

Introduction

Society as Artifact

MODERN social thought was born proclaiming that society is made and imagined, that it is a human artifact rather than the expression of an underlying natural order. This insight inspired the great secular doctrines of emancipation: liberalism, socialism, and communism. In one way or another, all these doctrines held out the promise of building a society in which we may be individually and collectively empowered to disengage our practical and passionate relations from rigid roles and hierarchies. If society is indeed ours to reinvent, we can carry forward the liberal and leftist aim of cleansing from our forms of practical collaboration or passionate attachment the taint of dependence and domination. We can advance the modernist goal of freeing subjective experience more fully from a pre-written and imposed script. We may even be able to draw the left-liberal and modernist goals together in a larger ambition to construct social worlds whose stability does not depend on the surrender of our society-making powers or on their confiscation by privileged elites. The practical point of the view of society as made and imagined is to discover what is realistic and what illusory in these objectives and to find guidance for their execution.

No one has ever taken the idea of society as artifact to the hilt. On the contrary, the social theories that provided radical politics with its chief intellectual tools balanced the notion that society is made and imagined against the ambition to develop a science of history, rich in lawlike explanations. This science claimed to identify a small number of possible types of social organization, coexisting or succeeding one another under the influence of relentless developmental tendencies or of deep-seated economic, organizational, or psychological constraints. Marxism is the star example.

Such theories have become ever less credible. A mass of historical knowledge and practical experience has battered them. Inconvenient facts have discredited their characteristic beliefs in a short list of types of social organization and in laws that determine the identity of these types or govern their history.

But the most visible result of this battering has not been to extend the idea of society as artifact. On the contrary, it has been to abandon more and more of the field to a style of social science that seeks

narrowly framed explanations for narrowly described phenomena. This social science – positivist or empiricist as it is sometimes called – rejects the search for comprehensive social or historical laws in favor of a more limited explanatory task. In so doing, it comes to see society as a vast, amorphous heap of conflicting individual or group interests and exercises in interest accommodation, of practical problems and episodes of problem solving. Such a social science lacks the means with which to address the institutional and imaginative assumptions on which routine problem solving and interest accommodation take place. Whatever the adepts of this social science may say, their practice has a built-in propensity to take the existing framework of social life for granted and thereby to lend it a semblance of necessity and authority. In this respect, positivist social science is even more dangerous than the ambitious social theories of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These theories at least defined the present institutional and imaginative order of society as a transitory though necessary stage of social evolution or as only one of several possible types of social organization.

Meanwhile the radical project – the shared enterprise of liberal and leftist doctrines and of the political movements that embraced them – has also suffered a daunting series of setbacks. The communist revolutions, despite their economic and redistributive achievements, failed to establish social institutions that could credibly claim to carry the radical project beyond the point to which it has already been brought by the rich Western democracies and market economies. At the same time, party politics in these democracies has settled down to a series of routine struggles over marginal economic redistribution, within an institutional and imaginative ordering of social life that remains largely unchallenged. Third world countries continue to be the playing ground of predatory oligarchies that often can scarcely be distinguished from self-appointed revolutionary vanguards. It becomes hard to continue hoping that poorer and more fluid societies might stage promising experiments in the advancement of the radical project.

Such defeats have produced a sense of social life combining an awareness that nothing has to be the way it is with a conviction that nothing important can be changed by deliberate collective action. All revolutionary programs are made to seem utopian reveries, bound to end in despotism and disillusionment. This experience of faithless prostration, the stigma and shame of our time, provides an ironic commentary on the conception of society as artifact: while respecting the literal truth of this conception, it eviscerates the idea of its force.

The message of this book is that these disheartening intellectual and political events tell only half the story, the half that evokes intellectual entropy and social stagnation. *Social Theory: Its Situation*

and Its Task deals chiefly with the other, hidden half. It shows how the criticism and self-criticism of received traditions of social theory have prepared the way for a practice of social and historical understanding that extends even further than the ambitious European social theories of the past the idea of society as artifact and enables us to broaden and refine our sense of the possible. The resulting insights inform efforts to carry both liberal and socialist commitments beyond the point to which contemporary societies have taken them. Thus, what seems to be a circumstance of theoretical exhaustion and political retrenchment can be redefined as a gathering of forces for a new and more powerful assault upon superstition and despotism.

The critical argument of this book leads directly into constructive explanatory and programmatic ideas. The character and concerns of the critical diagnosis may best be outlined by suggesting the orientation of the constructive view it prepares.

This constructive view includes both an explanatory approach to society and a program for social reconstruction. The explanatory proposals of *Politics* cuts the link between the possibility of social explanation and the denial or downplaying of our freedom to remake the social worlds we construct and inhabit. Like classic doctrines such as Marxism but unlike traditional, positivist social science, these explanations assign central importance to the distinction between routine deals or quarrels and the recalcitrant institutional and imaginative frameworks in which they ordinarily occur. Such frameworks comprise all the institutional arrangements and imaginative preconceptions that shape routine conflicts over the mastery and use of key resources. These resources enable the occupants of some social stations to set terms to what the occupants of other stations do. They include economic capital, governmental power, technical expertise, and even prestigious ideals. (The terms context, structure, and framework are employed synonymously throughout this book.)

In the contemporary Western democracies the social framework includes legal rules that use property rights as the instrument of economic decentralization, constitutional arrangements that provide for representation while discouraging militancy, and a style of business organization that starkly contrasts task-defining and task-executing activities. In the industrial democracies the formative structure of social life also incorporates a series of models of human association that are expected to be realized in different areas of social existence: a model of private community applying to the life of family and friendship, a model of democratic organization guiding the activities of governments and political parties, and a model of private contract combined with impersonal technical hierarchy addressing the prosaic realm of work and exchange.

The explanatory theory developed in *Politics* differs from positivist

social science in its insistence that the distinction between formative structures and formed routines is central to our understanding of society and history. The institutional and imaginative frameworks of social life supply the basis on which people define and reconcile interests, identify and solve problems. These frameworks cannot be adequately explained as mere crystallized outcomes of interest-accommodating or problem-solving activities. Until we make the underlying institutional and imaginative structure of a society explicit we are almost certain to mistake the regularities and routines that persist, so long as the structure is left undisturbed, for general laws of social organization. At the very least, we are likely to treat them as the laws of a particular type of society and to imagine that we can suspend them only by a revolutionary switch to another type. Superstition then encourages surrender.

If the explanatory theory of *Politics* is incompatible with positivist social science, it is also irreconcilable with some of the characteristic tenets of the classic social theories. Like the view for which *Politics* argues, these theories assigned a central explanatory role to the contrast between frameworks and routines. Thus, for example, the Marxist studies modes of production (his frameworks) and the distinctive laws of each mode (his routines). The approach anticipated in this book nevertheless repudiates two major assumptions with which the contrast between frameworks and routines, formative structures and formed routines, has traditionally been associated.

One of these assumptions is the belief in the existence of a limited number of types or stages of social organization, all of whose parts combine to form an indivisible package. The style of social analysis to which this work contributes dispenses with ideas about such types and stages. Each framework is unique rather than an example of a general type that can be repeated in different societies at different times. The components of such an institutional and imaginative order are only loosely and unevenly connected. They can be replaced piece by piece rather than only as an inseparable whole.

The other repudiated assumption with which the contrast between frameworks and routines has ordinarily been connected is the thesis that general explanations of the genesis, workings, and reinvention of these frameworks must take the form of appeals to deep-seated economic, organizational, and psychological constraints or to irresistible developmental forces supposedly underlying the chaos of historical life. The theory advocated and anticipated here shows how we can develop an account of context making whose generality does not depend upon laws that generate a closed list or a preordained sequence of forms of social life.

A third idea extends the two sets of necessitarian assumptions that have traditionally accompanied the distinction between frameworks

and routines. This third assumption is less directly connected to the other two than they are to each other, and it represents more an unexamined prejudice than a considered belief. This prejudice is the belief that structures will be structures. They always have the same relation to the practical and discursive routines that they influence and to the constraints and tendencies that in turn shape them. The arguments of *Politics* claim, however, that we can diminish the power of these all-important structures to impose a script upon people's practical or passionate relations and weaken the contrast between structure-preserving routines and structure-transforming conflicts.

We have an important stake in changing our relation to the formative institutions and preconceptions of our societies. Less entrenched and more revisable sets of arrangements and beliefs help us empower ourselves individually and collectively. They encourage the development of productive capabilities by enabling us to experiment more freely with the practical forms of production and exchange. They free group life of some of its characteristic dangers of dependence and depersonalization by diminishing the hold of rigid hierarchies and roles over our dealings with one another. They allow us to engage in group life without becoming the victims of compulsions we do not master and hardly understand.

Nothing in the development of the effort to disengage the framework-routine distinction from its inherited associations requires a solution to the metaphysical problem of free will and determinism. The aim is not to show that we are free in any ultimate sense and somehow unrestrained by causal influences upon our conduct. It is to break loose from a style of social understanding that allows us to explain ourselves and our societies only to the extent we imagine ourselves helpless puppets of the social worlds we build and inhabit or of the lawlike forces that have supposedly brought these worlds into being. History really is surprising; it does not just seem that way. And social invention, deliberate or unintended, is not just an acting out of preestablished and narrowly defined possibilities.

A view of the institutional and imaginative contexts of social life, of how these contexts stick together, come apart, and get remade, lies at the center of the explanatory theory of *Politics*. From such a view we can hope to get critical distance on our societies. We can disrupt the implicit, often involuntary alliance between the apologetics of established order and the explanation of past or present societies. We can find an explanatory practice that, by providing us with a credible account of discontinuous change and social novelty, inspires rather than subverts the advancement of the radical project: the effort, shared by liberals and socialists, to lift the burden of rigid hierarchy and division that weighs on our practical and passionate relations with one another.

The approach to social and historical explanation for which this book argues has practical implications. Our beliefs about ideals and interests are shaped by the institutional and imaginative frameworks of social life. But they are not shaped completely. The formative contexts of social life never entirely control our practical dealings and passionate attachments. We regularly invest our recognized interests and ideals with ill-defined longings that we cannot satisfy within the limits imposed by current institutional and imaginative assumptions. But we just as regularly fail to grasp the conflict between longings and assumptions because of our failure to imagine alternative possibilities of social organization. This failure in turn prompts us to underestimate the wealth of materials available for context-transforming use: the surviving residues of past institutional arrangements and imaginative worlds, the stubborn anomalies of a social order, and the endless, petty practical and imaginative quarrels that may escalate at any time into structure-subverting fights. A believable social theory teaches the imagination how to take these deviations seriously and how to use them as starting points for the inauguration of new forms of social organization and personal experience.

The explanatory view of *Politics* goes hand in hand with a program for social reconstruction. Like the explanatory theory that informs it, the program is anticipated in this introductory book. The program takes sides with the cause that modernist and liberal or leftist radicals contentiously and half-consciously share. But in siding with this cause and in trying to justify, to develop, and to unify it, the argument also changes it. The change affects both the conception of what the cause is for and the view of its practical implications for the reordering of society.

The programmatic arguments of *Politics* reinterpret and generalize the liberal and leftist endeavor by freeing it from unjustifiably restrictive assumptions about the practical institutional forms that representative democracies, market economies, and the social control of economic accumulation can and should assume. At the heart of this vision of alternative institutional forms lies an appreciation of the link between the extent to which an institutional and imaginative framework of social life makes itself available to revision in the midst of ordinary social activity and the success with which this framework undermines rigid social roles and hierarchies. *Politics* argues for a particular way of reorganizing governments and economies that promises to realize more effectively both aspects of the radical commitment: the subversion of social division and hierarchy and the assertion of will over custom and compulsion. The traditional disputes between leftists and liberals are seen to be based on a misunderstanding, once we recognize that the present forms of decentral-

ized economies and pluralistic democracies (markets based on absolute property rights, democracies predicated on the skeptical quiescence of the citizenry) are neither the necessary nor the best expressions of inherited ideals of liberty and equality. They frustrate the very goals for whose sake we uphold them.

The same ideas that change our view of the institutional message of radical politics also revise and clarify our conception of their purpose. We come to recognize the ideal of social equality, for example, as a partial, subsidiary aspect of our effort to free ourselves from a social script that both subordinates us unnecessarily to an overpowering scheme of class, communal, gender, and national divisions and denies us as individuals, as groups, and as whole societies a greater mastery over the institutional and imaginative contexts of our lives. This enlarged view of the radical cause in turn allows us to connect leftism and modernism, the radical politics of institutional reform and the radical politics of personal relations, a political vision obsessed with issues of dependence and domination and a moral vision concerned with the inability of the individual to gain practical, emotional, or even cognitive access to other people without forfeiting his independence.

The programmatic and explanatory arguments of *Politics* stand much more closely connected than our inherited preconceptions about facts and values suggest is possible. One of the many connections should be singled out here because it illuminates the direction of this introductory work. The explanatory ideas of *Politics* focus on what may at first seem a mere embarrassment to the pretensions of general social theory. We sometimes act as if our shared institutional and imaginative contexts did not in fact bind us. We hold on to deviant examples of human association, often the left-overs of past or rejected bids to establish a settled ordering of social life. We pass occasionally and often unexpectedly from context-respecting disputes to context-defying struggles. This endless, baffling experience of hidden or open defiance eludes the explanatory styles favored by both the classical social theories and the positivist social sciences. But the apparent obstacle to our explanatory capacities in fact points the way to a better strategy of explanation. The failure of our social contexts, or of the tendencies and constraints that help shape them, to prevent or to govern their own revision is the very fact that supplies the cornerstone for the approach of *Politics* to social and historical explanation.

What the explanatory argument takes as an opportunity for insight, the programmatic argument sees as a source of practical and ideal benefits. A central thesis of *Politics* is that all the major aspects of human empowerment or self-assertion depend on our success at diminishing the distance between context-preserving routine and con-

text-transforming conflict. They rely on our ability to invent institutions and practices more fully respectful of the same context-revising freedom that provides the explanatory view of *Politics* with both its problem and its opportunity.

Why a critical assessment of the situation of social thought? Why not pass directly to the constructive explanatory and programmatic ideas?

The conception of intellectual history underlying this critical diagnosis is not the image of intellectual systems eventually collapsing under the weight of contrary evidence until a theoretical revolution replaces them with alternative theories. It is rather the picture of a twofold process of dissolution and construction: as the intellectual traditions dissolve, they also provide the materials and the methods for their own substitution. In this view of the situation of social thought, we need to explicate and to extend the fragments of an alternative social theory already implicit in the self-subverting activities of contemporary social thought. Thus, for example, the disintegration of Marxism is often misinterpreted by conservatives or antitheorists as the punishment due to overweening theoretical ambition. In fact, however, the internal controversies of the Marxist tradition have produced many of the insights needed to develop the idea that society is made and imagined and that it can therefore be remade and reimagined. The reluctance to push to extremes the criticism of an inherited tradition of social and historical analysis is habitually justified by the fear that its outcome will be nihilism. But this fear is misplaced not only because it makes us cling to confused and mistaken ideas but also because it deprives us of the constructive insights that help prevent the feared nihilistic result.

A great deal more than a hypothesis about intellectual history is at stake in this approach to the constructive implications of what may appear to be a purely disintegrative process. The practical issue is whether we must begin the reconstruction of social theory as nearly from scratch as possible. In the view that emphasizes the creation and overthrow of entire theoretical systems, we must not only formulate a brand new set of categories and methods but also laboriously develop a new empirical basis for our theories. Past observations will have been more or less contaminated by the flawed theoretical assumptions that partly shaped them. But in the conception of intellectual history employed here, the materials for an alternative vision – methods, insights, and interpreted observations – already lie at hand, though in undeveloped, fragmentary, and distorted form.

Another reason to preface the constructive explanatory and programmatic argument of *Politics* with a discussion of the contemporary situation of social and historical studies is to identify alternative

though similarly motivated responses to the same intellectual and political circumstance. Though the critical discussion developed in this introductory book foreshadows the affirmative explanatory and programmatic ideas of the larger work, the relation between criticism and construction remains loose. The explanatory and programmatic argument of *Politics* is certainly not the sole promising response to the intellectual predicament described here. At least one rival line of development deserves attention. This alternative, which this book labels ultra-theory, also pushes to extremes the conception of society as artifact. But it does so by abandoning rather than by transforming the effort to formulate general explanations and comprehensive proposals for social reconstruction. It puts in place of such explanations and proposals not positivist social science but an array of critical and constructive practices, which range from the trashing of particular necessitarian explanations to the utopian evocation of forms of social life more responsive to the radical project. The argument of this book remains neutral between this skeptical, antinecessitarian approach and the equally antinecessitarian but aggressively theoretical tack pursued in *Politics*.

Social Theory: Its Situation and Its Task does not merely show intellectual and political opportunities arising from apparent theoretical disorientation and social blockage. It also seeks to convey a sense of the variety of constructive possibilities existing even within a field of thought defined by commitments to the view of society as artifact and to the radical project in politics.

A final aim of this introductory book is to enlist the reader's help in the theoretical campaign that this work initiates. *Politics* sets out to execute a program for which no ready-made mode of discourse exists. It changes the sense of terms and problems drawn from other bodies of thought, inspired by other intentions. It raids many disciplines and imposes on its inquiry an order no discipline acknowledges as its own. It develops, as it moves forward, a language for a vision. When the larger argument falls into confusion and obscurity, when I stagger and stumble, help me. Refer to the purpose described in this book and revise what I say in the light of what I want.

Social Theory: Its Situation and Its Task does not follow a single continuous argument. Instead, it proposes several points of departure from which to arrive, by convergent routes, at the same theoretical outcome. By far the most extensively considered of these points of departure is the internal situation of social thought, understood to include the whole field of social and historical studies. The discussion advances through a criticism of two intellectual traditions. One tradition, represented by positivist social science, disregards or downplays the contrast between the institutional and imaginative contexts,

frameworks, or structures of social life and the routine activities, conflicts, and deals that these frameworks help shape. The other tradition accepts the distinction but subordinates it to unjustifiably restrictive assumptions about how frameworks change, what frameworks can exist, and what relations may hold between a framework and the freedom of the agents who move within it.

Marxism is the most cogent and elaborate example of this second class of theories. Yet both in Marx's own writings and in the later tradition of Marxist self-criticism we find the most uncompromising statements of the idea that society is made. We also discover many of the most powerful instruments with which to free this idea from the necessitarian assumptions about frameworks and their history that have played so large a role in Marxist thinking. Thus, the confrontation with Marxism remains a continuing concern – explicit in this preliminary book, largely implicit in the constructive work that follows.

The discussion of the internal situation of social theory suggests two parallel but distinct responses. One of these agendas, pursued in the main body of *Politics*, is intellectually ambitious. The other response is skeptical of the usefulness of general explanations and detailed proposals for reconstruction. But both carry to new extremes the conception of society as artifact. Both take sides with the people who, when faced with claims that current forms of social organization reflect inflexible economic, organizational, or psychological constraints, answer: No, they do not; they are just politics. Both show how the seemingly voluntaristic and nihilist claim that it is all politics permits a deeper insight into social life and even a better grasp of constraints upon transformative action.*

Preconceptions about scientific method have influenced practices of social description and explanation. The major traditions of social thought have modeled social explanation on their view of a scientific

*Throughout this book and its constructive sequel I use the term "politics" in both a narrower and a broader sense. The narrower sense is the conflict over the mastery and uses of governmental power. The broader sense is the conflict over the terms of our practical and passionate relations to one another and over all the resources and assumptions that may influence these terms. Preeminent among these assumptions are the institutional arrangements and imaginative preconceptions that compose a social framework, context, or structure. Governmental politics is only a special case of politics in this larger sense. In a theory that carries to extremes the view of society as artifact, this larger notion of politics merges into the conception of society making. The slogan "It's all politics" adds a further twist to this more inclusive idea. The additional twist is the notion that this society-making activity follows no preestablished plot and that its outcomes are not chiefly to be understood as the results of lawlike economic, organizational, and psychological constraints or overpowering developmental tendencies.

method most fully manifest in the natural sciences. The cruder versions of large-scale social theory and positivist social science have tried to come as close as possible to natural science. The subtler versions have seen in the historical, particularistic, and relatively contingent quality of social phenomena a reason to moderate the imitation of science. But they have then also moderated their explanatory and critical ambitions. Finally, those who have rebelled against the intimidating example of natural science have often done so by assimilating social theory to the humanities. The result has been to abandon the causal explanation of social facts and historical events to people who hold up the example of a single-minded view of science.

An antinecessitarian social theory must reject the choice between a scientific social theory and a causally agnostic understanding. Thus, a discussion of the broader philosophical and scientific setting of social and historical studies caps my analysis of the internal situation of social theory. This discussion begins as an attempt to enlist certain discoveries of modern philosophy, psychology, and natural science in the endeavor to break the scientific obsession. But it ends as an effort to use these same discoveries to make the constructive implications of the earlier criticism of social and historical studies clearer and more powerful.

The analysis of the internal situation of social thought and of its philosophical and scientific setting is preceded in this book by a discussion of three other themes. These themes deal with aspects of contemporary practical experience and ideology. Nevertheless, they too provide points of departure for the development of a social theory capable of carrying to extremes the view of social order as frozen politics. They highlight the practical importance of the effort to work out a body of ideas faithful to the insight that society is made and imagined. They suggest the diversity of paths for arriving at the same intellectual position.

The first such starting point is the diffusion to ever broader numbers of people of an idea of work once restricted to tiny numbers of leaders, artists, and thinkers and not always and everywhere shared even by them. In this view of work, true satisfaction can be found only in an activity that enables people to fight back, individually or collectively, against the established settings of their lives – to resist these settings and even to remake them. The dominant institutional and imaginative structure of a society represents a major part of this constraining biographical circumstance, and it must therefore also be a central target of transformative resistance. Those who have been converted to the idea of a transformative vocation cannot easily return to the notion of work as an honorable calling within a fixed scheme

of social roles and hierarchies, nor can they remain content with a purely instrumental view of labor as a source of material benefits with which to support themselves and their families.

The attraction of the ideal of a transformative vocation depends on the satisfaction of elementary material needs. Moreover, the distinctive traditions of particular nations and classes influence both the interpretation of this ideal and its persuasive force. Nevertheless, something in this conception of work represents the combination of a deeper insight with a more defensible aim of human striving, deeper and more defensible than the empirical and normative assumptions on which other available views of work depend. The social theory anticipated in this book is, among other things, an effort to develop the ideas that make sense of the transformative vocation and to justify its claim to allegiance.

A second starting point for my argument is the effort to develop ideas that elucidate and support what this book calls the radical project or the project of the modernist visionary. I do not claim that leftist liberal, or modernist radicals understand their cause in the precise terms by which it is described in these pages. On the contrary, the conception of the radical project already presupposes a criticism, a revision, and a reconciliation of separate and even antagonistic traditions: liberal and leftist proposals for social reconstruction and modernist attitudes toward rigid roles and conventions. The criticism of these loosely related traditions can lead us to rethink our ideas about society. This rethinking can converge with the intellectual agenda developed from the other points of departure discussed in this book. For in every instance the deficiencies of inherited leftist or liberal ideas turn out to be closely related to failures of our empirical understanding of society.

Institutional fetishism vitiates the most familiar liberal and leftist ideas. The classical liberal mistakenly identifies a particular group of makeshift compromises in the organization of representative democracies and market economies with the very nature of a free democratic and market order. The orthodox Marxist subsumes these same unique institutional arrangements under a general type of social organization that supposedly represents a well-defined stage of world history. He then excuses himself from the need to describe in detail the next, socialist stage of social evolution.

The modernist critic of roles and conventions often makes a different empirical mistake, at a higher level of abstraction. Human freedom, he is prone to believe, consists in the repeated defiance of all established institutions and conventions. We may not be able to purge social life of its structured and repetitious quality; but only so long as we continue trying can we hope to affirm our transcendence over the confining and belittling worlds in which we find ourselves.

This version of the modernist creed hopes for both too much and too little. It hopes for too much because it fails to see that we can never perform the act of defiance often enough or relentlessly enough to save ourselves from having to settle down in a particular social order. But it also hopes for too little. For all its negativism it fails to see that the relation of our context-revising freedom to the contexts we inhabit is itself up for grabs. The institutional and imaginative frameworks of social life differ in their quality as well as in their content, that is to say, in the extent to which they remain available for revision in the midst of ordinary social life. The adherent to the negativistic heresy within modernism believes that structures will be structures. But this belief imposes an unjustifiable restriction on the principle of historical variability that this same modernist ardently espouses.

The effort to correct and to unify the radical project by disengaging it from these errors holds an interest even for those who entertain little sympathy for any part of the radical commitment. The general insights and the concrete proposals that result from this exercise contribute to the solution of a dilemma that has increasingly overshadowed our debates about social and personal ideals. We lose faith in the existence of a transcendent, secure place above particular collective traditions from which to evaluate these traditions. Yet we also rebel against the idea that we must merely choose a framework, or accept the framework we are in, and take for granted its preconceptions about the possible and desirable forms of human association. A social theory capable of informing a revised and unified version of the radical cause shows that this rebellion is justified and that it can be carried out without either promoting nihilism or perpetuating belief in an uncontroversial and definitive foundation for normative thought.

Here, as elsewhere, *Social Theory: Its Situation and Its Task* merely suggests a route that *Politics* actually clears and follows. The modest beginning serves as a reminder that we do not need a developed social theory to begin criticizing and correcting liberal, leftist, and modernist ideas. Instead, our attempts to combine, step by step, revised ideals and changed understandings can themselves help build such a theory.

A third point of departure for the intellectual enterprise launched in this book is the effort to rethink the implications of the setbacks and obstacles the radical project has encountered in recent history. (For the present purpose I have in mind the liberal and leftist rather than the modernist side of radicalism.) The disappointments of the communist revolutions and of third world experiments present the most dramatic admonitory fables. Wherever it has gained power the organized left has proved more successful at achieving economic

growth, at redistributing wealth, and even at exciting nationalist fervor than at realizing the participatory self-government of which its leaders so often speak. We can glean more subtle and no less revealing lessons from the experience of leftist and liberal movements in the rich Western democracies.

In these countries the leftist and progressive liberal forces stand divided into two camps. One camp maintains the purity of its radical views at the cost of increasing difficulty in winning or maintaining electoral majorities. This left interprets radicalism from the vantage point of Marxist ideas that commit it to a rigid set of class alliances and to a narrow conception of transformative possibilities. It continues to present itself as the spokesman of an organized industrial working class, entrenched in mass-production industries that represent an ever weaker and smaller sector of the advanced economies. It remains committed to a contrast between a capitalist present whose place in world history it professes to understand and a socialist future to whose contours it can give little content other than redistribution and nationalization.

A second camp seeks to break into the mainstream and to become, or remain acceptable to, majorities. But it usually does so at the cost of abandoning its framework-transforming commitments. It settles down to a program of social democracy. This social-democratic program accepts the current institutional forms of representative democracies and regulated markets. It favors economic redistribution and grassroots participation in local government and in the workplace. And it argues that a more technical management of social problems has superseded great ideological conflicts over social life.

Social democrats regularly come face-to-face with the constraints that the existing institutional framework imposes on their redistributive and participatory aims. If they continue to take these institutional arrangements for granted they find their goals frustrated. If, on the other hand, they advocate and begin to realize alternative ways of institutionalizing representative democracies, market economies, and the social control of economic accumulation, their conception of their goals, and of their relation to familiar adversaries and allies, undergoes a drastic change.

For all its disappointments social democracy has become by default the most attractive political agenda in the world, the one with the broadest and most faithful following. Even parties whose orthodox leftist or classical-liberal rhetoric commits them to oppose the social-democratic program have, once in power, regularly contributed to its extension. The great political question of our day has become: Is social democracy the best that we can reasonably hope for?

The belief that social democracy is the best program we can expect to achieve rests on assumptions about what forms of governmental

and economic organization are possible and how they change – the same assumptions criticized in other parts of this introductory book. If we are serious about assessing the claims of social democracy, we must subject these assumptions to criticism. When we do so, we discover that they do not hold up.

The explanatory and programmatic social theory into which this book leads formulates ideas that can help us push the radical project beyond the point to which social democracy has carried it. The explanatory ideas account for the failures of the radical project in ways that do not make current institutional arrangements appear to be the necessary outcomes of intractable organizational, economic, or psychological constraints. They help us find transformative opportunity in the midst of apparently insuperable constraint. They provide a credible view of social change and social invention, freeing us from the temptation to describe as realistic only those proposals that stick close to current practice. The programmatic ideas informed by these explanatory conjectures present a detailed alternative to social democracy and describe both the justifications that support this alternative and the style of transformative practice that can bring it into being. *Social Theory: Its Situation and Its Task* emphasizes the elements of the problem rather than the terms of the proposed solution. But the description of the problem anticipates the terms of the solution.

A clear connection links the three starting points that precede my discussion of the internal situation of social thought: the idea of the transformative vocation, the reinterpretation of the radical cause, and the discontent with social democracy. For the first represents the repercussion of the radical project on our expectations about work while the second shows the influence of this project on the imagination of possible social futures.

It is not surprising that a more credible social theory assists the modernist, liberal, and leftist radicals. We must be realists in order to become visionaries, and we need an understanding of social life (whether or not a theoretical understanding) to criticize and enlarge our view of social reality and social possibility. But the reverse claim that the radical perspective has a unique cognitive value, that it contributes to the development of a non-necessitarian social theory, seems far more controversial. Why, indeed, should the progress of our insight into social life be tied up with the concerns and fortunes of a particular program for the reconstruction of society? The main text of *Politics* argues that an explanatory social theory has a far closer connection to our normative commitments than modern philosophical preconceptions about facts and values allow. A fully developed social theory interprets our efforts at individual and collective self-assertion. This interpretation can prompt us to revise our preexisting

beliefs about where to find self-assertion and how to achieve it. Given certain additional assumptions, which are themselves as factual as they are normative, it can even persuade us to change our ideals and commitments.

The case for the convergence of explanatory and prescriptive ideas is intricate and contentious. This argument plays no major role in this introductory work. But there is a looser and less doubtful link between the explanatory and the programmatic ideas prefigured in this book. As reinterpreted here, the radical project seeks to change the relation between formative structures and formed routines. It sees the disruption of the social mechanisms of dependence and domination as inseparable from the achievement of this objective. The basic puzzle of social explanation, the chief obstacle to generalization about society and history, the reason why social understanding remains so hard to square with scientific method, is that we are not governed fully by the established imaginative and institutional contexts of our societies and that such contexts are not interestingly determined by general laws or inflexible constraints. The radical is the person who can least afford to disregard this vocation for indiscipline. He wants to use it, to extend it, and even – by an apparent paradox – to embody it in a set of practices and institutions. He must therefore also comprehend it. Thus, to look at society and history from his standpoint (even though the onlooker may be a conservative) is to force yourself to confront the central explanatory scandal of social and historical studies in the hope of turning this embarrassment into a source of insight.

The discussion does not begin immediately with the points of departure enumerated in the preceding pages. Instead, it turns first to the description of a view of human activity – a picture of our relation to our contexts – that inspires all the programmatic and explanatory arguments of *Politics*. The social frameworks or structures with which these arguments deal are only a special case of the contexts addressed by this preliminary conception.

I do not mean this initial view of our relation to the mental or social contexts we construct and inhabit to be taken on faith. It is rather to be justified retrospectively by the relative success of the explanatory and programmatic ideas it informs. Its defense is what can be accomplished under its aegis. Nevertheless, the tentative statement of this picture of our relation to our contexts at the outset of the long, taxing, and implausible project that this book begins may help dispel ambiguities by clarifying intentions. It locates this theoretical venture in a speculative setting broader than any of the discrete points of departure for the argument.

This conception of our relation to our contexts gives a new twist

to one of the oldest and most puzzling themes of our civilization: the idea that man is the infinite caught within the finite. His external circumstances belittle him. His ardors and devotions are misspent on unworthy objects. An adherent to this view of our basic circumstance is hopeful when he thinks that this disproportion between the quality of our longings and the nature of our circumstances can be diminished. He is doubly hopeful when he thinks that the methods for diminishing this disproportion are the same as the means for cleansing our relations to one another of their characteristic dangers of subjugation and of disrespect for the originality in each of us.

The social theory foreshadowed here gives a detailed social and historical content to this speculative conception and provides reasons for this double hope. Reconsidered from the perspective of this theory, the radical project has a moral significance that goes beyond the liberal or leftist aim of freeing society from structures of dependence and domination and beyond the modernist goal of rescuing subjectivity and intersubjectivity from rigid roles and unexamined conventions. This greater ambition is to make our societies more responsive to that within us which ultimately rejects these limited experiments in humanity and says that they are not enough.