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Samuel H. Beer and the Possibilities of Politics

Peter A. Hall

Minda de Gunzburg Center for European Studies

Harvard University

Cambridge MA 02138

phall@fas.harvard.edu

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The death on April 7th 2009 of Samuel Beer, still vigorous at the age of 97, marks the passing of an era in the study of British politics, not least in the United States where he towered over the field for more than fifty years. This is an appropriate moment to reflect on the distinctive perspectives Beer brought to the study of politics. Although he was a scholar of American federalism and European political development, as well as British politics, Beer's work had an underlying unity and, as we create our own frameworks of understanding, it is worth recalling the vision of politics articulated by one of the twentieth-century scholars who thought most deeply about it.

I first became aware of Beer several years before I met him when, upon arriving at Oxford, I realized I should learn something about British politics. I asked a politics tutor to recommend some reading, expecting to emerge with a long list of books by Oxford dons. To my surprise, he declared that the best book ever written about British politics was the work of an American and he sent me to find *Modern British Politics* by Samuel H. Beer.¹

I must confess that an initial reading of the book left me confused. Astute enough to recognize it as a work of extraordinary scholarship, I was not yet familiar enough with British politics, or maybe even politics as a whole, to appreciate what was on offer. It seemed a book and a half, dense with observations about the character of British politics and much deeper than the text I had been expecting. Only later did I realize that this is a book, not only about party politics in Britain, but about the character of politics itself and in many ways a timeless work.

Why does Beer's work have a depth and timeless character rarely attained in political science? In some measure, those qualities derive from the significance of the questions he asks and the levels of insight he brings to bear on them, born of a lifetime of study. How is the traditional combined with the new in contemporary British politics? Why did a country that governed itself so well for so long do so poorly in the 1970s? What role do the states really play in American federalism, and why does power shift back and forth between them and the federal government over time? What use are legislatures in a technocratic world? How should political science address history? These are the kind of large questions that Beer tackles.

However, the classic quality of his work rests on another foundation. In contrast to most of us who write about specific political problems without paying much attention to the overall nature of politics, Beer writes out of an abiding fascination for the character of politics itself. Whatever their immediate subject, his books and articles are also commentaries on the terms in which human beings come together in political association to take common decisions about their collective fate. Whether implicitly or explicitly, they all speak to the parameters and potential of politics itself. As a consequence, if the primary objective of most works in political science is to close a contentious issue, Beer's books are aimed instead at opening up new vistas, typically on the possibilities of politics itself.

What are the conceptions of politics animating Beer's work? Without claiming to capture every nuance, I will chart the outlines of the vision that underlies, and to some degree unifies, most of his writing. For Beer, politics is the means whereby human beings formulate and pursue a set of collective purposes. He came to that idea early on,

perhaps, as a student of A.D. Lindsay, under the influence of the nineteenth century English idealists. The first page of his first book, *The City of Reason*, indicates that it is about the “problem of purpose” and toward its end, we are told: "Common purpose is a means of self-realization. As the idealists assert, government therefore ought to take care to protect and promote a common purpose." (Beer, 1949, 204).

The City of Reason is an effort to formulate a philosophy of liberalism founded on the “metaphysics of creative advance” of Alfred North Whitehead. Published just after the Second World War, it tackles fears, prevalent in the wake of depression, war and holocaust, about an irrational world spinning beyond human control. Beer defines the problem in the following terms: "Why should man try to control his future and make his history in a world which seems to be governed by a blind and lawless fate?" (vii). In other words, on what basis does it even make sense to pursue, whether in inquiry or action, a set of purposes deemed worthy of pursuit? His targets lie in the fatalism and ethical relativism of many contemporaries, and his response insists on the capacity of human beings for creative advance, toward self-realization, not as a solitary endeavor but as a collective pursuit.

Seen in these terms, the potential for creative advance is the capacity on which morality is founded: ethical action lies in its recognition and realization. Moreover, since politics is the main avenue for the formulation and pursuit of collective purposes, it is incumbent on us to use politics for that end, and the political choices we make become fundamental acts of morality. On one level, this view identifies an ethical imperative. On another, it draws our attention to the ways in which the debates that underpin political

conflict are, not just a reflection of social learning, but of collective normative learning as well. In some measure, politics is about the articulation of moral visions.

Here is an answer to those who would see politics in more banal terms, at best as a struggle for power over scarce resources, at worst as a means for the public pursuit of private interest. Beer recognizes this side of politics. He opens *Modern British Politics* (xi) with the observation that "[p]olitics is at least a struggle for power", and his magisterial analysis of the modernization of American federalism shows how the structural features of each phase of federalism turns on specific kinds of coalitions formed to secure resources (Beer, 1973a).

However, Beer sees greater potential in politics. In *Patterns of Government* and the 1969 epilogue to *Modern British Politics*, he interprets modern political development as the unfolding of this problem of purpose over time. He describes the movement to the modern world in terms of twin developments, the rise of scientific rationalism, on the one hand, and the realization of voluntarism or democratic governance, on the other (see also Beer 1974a). By rationalism, Beer (1969, 392) means "the notion that men have the ability scientifically to control nature and society" counter-posed to earlier views of nature and society as immutable orders given by God. He takes voluntarism to refer to "the view that human wishes are the basis of legitimacy in constitutional structure and public policy" – a position linked to the Enlightenment reaction against conceptions of political authority as derivative of a divine or teleological order.

The result is a stimulating accounts of the modernization process, striking for the preeminent role accorded ideas in the progress to modernity and for the sense it conveys that human beings shape their own destiny. It allows Beer (1973b, 4) to formulate a

distinctive diagnosis of the central problem of the modern world, defined as "the coincidence of loss of purpose with dominance of technique". Although resonant with the reaction against technocracy of the 1960s, this perspective anticipates, by some years, later debates about communitarianism (Sandel 1982). Beer sees the potential for malaise, marked by a loss of moral direction, in the development of democratic political institutions that legitimize whatever is the people's will but do nothing to provide that will with a content and objectives. As he sees it, the attack that modernity mounts on the coercions of despotic rule is truly liberating, but at the heart of the liberal democratic order constructed in their place is a certain emptiness.

In the years since Beer articulated them, such concerns have become even more apposite. His vision of the modern democratic state as the political vehicle for Enlightenment ideals – an agent that harnesses the growing power of science to the service of a popular will – provided a rationale for one of the most consequential developments of the second half of the twentieth century, namely, the rise of activist states, under Conservative, Christian Democratic or Social Democratic governments. In subsequent decades, of course, post-modernist thought has subjected Enlightenment ideals and the concept of modernization itself to withering critique, and there is much to be said for that critique (Hall 2007). But Beer's analysis illuminates the political dilemmas of a post-modern age that leaves many politicians and members of the public alike wondering what the legitimate basis for interventionist government might be.

Beer's (1973a, 4) own answer is that it is incumbent upon the members of a nation to formulate "a conception of common purpose" with which to animate their institutions. Here is another of the central themes of his work: an insistence on the role

of ordinary people in the workings of a democratic political system. That theme is most fully developed in Beer's (1978, 1993) distinctive account of American federalism as a system of government in which the federal government and the states act, alternately over time, as checks on each other, through an unfolding process in which the people throw their electoral weight behind one or another in the contest over public policy.

To support such faith in the people, however, Beer is forced to consider how the wide variety of people of diverse ways of life found in nations like the United States or contemporary Britain can constitute enough of a community to support the search for common purposes. In a remarkable appreciation of Walt Whitman, Beer (1984) celebrates the diversity of people, occupations and views to be found in America; and, in *The City of Reason* (1949, 10), he reacts against the Idealists' conception of community as one in which people must become more similar in order to live in harmony, in favor of the Lockean view that democracies can govern many different kinds of people provided they share a minimum consensus about the forms of legitimate politics.

In later years, Beer would deepen those ideas. His analysis of the American founders' ideas of federalism suggests that their genius lay in seeing that the diversity of a large republic would counteract the dangers of rule by faction present in small republics (Beer, 1990, 1993). He finds a more romantic answer in Whitman's view that "diversity itself holds out to all a promise of self-fulfillment which may mobilize more consent among the citizenry for the protection of diversity than is accomplished by the calculations of interest or the compulsion of right" (Beer, 1984, 43). Beer saw federalism as a system in which diversity can be the agent of unity provided it is underpinned by a national ideal that creates one people. Underpinning this, as Hugh Heclo (2009) has

noted, is the more fundamental view that people can find in their differences ways to complete themselves, leading to “a mutual fulfilling of identity through relationships of difference.”

Much of Beer's work focuses, then, on two problems. The first asks how politics can be a vehicle for the search for collective purposes. The second asks how a diverse people can be the keystone for such a politics. On the answers to those questions depend the conditions for successful democratic governance.

Beer's approach to these problems is built on an interpretation of the political dynamic with two sides to it. On the one hand, he displays a deep concern for the construction and operation of political institutions, notably in research about political parties and interest groups in Britain as well as federalism in America. On the other, Beer has a healthy respect for the importance to politics of political culture, in all its forms. In contrast to those who fasten on one or another side of this dynamic to the exclusion of the other, Beer's analyses of politics give each equal weight.

The importance he attaches to political institutions and their consequences is most evident in *Britain Against Itself* (1982, 107) where he observes: "The discovery of structural explanations is probably the most prized achievement of the social scientist. This is his *métier*: to show how a certain pattern of action regularly leads to consequences unintended by its institutional norms or by its human participants." Here, he shows how the institutions of the British political system, which served the nation so well for many years, began to frustrate processes of collective choice in the late 1960s and 1970s, as the powerful organizations of the collectivist polity became locked into what Beer termed 'pluralistic stagnation' (Beer, 1982, 24-30; 1969, Epilogue).

That analysis was the culmination of a more extensive investigation into the ways in which the representative institutions of the British polity had evolved, especially over the course of the twentieth century, to culminate after the Second World War in a new pattern of 'collectivist politics'. *Modern British Politics* began as a study of political parties and interest groups, which spawned many other articles on those subjects during the 1950s and 1960s, but became nothing less than an effort to specify the character of politics in post-war Britain. Although this book contains the best account of party politics in Britain since Robert McKenzie's pioneering work, its image of collectivist politics provides a new conception of the way in which politics in virtually all the developed democracies was structured in the second half of the twentieth century.

At the heart of Beer's conception of collectivist politics is an analysis of the ways in which the development of the welfare state and a managed economy altered the content and conduct of politics. Influenced by the observation of E. Pendleton Herring that "[t]he greater degree of detailed and technical control the government seeks to exert over industrial and commercial interests, the greater must be their degree of consent and active participation," Beer shows how governments' efforts to manage the economy drew producer groups ever more closely into the process of governance (Beer 1969, 321 *et passim*). Almost two decades before Philippe Schmitter (1974) ignited a resurgence of interest in corporatism, Beer (1956, 1969, 71 *et passim*) had identified a new pattern of group politics that he termed 'quasi-corporatist'. In contrast to those who saw strong interest groups and powerful political parties as inimical, he argued that 'party government' could co-exist with 'producer group politics' – seeing them as complementary forms of interest representation in the collectivist polity.

Modern British Politics and its sequel, *Britain Against Itself*, offer masterful analyses of how political institutions structure the process and outcomes of politics. Beer was a source of inspiration for those who developed approaches to politics based on a 'new institutionalism'. He made an early break with the canons of pluralism on the grounds that "party policy is influenced not only by calculations flowing from the pursuit of power, but also by distinctive party conceptions of the common good" (Beer, 1969, 352). However, what moves the analysis beyond an account of the mechanics of political institutions is Beer's wider concern for the contributions that particular kinds of institutions can make to the efficacy of collective choice and to the quality of representation. We are reminded that democratic governance is all about representation, seen as a matter of high moral concern linked to the creative process whereby human beings control their own destiny. These books are animated by a sense of the importance of issues of representation, which drives both the author and his readers forward.

However, there is another side to these books, rooted in Beer's appreciation for the significance and complexity of political culture. Shortly after the paean to structuralism cited above, Beer (1982, 107) goes on to observe that "...in social studies there is always a certain looseness in such structural explanations arising from the fact that its subjects are thinking, feeling beings...Therefore, powerful as the situational compulsion on them may appear, you can usually imagine them responding differently to the situation if they took it into their heads to have different thoughts and feelings about it." Thus, as he explains in *Modern British Politics* (1969, xii), "I lay great stress on political culture as one of the main variables of a political system..." and the power of his analyses rests on the ways in which they combine cultural and structural explanation. As

he puts it: "The great problem of describing British politics in this period is to do justice to both features: on the one hand, the powerful thrust of the new politics of group interest and, on the other, the continuing dynamic of ideas." (Beer, 1969, 386).

From this perspective, Beer is able to show that collectivist politics is not entirely new: it combines and transmogrifies conceptions of representation developed centuries before in the age of Old Tory and Old Whig politics. He manages to parse the assertions of modern British politics into components reflecting continuity and change with a precision that has eluded virtually all analysts since Bagehot (see also Beer 1974b). In *Britain Against Itself*, he carries the argument a step further to suggest that the disarray of British politics in the 1970s was a consequence, not only of pluralistic stagnation, but of cultural changes that led to an erosion in traditional modes of deference, culminating in 'the romantic revolt' of the 1960s. If *Modern British Politics* was an explicit attempt to put post-war politics into the context of the organizational revolution of the twentieth century, *Britain Against Itself* shows how those who were organized by it reacted against it to create a counterculture that ultimately had repercussions for high politics. In a delightful analysis that moves from Bagehot to the Beatles, Beer associates the pop culture of the 1960s with the romantic movements of the preceding century to show how the cultural continuities identified in *Modern British Politics* were themselves subject, as culture periodically is, to change.

A similar sensibility animates Beer's interpretations of the two titans of *fin-de-siècle* British politics, Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair. Emphasizing the radical change wrought by Thatcher on postwar Conservatism, he accepted her own claim that William Gladstone was her ideological forefather, and concluded that Blair's successful

efforts to move the Labour party toward the new political center she had established resulted, in 1997 in “that psephological monster, a landslide for the status quo” (Beer 1997, 318). From this perspective, Beer concluded that the program of New Labour resembled nothing so much as the ‘new liberalism’ of David Lloyd George, counterposed to the liberalism of Gladstone, albeit in a context where its import is less radical and likely to be concerned mainly with the “admirable and necessary but piecemeal reform of the welfare state” (Beer 1997, 323). In the exhilarating aftermath of the 1997 election, few diagnoses would prove so prescient.

Influenced by the formulations of Talcott Parsons among others, Beer's accounts of political culture are sophisticated and multidimensional (see especially Beer 1973b, Part I, ch. 3). However, one of his major contributions is the elaboration of a distinctive conception of political culture, which sees it as constituted by political ideas, and especially by the ideas about representation that frame the construction of authority in the polity. When Beer was writing, political science commonly construed political culture as a diffuse set of value orientations, often expressive or affective, whose impact was rarely tied with precision to the content of the ideas underpinning them. By contrast, Beer emphasized the power of political ideas, as opposed to orientations, in terms that are closer to Weber than Parsons. His approach is exemplified in the argument of *Modern British Politics* that the evolution of policy and politics in Britain rests on a shifting consensus about the kinds of interests that merit representation in the process of government and about the means whereby such representation is to be secured. This viewpoint enriches our understandings of how political culture might be constituted.

Beer's conception of political culture also reminds us that ideas matter in politics. Like his account of modern political development, his analyses of British politics and American federalism are distinguished by an emphasis on what the relevant political actors thought they were doing. Beer travels back, not just to the actions of the historical protagonists, but to their words, minds and intentions, as Weber suggested social analysts should (Shils and Finch 1949). This approach results in reconstructions of historical development extraordinarily faithful to the actual course of affairs and pregnant with a sense both of developing possibility and of the paths not taken. Contemporary scholars in political science, economics and sociology who have rediscovered the value of applying theory to history could benefit from an inspection of the ways in which Beer uses what he terms this "method of subjective understanding" (Beer 1970).

Of course, that method is highly congruent with Beer's overall conception of democratic politics as an activity in which human beings find and pursue a common set of purposes. Beer (1974b, 1979) argues that democratic forms of government have value because they protect the freedom of the individual for self-realization and nurture the free discussion that offers the best chance for discovering a wise course for the collectivity. In terms resonant with those of Mill, Beer (1949, 208) argues that democracies have an unrivaled knowledge of the important facts on which successful decisions must be based because they allow for free debate out of whose "competition of partial truths" should come "a wider and more inclusive truth". It is fitting that this distinguished student of the two most long-lived democracies should choose to borrow from Bagehot (1872) to characterize their politics as 'government by discussion'. In such formulations, Beer also

makes an implicit case that what both nations need a renewed emphasis on ideas in public life (Beer 1978, 1993).

Beer holds out for us an evocative image of democratic politics as a purposeful activity, underpinned by evolving conceptions of authority, driven forward by electoral debates suffused with competing conceptions of the common good. Although far from fully sanguine, this image alerts us to dimensions of politics sometimes missed by political science, even as it reminds us of the importance of politics

This discussion of the work would not be complete without a few words about the man. On those of us fortunate enough to know him, Sam Beer made an indelible impression. A tall, handsome mid-westerner with a shock of red hair, Beer was a charismatic teacher, who knew, as we all should, that the best teachers leave their students, not with answers, but with a more profound appreciation for the questions. Throughout his life, he searched relentlessly for answers to the largest questions one can ask about politics. The same questions he scribbled as a graduate student on the margins of Hegel's *Phenomenology* are visible in the probing correspondence with other scholars that he kept up well into his nineties, and in his great dialectical lectures.

Beer wanted to learn from everyone he met. He always wanted to know 'what do you think about this argument or that development?' His papers, now in the Harvard archives, are full of letters from people in high office on two continents, but he was just as interested in learning from every undergraduate who walked through his office door, whom he would greet with such enthusiasm that it seemed he had simply been waiting for them to drop by. Just as his writing celebrates the variety of people the American republic contains, he took palpable pleasure in the diversity of people encountered in

daily life. I have watched him argue the merits of American federalism with a first-year student from Iowa with the same interest and intensity he brought to a debate about Harrington with Tony Benn. It is not difficult to see why Beer would see potential in government by discussion.

The passion for politics and its possibilities infused Beer's life as well as his writing. From the days when he worked for a close advisor to Franklin D. Roosevelt to his service as chair of Americans for Democratic Action and a member of the McGovern Commission that rewrote the rules of the Democratic Party, Beer was actively involved in politics. In these ways and on the beaches of Normandy, he provided a model for those who would serve their country with actions as well as words.

For those of us who studied with him, however, Beer was most important for the personal example he set. At Harvard in the 1970s at least, it was easy for graduate students to come to the conclusion that, in order to become a fine scholar, one might have to become a lesser person. The long hours and obsessiveness required to complete a doctoral dissertation sometimes seemed to entail some deformation in personality, if not in character. To come to know Samuel Beer, however, was to realize this need not be so. Here was a man who had become the Eaton Professor of the Science of Government at Harvard, President of the American Political Science Association, and a confidant of leading politicians on two continents, who managed at the same time to remain a compassionate human being of great honor and decency, devoted to his scholarship but alive to the many other joys offered by the world, in family, friends, the outdoors, athletics, religion and literature. For those of us facing the vicissitudes of graduate study, Sam Beer was an inspiration both as a scholar and as a person.

In remarks to the last meeting of the American Political Science Association that evoked the essential unity between what Beer wrote and how he lived, Hugh Heclo quoted a passage in *The City of Reason* (p. 189) about the fundamental interdependence of human beings, in which Beer suggests: “My creative inquiry is worth while because creativity everywhere is worth while. My pursuit of truth is important because the pursuit of truth by men anywhere is important. Therefore, it is my duty not only to seek truth and excellence on my own part, but also to help others seek truth and excellence. If my soul’s growth is important, so is their soul’s growth.” As Heclo noted, we should not simply remember Sam Beer. We should also listen to him.

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Notes

¹ The first edition was published in London by Faber in 1965 and the second edition with an important epilogue in 1969 by Faber and by Alfred Knopf in New York under the title, *British Politics in the Collectivist Age*. Norton reissued that edition in 1982 as *Modern British Politics*.