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Have We Abandoned a "Constitutional Perspective" on American Political Development?

Karen Orren and *Stephen Skowronek*

Defining terms is a serious undertaking and one bound to stir controversy. When we decided to devote a book to this task, we were under no illusion that everyone would readily sign on to our proposal. We thought, however, that it was worth calling attention to certain conceptual problems that currently beset the study of American political development (APD). We wanted to underscore the value of tractability in claims about change over time and to demonstrate the benefits of specificity in moving this venerable research tradition forward. We regret that Professor Thomas finds our proposal objectionable, but we are even more concerned that his alternative seems to do little to address the issues that prompted our effort.

The charge that our definition of political development is ill suited to the mission of APD, or at least to a good part of the mission, is troubling, for we agree with Professor Thomas that political development offers a "unique way to study the polity." Professor Thomas believes that defining development as "a durable shift in governing authority" will "marginalize," "banish," "purge," "threaten," "neglect," and/or "abandon" matters of vital significance. So we read his commentary carefully for clues as to how exactly it will do so. On inspection, it is hard to tell. Professor Thomas seems to concede that the exclusions he is concerned about "[do] not follow logically" from our conceptualization, and at another point, he says only that our definition "may well" exclude "interesting and important work." The problem, so far as we can see it, lies less with the definition itself than with what Professor Thomas perceives to be its intellectual affinities, with what it seems to him to represent. He wants to defend a "constitutional perspective" on American political development against the forces of positivism, historicism, and social science, and we are enrolled as stalwart advocates of the latter arrayed against the former.

Readers of *The Search for American Political Development*, or, for that matter, readers of other things we have written both individually and in collaboration, might find this characterization curious. The charge that our definition of development is indifferent to "the constitutional foundations of American identity" seems at the very least idiosyncratic, certainly at odds with much of what we say in the text about our reasons for its adoption. More striking still

is Professor Thomas's insinuation that scholars interested in diagnosing the "health" of the regime are threatened by a proposal to lend assessments of it a bit more analytic rigor. On this score, it appears that Professor Thomas is more interested in drawing lines narrowly than we are. Our book is as critical of certain uses of history in "mainstream" political science today as it is of efforts to turn APD scholarship into an island preserve of normative reflection. Both present sharp breaks with the longer tradition as we see it. Far from adopting a precious view of themselves, APD researchers from Burgess to Burnham sought at once to address fundamentals *and* to place their work at the center of contemporary political analysis. The challenge, as we understand it, is to keep both goals in view, to prevent the enterprise from abandoning this unique combination of elements and its adherents from dispersing into starkly separate camps. Far from recommending that the traditional concerns of the field be jettisoned in the process of sharpening its analytic claims, our stated goal was "to underscore their importance" (*Search for Am. Pol. Dev.*, 123).

In the course of elaborating his alternative, Professor Thomas touches on many topics we speak to in our book. It is hard to compare our two approaches, however, because these overlapping interests are never engaged directly at a substantive level. Professor Thomas calls attention to the insights of J. David Greenstone (to whom our book is dedicated) and to the work of Woodrow Wilson, Louis Hartz, Rogers Smith, and Jeffrey Tulis (each of whose contributions we consider in some detail). His point seems to be that we have missed the essence of their common project, but since he does not deal with anything that we do say about them, it is difficult to figure out what exactly we have overlooked. At one point, Professor Thomas acknowledges a suggestion he draws from Smith that "foundational concepts need to be defined more clearly and that, in doing so, we must be careful of our own normative presuppositions." But there is nothing that follows up this link between Smith's concerns and our own, nor is there any mention of the fact that we scrutinize Smith's own work on those very grounds: that we employ our definition of development to press his claims about a developmental reversal in the aftermath of Reconstruction and to sharpen appreciation of the wholesale rearrangement of constitutional relationships underway in that era.

At another point, Professor Thomas stresses the importance of religion in American political culture and how it bears on the principle of the separation of church and state. The impression he would leave is that our definition draws attention away from these subjects, whereas the fact is that we specifically write about them in one of our three demonstration studies of intercurrence in chapter 4. We identify the multiple orderings of authority arrayed by the separation of church and state in America and sort through changing dispositions on both sides as they have come to frame the impasse of the current period. Perhaps if Professor Thomas had been interested in the contents of our book rather than in its alleged sensibilities, we might have a clearer

understanding of where it falls short. As it stands, we remain fairly confident that examination of our text will quickly dispel the notion that we have aligned the field against those who hold an abiding concern for the constitution of the American polity.

Beyond that, readers will find that we actually have quite a bit to say about the particular concerns Professor Thomas raises, which are principally four. One is that APD research not diminish the importance of ideas and culture or focus too narrowly upon institutions. Another is that APD research pay due attention to the normative principles that underpin the American regime. A third is that APD research not collapse into the study of change or lose sight of the problems of regime maintenance. A fourth is that APD research not slight the importance of "direction" in assessments of development over time. All these concerns seem eminently sensible, but apart from the repeated suggestion that our definition is hazardous in each case, there is little in Professor Thomas's essay suggesting how this is so. Nor is there any indication that these issues might prove particularly challenging. Professor Thomas recommends adopting a program he finds outlined by Aristotle and exemplified by Tocqueville, but apart from his admonition to resist the siren songs of historicism and positivism, he appears to think that his own recommendation is self-evident.

Our opinion is different. As we see it, the study of American political development over the past century amounts to more than a collection of normatively frank diagnoses of the polity's health, more than a series of learned reflections on the impact of history on its core values, more than a string of informed commentaries on how best to maintain and secure its immeasurable benefits. As a corpus, APD research has a cumulative message with significant implications for studying both past and present. Running throughout is a persistent interrogation of the proposition that the American polity has, on some falsifiable definition, "developed." Practitioners all along have been at pains to establish firm anchors for such an assessment, or, if you will, a usable theory. But as each gesture toward definition—toward general theory—has been subjected to the empirical assaults of the next, the assumptions that underlay these investigations have been left ever more fully exposed. It is one thing to admire research for the intellectual commitments it reflects, and we emphatically do. It is quite another to reckon with the long chain of critical engagements with the foundations of historical investigation and with the significance of change in the American polity. We believe that a serious reckoning with the field's own literature reveals that the ground for interpretation has been substantially altered.

We were led to the problem of definition by this route, and not out of disregard for things that matter to Professor Thomas. We observed through due consideration that APD scholarship has over the decades steadily unraveled the largely normative premises by which it was motivated. The worry that our proposal might render APD "aimless" is especially curious in this regard, for our "diagnosis" was that the bottom had already been cut out

from under it, that the best chance for regaining our bearings was to set to work on foundations. Surely John Burgess thought he was offering something more than an interpretation of the health of the American regime at the time that he wrote. The question remains whether we, today, will have anything more on which to rest our own research. Our wager was that, by coming up with a defensible definition of what political development entails, we could answer in the affirmative and advance the field theoretically.

Defining political development as "a durable shift in governing authority" holds promise along a number of fronts, philosophical as well as empirical. Not the least of its attractions is that it allows us to confront directly the issues that currently swirl around simple assertions about the regime's core values—liberalism, republicanism, constitutionalism, democracy, equality, liberty, justice, the rule of law. To be sure, our definition capitalizes on the institutional turn in APD and elsewhere in the social sciences. It locates values on a historical site with describable features and within a set of governing structures. In this way, it makes high demands on specificity, on precisely determining the empirical referents of ideals and on careful scrutiny of the manner in which they are, or are not, accommodated by government. But there should be little in any of this to offend those interested in the reach or expression of these ideas over time.

Our argument is not that ideas should be excluded from view by the presence of institutions. It is rather that the historical significance of ideas will be best located where their impact is registered: in the exercise of authority and in the attempts by various methods to alter it. Strange to say in light of what Professor Thomas has written, we rest the case for our definition of political development on its capacity to facilitate exactly what he seems to want. We believe that it will prompt analysts to distinguish more carefully between political development and the back-and-forth changes of everyday politics, and to more closely observe what is at issue in political combat. We also believe that it will help establish guideposts for tracking political arrangements over time and for assessing direction. We take up the challenge of discovering direction ourselves, suggesting, for instance, that development in America exhibits (among other features) a pronounced shift from prescriptive to positive law (ibid., 178). Nowhere do we make an a priori claim that political development is in some way more valuable than political maintenance, nor do we recommend that scholars attend to the former at the expense of the latter. On the contrary, we identify the relationship between "continuity and change" and "order and change" as core problems of the field (ibid., 9–18). Our definition is meant to illuminate the meanings of political action, to aid in the assessment of its outcomes whatever they may be, and to draw out its historical implications for the polity as a whole.

So what is left after all these alleged differences of purpose are cleared away? We wonder if the real rub might lie elsewhere, in a certain conceptual characterization of the polity that seems to us to lend necessary analytic leverage but which may feel normatively unstable to Professor Thomas. For

instance, we posit the following: that authority is plenary, that shifts in authority—even revolutionary reconstructions of authority—are always partial and incomplete, that the polity at any given time is likely to feature disjoint, "intercurrent" principles of organization and operation, that the conflicting principles embodied in political institutions are likely to abrade one another over time. We recommend this characterization because we believe that it best prepares researchers to face the facts. Attention to its different elements will draw the analyst deeper into our history, deeper into the polity's constitution, deeper into the relationship between what changes over time and what remains the same. It may also provoke fresh thinking about familiar ideas, such as limited government, for example, and the project of self-government. Professor Thomas might object that this is the outlook of a historicist. Its worth, however, is not to be determined by the label assigned, but by the force of its explanation.

Admittedly, our formulation ups the ante for those like Professor Thomas, who want to preserve and protect inquiry into the "essential character" of the American regime. The time has passed when familiar claims about constitutional foundations and normative commitments can be ventured confidently without serious consideration of confounding evidence. Making inquiries into these areas specific and empirically tractable will be, we think, value added. Such a course abandons nothing along the way except what is shown to be false on the evidence. Indeed, if there exists any grounding for Professor Thomas's interest in teleology, we suspect it will be found exactly where our definition of development puts it: in the working out of the principled conflicts engrained in our institutions, which is to say, in shifts of governing authority negotiated over time.