Preface

Because it is a discipline without scientific pretensions, political philosophy has never been very constrained by matters of fact. But the real world of politics impinges on political philosophy nevertheless. Thus the major political transformations of the past quarter century have had significant philosophical effects. Indeed, the early 1970s now appear to have been a watershed. The economic expansion that followed the end of the Second World War in all the advanced capitalist countries came to an end around that time, to be replaced by a period of slow decline. Actually existing socialist regimes entered a period of prolonged economic and political stagnation culminating eventually in their demise. And the so-called Third World began to splinter apart: a few countries achieved a measure of unanticipated economic success, the rest sank deeper into misery. These momentous changes have resonated throughout the entire political culture. There can be little doubt that they account, in part, for the decline of the historical Left, almost to the point of extinction, and for the resurgence of pro-market and antistate ideologies. These phenomena, in turn, have affected political philosophy profoundly.

On the surface, however, academic political philosophy appears to have changed very little. In 1971 John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* was published. That masterpiece exercises an enormous influence over political philosophy to this day. The appearance in 1993 of *Political Liberalism*, a redacted collection of Rawls's essays written in the preceding decade and a half, has brought Rawlsian concerns even more into the foreground. Needless to say, Rawls's focus has evolved over the years. Thus *A Theory of Justice* is much less concerned, say, with cultural diversity and other "facts of pluralism" than *Political Liberalism* is. But the overall constancy of Rawls's philosophical vision and the nearly hegemonic influence of his work in so many areas of political philosophy can make

it seem that the discipline has evolved hardly at all in the past quarter century. Those of us who, on balance, regret the way that recent history has affected political philosophy therefore find ourselves complaining both that so little has changed in the past twenty-five years and also that so much has changed for the worse.

On balance, however, it is plain that the Rawlsian turn has been a godsend—especially for egalitarians. More than any other factor, Rawlsian liberalism has kept alive and even breathed new life into an egalitarian vision that, until quite recently, animated a significant political constituency, but now no longer does. It has done so, however, by celebrating some of the institutional arrangements that have superintended the rightward, anti-egalitarian drift in real world politics. This is why I, an unreconstructed egalitarian of the old school, am ambivalent about the current state of academic political philosophy. What follows is an effort to think through this ambivalence and, so far as possible, to resolve it.

With some exceptions (concentrated mainly in Chapters 4 and 5), the topics I address are central to the concerns of political philosophers who have taken the Rawlsian turn—the majority of political philosophers today. But the claims I advance are often at odds with views that are emblematic of the strain of liberal theory they have produced. Thus I favor a form of liberalism that owes more to John Stuart Mill than to Rawls, and I endorse a vision of democracy and community based on some non- or extraliberal ideas of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Karl Marx. In fact, the position I ultimately defend is not strictly liberal at all. What follows, however, should not unduly disturb open-minded proponents of the kind of liberalism I propose to rethink. As followers of Hegel might say, my aim is to *incorporate* this strain of liberal theory, liberal egalitarianism, along with several of the positions it *negates*, into a new *synthesis*. Of course, it will be impossible here to do more than sketch what I have in mind. The supersession of liberal egalitarianism is a daunting project. Its successful execution can only be the work of many, and the philosophical community nowadays is indifferent, if not hostile, to such an endeavor. But the pendulum is sure to swing back; real-world conditions will see to it. For now, it is worthwhile, I believe, to struggle against the current, even at the risk of appearing antiquated or utopian. Otherwise, some deeply important implications of the egalitarian idea may fall out of sight, rendering their eventual reconstruction all the more difficult. Thus my aim is to show how liberalism, refracted through the work of Rawls and philosophers influenced by him, points the way toward a political philosophy *beyond* its own conceptual horizons. It does so neither intentionally nor self-consciously. But it does so nevertheless.

It is a tenet of Rawls's "political liberalism" that everyone "reasonable" can in principle be brought to support an "overlapping consensus" favoring liberal institutional arrangements. I take issue with some aspects of this view (in Chapter 3), but I agree that liberal theoretical convictions, properly conceived, are more nearly ubiquitous than was widely assumed just a decade or so ago. What follows is not, in the main, a political tract intended to persuade lapsed egalitar-

ians to resume the cause or potential egalitarians to take it up. What follows is, rather, an investigation of the forms and limits of one currently prominent kind of liberal theory, and of what that theory might become, were it successfully joined to some ideas of Rousseauian and Marxian provenance. Even so, I do hope to convince adherents of the broad consensus on values that motivates liberal egalitarians and many others that, despite all that has happened in recent years, the supraliberal vision of the historical Left remains eminently defensible. If this smacks of pouring old wine into new bottles, so be it. The old wine, suitably filtered, is as good as it ever was, and the new bottles are better than the old ones ever were.

I expect that my focus on recent academic political philosophy will disconcert at least a few readers who would otherwise be inclined to support my conclusions. They will find what follows too concerned with current preoccupations and too little focused on traditional left-wing ideas, in short, not “old-fashioned” enough. To them, I would say that liberal political philosophy, as it has developed in the past quarter century, has become indispensable for theorizing some of the values the Left has always advanced. When the Left revives politically, as it eventually must, given the persistence of its reasons for being, there will be no going back to ways of thinking that preceded the Rawlsian turn.

I fear, however, that there will be other readers, a far greater number, who will find what follows hopelessly out of date. They will consider it unconscionable in a “postmodern” age to remain mired in traditional liberal or Rousseauian or Marxian ways of thinking. I should alert readers who might expect to find liberal equality rethought here in a postmodern “register” that they will be disappointed. I will not belabor the point, but I trust that my allergy to “discourses” bearing the prefix “post-” is not so much a personal idiosyncrasy as a rational response to some patently unfortunate developments in the prevailing intellectual climate. I have in mind a certain tendency toward conceptual relativism and, correspondingly, a *de facto* abandonment of some of the norms of rational argumentation. It is fortunate, therefore, that academic philosophy generally, including political philosophy, has so far remained largely outside the postmodernist ambit. As will become apparent, there are important conceptual affinities joining egalitarian positions with long-standing “modernist” forms of political theory. This fact is a condition for the possibility of conceiving an egalitarian vision that is genuinely supraliberal in content.

I describe this vision as “utopian,” but I trust that the reader will understand that the emphasis is on the scare quotes. Strictly speaking, “utopian” suggests institutional arrangements that are impossible to realize under *feasible* real-world conditions. But insofar as the reflections that follow depend on the feasibility of transforming people’s dispositions and circumstances, there is, I believe, nothing literally utopian about what I shall say. I appreciate the fact that few readers today will be disposed to agree with me, and I regret that it is simply not possible to assuage their doubts satisfactorily. When positions like the

one I develop are faulted for being utopian, philosophical speculations alone can hardly abrogate the charge. It is not at all clear that a more empirically focused inquiry could either. What evidence there is that bears on the issues in contention here is too equivocal to advance the discussion one way or another. I intend the scare quotes to underscore this situation. Now and for the foreseeable future, no one is in a position to say with confidence just how “utopian” it is reasonable to be. I can only hope to make the reader see that my “utopianism” is at least as plausible as the “realism” that has come to dominate contemporary thinking. My hope is that this posture is salutary as well. I would venture that of all the ways that the political culture has changed for the worse in the past quarter century, the one that is most insidious—and perhaps also most detrimental to efforts to change the world for the better—is the apparently inexorable rise of political pessimism and its consequence: a revolution of diminished expectations throughout the remnants of the political Left.

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Rethinking Liberal Equality