolff, *In Defense of Anarchism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971); Paulina Ochoa Espejo, *The Time of Popular Sovereignty: Process and the Democratic State* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011).

22) Derrida, ‘Force of Law’, p. 19-27.

contingent, but the logical and temporal priority of problems over styles means that we can identify a certain unity to political theory despite the fact that political theory is characterised by sometimes very different styles. Political theory is united around certain problems, even if old problems fade in importance and new problems emerge over time. For instance, the relationship of secular power to a transcendent religious power is less important in contemporary Europe than it was at the time of, say, Thomas Hobbes; and the relationship between human beings and their natural environment is emerging as central to contemporary political theorising.

For Donahue and Ochoa Espejo, problems are external and prior to styles of dealing with problems. This distinguishes their proposal from Ian Hacking's styles of reasoning. For Ian Hacking, problems are internal to styles of reasoning because different styles of reasoning define different problems as worthy of attention.²⁵⁾ With Hacking, one can ask how a problem becomes a problem. Donahue and Ochoa Espejo do not account for how a problem becomes a problem, and how political theory becomes characterised by certain problems. For them, problems emerge, and that emergence is a contingent historical process. With Michel Foucault, whom Hacking draws on, we might think of this in terms of problematisation which, for Foucault, refers to 'a movement of critical analysis in which one tries to see how the different solutions to a problem have been constructed; but also how these different solutions result from a specific form of problematization'.²⁶⁾ Seen in this way, problems are constituted as problems – and as political problems, and as significant problems – within a style of dealing with problems, which we may think of as a certain 'movement of critical analysis'. In this way, problems are not prior to, or independent of, styles.

Jason Glynos and David Howarth have proposed that social science research should be problem-driven. Drawing on Ian Shapiro, they distinguish problem-driven research from method- or theory-driven research, where method-driven research is motivated by adherence to particular methods, which are taken as the starting point for the analysis; and where theory-driven research is motivated by the desire to prove an existing theory instead of treating the theory as a

23) Donahue and Ochoa Espejo, 'The Analytical-Continental Divide', 148.

24) Donahue and Ochoa Espejo, 'The Analytical-Continental Divide', 144.

25) Donahue and Ochoa Espejo, 'The Analytical-Continental Divide', 143-4; and Ian Hacking, *Historical Ontology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), pp. 161-4, 178-99.

26) Michel Foucault, *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: The New Press, 1998), pp. 118-19.

hypothesis.²⁷⁾ Problem driven research is motivated by the desire to explain a phenomenon that presents itself as a problem to the researcher, for instance the neoliberalisation of the university. Glynos and Howarth stress that their ‘problem-driven approach ought not to be confused with problem-solving research’.²⁸⁾ Problem-solving approaches take problems as given without examining how those problems became problems in the first place, for instance how neoliberal governance is forcing the university into becoming the problem solvers for industry and business. We are, thus, back to the issue of how problems become problems. Here, I would like to take up Glynos and Howarth’s proposal to think of this – and of the research process more generally – as a process of articulation.

Political Theorising as Articulation

The notion of articulation will allow me to make sense of the relationship between styles and problems. In the case of Glynos and Howarth, they use the notion of articulation to account for the relationship between what we might call the particular (problems, cases, examples) and the universal (theories and what they call ‘logics’).²⁹⁾ Glynos and Howarth take the notion of articulation from Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe who, in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, refer to articulation as ‘any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice’.³⁰⁾ If we think of styles and problems as elements of the research process, and if we think of the research process as an articulatory process, then styles and problems are modified through that process as they are being articulated together. The modification – or articulation – happens through the novel combination of styles and problems – their gathering together – which assumes that styles and problems are not fixed in stone. They may already be articulated in one way or another, but those articulations are always contingent and therefore open to re-articulations. Laclau and Mouffe introduced the notion of articulation in the context of the concept of hegemony so that they understand hegemony as hegemonic articulation – and

27) Jason Glynos and David Howarth, *Logics of Critical Explanation in Social and Political Theory* (London: Routledge, 2007), pp. 84, 167, 207; Ian Shapiro, ‘Problems, Methods, and Theories in the Study of Politics’, *Political Theory* 30:4 (2002): 596-619.

28) Glynos and Howarth, *Logics of Critical Explanation in Social and Political Theory*, p. 167.

29) Glynos and Howarth, *Logics of Critical Explanation in Social and Political Theory*, Chapter 6.

30) Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1985), p. 105.

articulation as hegemonic articulation. All articulation is hegemonic in the sense that it is a matter of a hegemonic struggle over meaning and power. In the case of political theorists, they are engaged in a hegemonic struggle over styles and problems, for instance the legitimacy of particular styles of dealing with problems, and the relevance of particular problems. This character of hegemonic articulation is not something that is brought to styles and problems by political theorists and philosophers; styles and problems are constituted through hegemonic articulation.³¹⁾ In short, there are no styles and problems that are not the result of hegemonic articulation, and political theorists do not choose whether to engage in hegemonic articulation or not, even if they may not describe what they are doing in these terms.

If we accept the notion of articulation, we can think of styles and problems in this way. Styles are, then, not logically or temporally prior to problems, and vice versa. Instead, a style is articulated – modified – in the encounter with a problem, and vice versa; and no style or problem is ever set in stone. The notion of articulation is a way to understand and explain how a problem becomes a problem in the first place, and how it becomes a particular kind of problem. Likewise with styles of dealing with problems: the notion of articulation is a way to understand and explain how styles emerge and how they emerge in particular forms. Of course, the notion of articulation is very abstract, and the actual explanation of a phenomenon such as a style or a problem in political theory can only take place on the back of careful contextual description, analysis and critique.

The word articulation may be slightly misleading. The word may suggest that elements – a problem, for instance – is articulated out of the blue, as it were, and that there is a sovereign subject – the political theorist – behind the articulation. It should be stressed that articulation is really dis-articulation and re-articulation.³²⁾ This is also the sense of Laclau and Mouffe's initial formulation of articulation: it modifies. In modifying, articulation creates new meanings, but always by modifying existing meanings. Existing meanings are contingent and can, therefore, be dis-articulated from their existing articulation and then re-articulated. In the case of styles and problems of political theory, that dis- and re-articulation takes place in the context of disciplinary structures, intellectual traditions and

31) Glynos and Howarth, *Logics of Critical Explanation in Social and Political Theory*, p. 196.

32) Glynos and Howarth describe this as a process of reactivation, commensuration and articulation. Glynos and Howarth, *Logics of Critical Explanation in Social and Political Theory*, p. 181.

institutional practices.

Glynos and Howarth introduce the notion of naming in order to account for how a case is articulated as a case of some general category, that is, how the particular is articulated as an instance of a universal. Here, they draw on Laclau, who in turn drew on Saul Kripke and Slavoj Žižek for this notion of naming.³³⁾ In a first step, Glynos and Howarth introduce naming in opposition to, and as an alternative to, subsumption, that is, to the naturalist view of social science where you explain a phenomenon by subsuming it to a general law. As opposed to the determination of a law of subsumption, naming a universal – what Glynos and Howarth call a logic, for instance a logic of the neoliberal university – is a performative act; it does not extract a conceptual essence but instead performatively constitutes the universal: ‘the very naming and identification of social logics entails a judgement or act of *gathering* that articulates together a set of heterogeneous discursive elements by making their links visible in the process of constituting them’.³⁴⁾ The notions of naming and articulation share this performative aspect: they bring into being what they claim to simply reflect.

It is important, however, to avoid thinking of naming and articulation as sovereign acts; naming and articulation always draw on the contexts in which they take place, and they need to be recognised as legitimate by an audience, for instance the academic community of political theorists. That is why I have insisted that articulation is always dis- and re-articulation; and that is why Glynos and Howarth – drawing on Quentin Skinner – describe naming as redescription.³⁵⁾ This is an important corrective to Laclau’s notion of naming, which often relies on the image of a sovereign subject behind the act of naming. This is so, for instance, when he characterises it as a ‘transcendent, singular moment’.³⁶⁾ We are not dealing with a transcendent moment because naming – that is, articulation – does not transcend a field of meaning from the outside, as if by a transcendent and sovereign God, and because naming – that is, articulation – is not a one-off event that changes the meaning from one moment to another. Instead, we should think of naming, or articulation, as re-articulation, as redescription. That is what political

33) Glynos and Howarth, *Logics of Critical Explanation in Social and Political Theory*, pp. 186-7; Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005), pp. 101-4.

34) Glynos and Howarth, *Logics of Critical Explanation in Social and Political Theory*, p. 187.

35) Glynos and Howarth, *Logics of Critical Explanation in Social and Political Theory*, p. 187.

36) Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, p. 100. Glynos and Howarth quote this, seemingly approvingly, in Glynos and Howarth, *Logics of Critical Explanation in Social and Political Theory*, p. 180.

theorists do: they work with styles and problems and rearticulate them.³⁷⁾

Conclusion

Starting from a critical appraisal of Donahue and Ochoa Espejo's proposal to think of debates in contemporary political theory in terms of styles of dealing with problems, I have suggested that the notion of articulation accounts for what we do as political theorists. We theorists – whether legal, political or social theorists or philosophers – work with styles and problems, and we rearticulate them as we go along.

In the course of my analysis, I have put several distinctions into question. There was, first, the distinction among Donahue and Ochoa Espejo's four styles of dealing with problems. I suggested that pressing a problem may also be a way to solve a problem, even if pressing a problem does not promise to solve the problem once and for all. Likewise, it could be argued that all four styles of dealing with problems *dissolve* – or dis-articulate – problems to some extent to re-articulate them in new ways. Donahue and Ochoa Espejo's example of a political theorist who dissolves a problem – Wolff's reworking of the classical problem of the legitimacy of the state into a different problem ("How do we achieve a society in which the moral autonomy of all members could be upheld while simultaneously solving the coordination problems that any society faces?"³⁸⁾) – seems to be a good example of a dis- and re-articulation of a problem.

Putting into question these distinctions among styles of dealing with problems also suggests that the distinction between problem solving and world disclosure may not be as clearcut as one might first think. This is not to say that the distinction can have no value. Questioning these distinctions does not dissolve them or do away with them; the aim, and the outcome, is rather to arrive at a finer differentiation between options, a differentiation that would not be available to us if we blindly held on to the distinctions.

By introducing the notion of articulation – taken from Glynos and Howarth, who in turn borrow it from Laclau and Mouffe – I was able to put into question the hierarchical distinction Donahue and Ochoa Espejo make between problems and styles. Neither problems nor styles come first; they are mutually articulated. In the same way, we can, as Glynos and Howarth argue, talk of a mutual articulation between problems, methods and theories.

37) Thomassen, *Derrida, Deconstruction and Political Theory*, Chapter 6.

38) Donahue and Ochoa Espejo, 'The Analytical-Continental Divide', 148.

The notion of articulation at first appeared to be on the side of naming as opposed to subsumption. Yet, as I argued, there is no ‘pure’ naming because all naming draws on existing meanings, and an act of naming must be recognisable to others according to existing conventions – even as that act of naming, or articulation, rearticulates existing meanings and conventions. Likewise, Glynos and Howarth argue that there is no ‘pure’ subsumption because every act of subsumption – subsuming a particular case to a universal law – also modifies the law.³⁹⁾ What Glynos and Howarth do, and what I have tried to do here, is not to simply reverse a distinction, in this case between naming and subsumption. Rather, they show that articulation is a general category that makes us better equipped to make sense of both naming and subsumption by conceptualising them as practices of re-articulation. Here I have argued that we can think of political theory more generally as a practice of re-articulation.

39) Glynos and Howarth, *Logics of Critical Explanation in Social and Political Theory*, p. 188.