



The Primacy of the Political: A History of Political Thought from the Greeks to the French and American Revolutions (Columbia Studies in Political Thought / Political History)

Dick Howard

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The conflict between politics and antipolitics has replayed itself throughout Western history and philosophical thought. Plato's quest for absolute certainty led him to denounce political democracy, an anti-political position later challenged by Aristotle. This back-and-forth exchange came to a head at the time of the American and French revolutions. Through this wide-ranging narrative, Dick Howard throws new light on a recurring philosophical dilemma, proving our political problems are not as unique as we think.

Howard begins with democracy in ancient Greece and the rise and fall of republican politics in Rome. In the wake of Rome's collapse, political thought searched for a new medium, and the conflict between politics and antipolitics reemerged through the contrasting theories of Saint Augustine and Saint Thomas. During the Renaissance and the Reformation, the emergence of the modern individual again shifted the terrain. Even so, politics vs. antipolitics dominated the period, frustrating even Machiavelli, who sought to reconceptualize the nature of political thought. Hobbes and Locke, theorists of the social contract, then reenacted the conflict, which Rousseau sought (in vain) to overcome. Adam Smith and the growth of modern economic liberalism, the radicalism of the French revolution, and the conservative reaction of Edmund Burke subsequently marked the triumph of antipolitics, and the American Revolution may have offered the potential groundwork for a renewal of politics. Taken together, these historical examples, viewed through the prism of philosophy, reveal the roots of today's political climate and suggest the trajectory of the battles yet to come.

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