

Political Theory in Albania: An Exercise in Democratic Culture¹

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What can political theory contribute to the emerging democracies in East-Central Europe? Under the communist regimes of many of these countries, the study of political thought was often reduced to political propaganda and used for the ideological preparation of party cadre. This is particularly true of Albania, one of the most repressive and isolated of the totalitarian regimes. Under the dictatorship of Enver Hoxha, Albania broke with the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact countries in the 1960s, forming an alliance with faraway China. In the 1970s, Albania broke even this tie, leaving itself isolated politically as well as intellectually, with most films, books, and journals from the West and East banned or censored.

Even in this Balkan enclave, however—following popular uprisings demanding extensive reforms—the process of democratization has begun. On the belief that political theory provides democratic tools that could make a difference, four teachers of political philosophy² set out in October 1993 with suitcases bulging with classics from Plato and Aristotle to John Rawls and Susan Moller Okin.

Background

How did they get there? In 1991, Donald Moon, then president of the Conference for the Study of Political Thought (CSPT),³ set up a committee for establishing contacts and developing programs with scholars in East-Central Europe and the former Soviet Union. Soon afterward, he organized a meeting of political philosophers from East

and West in Eichstatt, Germany, to discuss possible programs and future collaboration.

Julie Mostov, who participated at this meeting, traveled to Albania in 1992 and relayed some of the suggestions made at Eichstatt to several members of what was then the Faculty of Philosophy and Sociology in Tirana. Together they drew up a proposal for a program of seminars and workshops in the study of political thought. A version of this proposal was then submitted to IREX by Professors Moon and Mostov and awarded a Special Projects Grant for 1993.

Hirschmann, Moon, Mosher, and Mostov developed a schedule of seminars, lectures, and workshops, which were then faxed to Tirana and discussed by our Albanian colleagues. With some changes, we settled on an ambitious work program for two weeks in October, just as the Tirana department would be opening in a totally new institutional form, with a significantly reduced faculty.

It may have seemed quixotic to offer a series of seminars at a university that had only just reopened after a period of anarchy, in buildings in ruinous disrepair, in need of window glass, paint, and reliable electricity. But the Albanians, led by the department head, Artan Fuga, welcomed us eagerly. Involved in the process of writing a new constitution and ironing out the workings of a multiparty system, they saw serious discussion of different understandings of such core concepts as justice, rights, and liberty as extremely important to their political practice. Given the

history of repression in Albanian politics, they were looking for ways in which the educational system could effectively foster the development of a democratic culture in Albania.

Political Theory as a Democratic Tool

Our program consisted of three components: faculty seminars,⁴ teaching workshops, and a public roundtable. Seminars were designed primarily for faculty interested in research and teaching in the history of political thought, political philosophy, and democratic theory, but sessions were open to other faculty and students as well.⁵ The seminars covered different approaches to the study of political thought, debates in contemporary theory, and discussion of basic texts in the field. In addition to these seminars on the history of political thought and contemporary political theory in the Department of Philosophy and Sociology, we also led seminars on constitutionalism in the Faculty of Law and democratic theory and market economies in the Faculty of Economics.

We drew on our individual interests and fields of research, rather than trying to cover too many themes and authors in a short time, keeping in mind the topics requested by our hosts. They were interested, primarily, in contemporary applications of theory and ways in which it could or could not be adapted to cultural values, political institutions and concerns, and the process of democratization in

FIGURE 1



An important aspect of both visits was the public roundtables, which were attended by over 100 people within and outside the university.

Albania. We did our best to couch our discussions in these terms.

Each seminar was facilitated by one of the U.S. professors, who provided a 20-minute discussion of the chosen theme: the study of Western political thought, the concept of liberty, value pluralism and the grounding of political judgments, nationalism, procedural justice and constitutionalism, democracy and market economies. The other CSPT professors followed with questions, suggested alternative viewpoints, and elaborated on points made by the principal speaker. Since we represented different philosophical orientations and used distinct methodological approaches in discussing these topics, we did not hesitate to disagree and argue with each other. The floor was then open to questions and comments, which often proved to be quite challenging.

Setting the stage for disagreement characterized by a spirit of tolerance and intellectual exploration turned out to be an important aspect of the seminars for the Albanian participants. Given their political history, in which disagreement with official orthodoxy could be disastrous, they were reticent about engaging in public debate. The heated discussions showed that disagreement need not result in animosity or ideological rigidity and

could be conducted in a friendly and constructive manner, as an important part of the free exchange of ideas.

In the second component of the program—teaching workshops—we were able to explore how such free exchange, so important to building a democratic culture, could be brought to the classroom and the next generation of citizens. The Albanian faculty noted lack of student participation in classes because few works in political philosophy have been translated into Albanian or are available for distribution among students.

As a result, classes in the history of philosophy (or sociology and social theory) had to be lectures without readings. We worked with the faculty to develop ways in which discussion could still be brought into their lectures without relying on assigned readings; and at their request, we taught several of their classes. Although we had not planned to do this, we thoroughly enjoyed teaching their demanding students on such varied subjects as Plato's *Republic*, concepts of liberty, and feminism.

We also covered the “nuts and bolts” of programs in political philosophy and theory: curricula, course syllabi, assignments, and sample examinations with special emphasis on those programs that

could draw from the books and articles we donated to their library.⁶ We gave the department a collection of syllabi, including the APSA political theory syllabus package.

The third component of our project—a public roundtable discussion on the notion of tolerance⁷—became one of the most important aspects of our program. Not sensing the novelty of such an undertaking before arriving, we had not expected this to be more than an opportunity to engage in a discussion with an audience beyond our host department and faculty. It turned out, however, to serve as an effective example of public dialogue, demonstrating the practical place of political theory in democratic culture, and providing a public forum in which to affirm the work of our Albanian colleagues. Given the recent restructuring of the university, the latter was extremely important.⁸

The panelists included the four CSPT professors as well as four Albanians from the departments of philosophy and sociology, economics, and law. Each panelist was given five minutes to speak (plus five minutes for translation), followed by an open discussion. Panelists approached the notion of tolerance through the history of Western political thought, making reference to such theorists as Locke, Madison, Mill, and Montesquieu. We all made use of this opportunity to note the relevance of these thinkers to current issues in Albanian society, such as the masked intolerance of women's participation in public life, the lack of tolerance in the press, violations of due process in the treatment of political opponents in the legal system, and obstacles to privatization in Albania's transition to a market economy.

The very positive responses of Albanians to the roundtable, however, had more to do with the process and format of the program than the substance of the remarks. Our department head had worried that political partisans of the competing parties would use the opportunity to continue their attacks on one another, thereby undermining this attempt at a free exchange of

ideas and reasoned argument, as well as jeopardizing the effort to make the university a safe space for building democratic culture. His fears, however, did not materialize.

In the packed hall filled with students, faculty, administrators, some journalists, and a handful of interested citizens, participants engaged in an open and lively discussion adhering to the procedural requirements of tolerance. This made for a different sort of political forum than the Albanians had been used to. For instance, when a speaker expressing very strong anti-Muslim sentiments was told his time was up, he could not claim it was for political reasons, the common charge in recent Albanian politics: he was heard and even had an opportunity for rebuttal.

The roundtable was a media event and segments were rebroadcast several times on Albanian television. (Since there is only one Albanian channel, we had more than our 15 minutes of fame!) When we returned for a second visit in June 1994, the first thing our hosts insisted on scheduling was another roundtable.

The Follow-Up

In evaluating our October program, our Albanian colleagues encouraged us to apply for a follow-up grant, stressing the importance of continuity in their international contacts and continued support for faculty development in the collegial spirit we had developed through our two weeks together. We were fortunate to get another grant from IREX for 1994.

Moon and Mosher were not able to go to Tirana in June, the time our Albanian colleagues thought would be best for our seminars. Thus, Hirschmann and Mostov were joined on the follow-up project by Paul Thomas of the University of California, Berkeley; and V. P. Gagnon of Cornell University. At the suggestion of the Albanian academics, we brought three students from the United States with us on this second visit: Suzanne Dovi, a graduate student in political theory from Princeton University; Heloise

Dupont-Nivet, a graduate of the International Area Studies Program at Drexel University; and Cynthia Neal, a graduate in political science from Smith College.

Our Albanian colleagues greeted us warmly upon our return. Significant progress had been made at the department: new windows, fresh paint on the walls, electricity, and the latest in computers and printers (donated by Soros Open Society Fund). Our hosts insisted that these improvements represented tangible recognition of the department's ability to succeed, and that this was due in good part to our efforts and the attention that our program had brought to the department. The books that we brought in October had been catalogued in a new departmental library, and the shelves were ready for the additional volumes we brought with us.

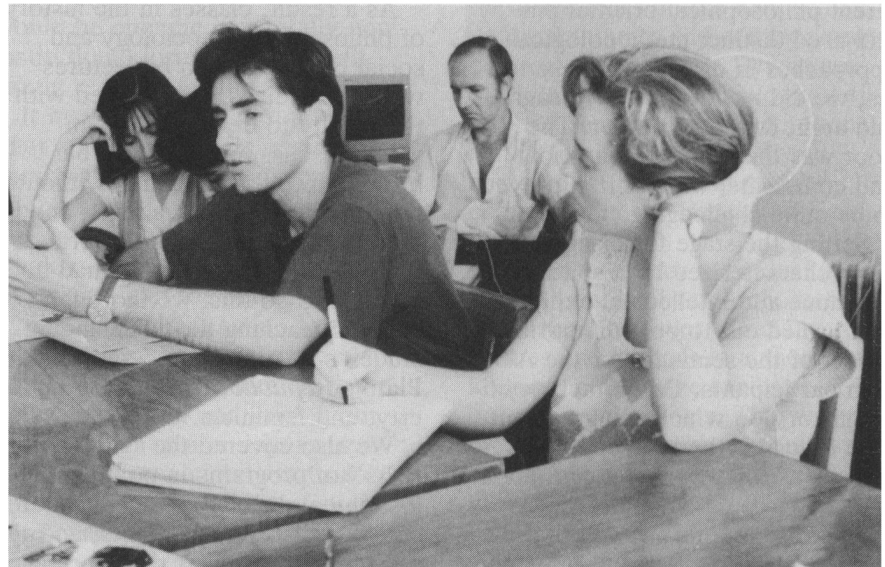
In designing the program for this follow-up project, we followed the suggestion of our Albanian colleagues to present our own research. They wanted to see how we used the theories we had discussed in the fall in our own research projects. All of us were eager for this chance to get feedback on our work and to see how discussion of it could be used as part of the process of faculty development. Our Albanian colleagues presented their research as well. This encouraged their active participation in

the seminars and gave them an opportunity to present their work in a safe academic setting, but still get critical comments and suggestions from us and other faculty members. We continued our discussions on teaching, but disappointed our colleagues when none of us could give a definitive answer to the question of how to juggle teaching, research, and university service!

We hit the television screen again with our second roundtable, a tradition we hope the department will regularly promote. This time the chosen theme was "Public Opinion and Democracy," and topics ranged from public spaces, apathy, and opinion polls to problems of access to and reliability of information, as well as the question of opening up the secret police files.

The American students met daily with Albanian students to work on a joint project. The idea was to take a philosophical concept that figures critically in discussions of democratization in Albania and to explore different aspects of it in practice. The Albanian students chose to investigate the notions of liberty and economic security. Less concerned about freedom of the press than their professors, they were worried about the challenges posed to their personal liberty by economic conditions. They presented reports at the end of our stay, all but one in English.

FIGURE 2



U.S. and Albanian students presented their joint project at the end of the visit.

The Albanian students expressed their enthusiasm for and appreciation of this aspect of the CSPT program to their professors, our students, and us. They had never worked in groups before and found the experience of articulating their concerns in theoretical terms, developing their own arguments, and presenting their work to be a stimulating and rewarding experience.

On the other side, our students felt that they learned a great deal about the difficulties of democratization in Albania by working with the Albanian students, understanding the country through their concerns, and spending time with them outside the classroom. At our last session, we discussed ways in which students would continue such group projects during the coming academic year.

Conclusions

On both visits, we left Albania thinking that this had been a successful project and an exciting and challenging experience. We learned about Albania's history, politics, and culture, the possibilities and difficulties of democratization, and some of the effects of an extremely closed and repressive regime on higher education. Our colleagues shared valuable insights with us through their comments on our work and their own presentations. We hope that we helped to facilitate faculty and curricular development, gave moral and material support and public legitimacy to the members of the department, nourished networks of trust and mutual respect for further intellectual and academic collaboration, stimulated academic growth among the participants of the seminars and workshops, provided programmatic and curricular insights and information, and encouraged and demonstrated interactive pedagogical methods.

In their evaluation, our hosts appreciated the design of this project which encouraged our interaction as colleagues. They have seen enough "experts" passing through their country and know that what they need are long-term contacts and cooperation with colleagues

and institutions in the United States and Europe.⁹ They need books and journal subscriptions, resources for translation of important works, and time to develop their own texts. They could also benefit from short-term faculty exchanges or visiting scholar programs.

In October, Mostov, Mosher,

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and Dovi went to Washington, D.C., to talk about the project and the need for more follow-up activities at a policy forum organized by IREX. (A short report prepared from this session is available through IREX.) Less than two weeks later, Mostov received a call to talk to a group of educators from the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. Political philosophy, it seems, is catching on.

Notes

1. This project was funded by a grant from the International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX), with funds provided by the U.S. Department of State (Title VIII) and the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. None of these organizations is responsible for the views expressed.

2. The authors of this article, plus J. Donald Moon, Department of Government, Wesleyan University.

3. The Conference for the Study of Political Thought (CSPT) is an association of philosophers, political and social theorists, and other scholars in related fields, most of whom are engaged in university teaching and research. One of the aims of the CSPT is to encourage and develop the study of political thought and to facilitate exchanges among scholars doing research in related fields.

4. The Department of Philosophy and So-

ciology, in the Faculty of Social Sciences, was our host department, and the one we worked closely with on both our visits. At present, there is no department of political science or government.

5. Most of the Albanian professors spoke either English or French in our department. Seminars were held predominately in English, with French being a secondary resource. We used a translator in some of our classes in October, although a number of the students were proficient in English and/or French. We also used a translator for the public roundtables.

6. The books were purchased within the budget of the IREX grant or donated by the CSPT professors. Most of the works were in English, but a substantial number were in French, particularly those by French theorists. While faculty and students can read either or both of these languages, funding for translation of texts into Albanian is essential.

7. This topic was chosen by our hosts.

8. Reorganization left the department with only five full-time members and a few associate members (like adjunct faculty), most of whom were full-time faculty before a politically charged restructuring initiated by the government. Despite the tensions and drain on faculty resources this created, Dean Theodhori Karaj, Associate Dean Teuta Starova, and Fuga have been extremely resourceful in rebuilding the Social Science Faculty and Department of Philosophy and Sociology.

9. For example, Michael Mosher read a large section of Artan Fuga's dissertation, which Fuga is writing in Paris, and commented extensively on it. Mosher will return to Tirana some time in December, as part of our IREX/CSPT grant, for a week of seminars and discussions. Hirschmann received a request through Fuga from a group of women intellectuals who want to set up a feminist library. Hirschmann is trying to facilitate this through various women's networks, including the Women's Caucus for Political Science.

About the Authors

Nancy Hirschmann is assistant professor of government at Cornell University. She is the author of *Rethinking Obligation: A Feminist Method for Political Theory* (1992, Cornell University Press) and is currently writing a book on the concept of freedom from a feminist perspective.

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