

The Ralf Dahrendorf Memorial Lecture

Tribute and Critique

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Introduction

Professor the Lord Plant of Highfield is one of the leading Hegelian philosophers of the post-war era. His analytical style of apprehending philosophical tensions and the dialectical method of recovering (if not reconciling) seemingly contradictory and counterposing traditions and ideas distinguishes his work. As well as bringing this philosophical approach to bear upon political philosophy - it is best seen in, *Hegel: An Introduction* (1972; 1983), *Modern Political Thought* (1991) and *Hegel on Philosophy and Religion* (1997) - he has had a sustained influence on the disciplines of social work through his books *Moral and Social Theory in Casework* (1970) and *Community and Ideology* (1974), and on theology with his book, *Politics, Theology and History* (2001) and on political science and jurisprudence with his book with Kenneth Hoover, *Conservative Capitalism in Britain and the United States: A Critical Appraisal* (1989) and his landmark study, *The Neo-liberal State* (2010).

My tribute to Raymond Plant combines the gratitude of the student to his teacher and the recognition of a scholar to the author of countless works of significance in my own field of political science and adjacent, cognate disciplines. Plant's intellectual breadth is hard to rival. And yet my tribute also acknowledges the tireless and generous public service given to civil society groups and to the nation as a dedicated legislator scrutinizing government bills in the House of Lords. For most people, this is enough to fill a life and to warrant a tribute of a lecture named in honour of another example of scholarship and public service, Ralf Dahrendorf. But for me, and many who have been taught by and worked alongside Plant, the evidence of such a tribute lies also in the receipt of his steadfast friendship, kindness, and generosity of spirit. If there is an abiding lesson from his school, this is it.

The Critique: The Paradoxes of Plant

I do not have the time to list all of the things that Plant gets right in his scholarship or to adumbrate the political and economic issues where I follow his reasoning and concur with his conclusions. But knowing the man as I do, he would be embarrassed by an unalloyed tribute and would recoil at a

speech marked by hagiography. Therefore, a friendly critique seems to me the more interesting story to tell.

But, in a sense, I face a somewhat difficult task in providing a critique of the thought of Plant. Not because I know not where we differ, but simply because he was my teacher. And this is a problem of interpretation. My thought is to some degree scaffolded upon the footings Plant laid in his published work. In particular, upon the work he published defending a form of social democracy against the intellectual challenges of economic liberalism (Plant, 1984; Plant, 1988; Hoover and Plant, 1989; Plant and Barry, 1990). These works, and others on political philosophy (Plant, 1991), I studied as a Thorneycroft Memorial Scholar under his tutelage at the University of Southampton. He and I have engaged in an ongoing conversation that began in 2000 and continues to this day.

Whilst offering a critique of Plant's thought presents problems of hermeneutics, it is possible. This is because over time, our original differences have maximized. And whilst still squarely located within the Western tradition, we no longer share the same perspective. I have acquired a different grammar by which to ask certain questions and express deeper scepticism of what I understand as Plant's progressive worldview. But it is necessary to state that my debts to Plant are not solely the usual debts a student owes his teacher. Most students experience aspirations raised and aptitudes tested. For me, the tutorials in the Palace of Westminster, with the readings he suggested, and the conversations he instigated, revealed in my doctoral project¹ something of the interconnectedness of the questions posed by the study of philosophy and social science. My proper education had begun. The friendship and encouragement of Plant has been a benefit and a blessing over the years.

Paradoxes are uncomfortable and yet unavoidable in philosophy and theology. With Plant I find several. Chief among them can be understood as the *belief-non-belief paradox*. Plant maintains some residual theistic assent to the traditions of Christianity that he discovered as a child first in the Methodist Chapel (where his parents sent him) but more formatively in the Anglican Parish Church of St Augustine. All set to be an Ordinand at the College of the Resurrection in Mirfield, Plant reflected that pastoral ministry was not for him and embarked upon on a life of scholarship. In 2009 he was appointed Lay Canon of Winchester Cathedral, a post he occupied until 2018. And whilst trained as a Hegelian (a left Hegelian to be precise) as his career progressed through the 1970s and 1980s, Plant added an Anglo-American liberal analytic lens – influenced by the work of John Rawls – to his philosophical approach and this arguably became his dominant style. A more sympathetic

¹ The thesis was subsequently published. See, M. Beech (2006) *The Political Philosophy of New Labour* (London: Bloomsbury).

interpretation is that Plant tried to blend Hegel and Rawls, as he implies in the conclusion of *Modern Political Thought*:

Rawls's own development, which in *A Theory of Justice* was Kantian, has gradually moved in a Hegelian direction in his more recent writings, but he has not lost sight of the need for a general theory in which the disputes about social meanings within a society and between societies have to be mediated. There is, therefore, scope for both the general and particular in political theory, as Hegel saw very clearly in his account of concrete universals, and any full theory is going to have to do justice to both (Plant, 1991: 375)

Nevertheless, orthodox confessional Christian thought rarely impacts his analysis, forms his conclusions, or determined his voting record in the Upper House.

Next is the *family-individualist paradox*. Plant is the committed family man; husband to the wife of his youth, father, grandfather and yet his writings seldom assert the primacy of, or the necessity for marriage and family in the classical Christian sense. The concept of the family is occluded in his writings on society, economy, and politics whilst the individual sovereignly reigns. The concept of community, an outworking of the extended family and perhaps best understood as the free association of families in a given location with each other, received ambivalence and mild scepticism from Plant in his monograph *Community and Ideology* (1974).

The final paradox that I detect in the thought and work of Plant, can be termed the *nationalist-cosmopolitan paradox*. Plant is a Grimbarian of working-class heritage and spent his life in England's institutions including King's College London, and the universities of Hull, Manchester, Southampton, and Oxford, and as has been aforementioned as a member of the House of Lords, and the Church of England. And despite this most English experience, not a smidgen of national sentiment, let alone patriotism, or recognition of the benefits of the historic culture occupy the countless pages of words he has published across the impressive range of disciplines his work has reached, from philosophy to social work, theology to political science, and jurisprudence. If one read him and knew nothing of his biography, religious heritage, family, and nationality, one would conclude he could be from anywhere in the West. This no doubt is a compliment to many progressive scholars, and perhaps to Plant too, but it is an impossibility. To suggest that one can meaningfully write in such a way ignores the contingency of history and home, with its language, religion, culture, and traditions of thought. To aver that writing can be done in such a style - especially in the humanities and social sciences - requires intentionality. And this is a story in and of itself. Despite beginning with continental philosophy - which does not seek to divest history from doing philosophy, nor pretend that the role played by the beliefs that shape the philosopher are in some sense 'veiled' - the mainstay of Plant's career and scholarly output has been within the analytic tradition. And this is telling, and has much to answer for.

And yet, the simple fact that I can perceive such paradoxes in his thought, describe the tensions between subject and object, and pose questions of interpretation, is because of the gift of proper thinking bestowed by my teacher, Raymond Plant.

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