Classical Realism in a Democratic Context
A Response to Francisco Plaza

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In this response to Francisco Plaza’s paper, I have two primary aims. First, to highlight and further explore Plaza’s critique of what I will call the “content” that makes up modern thought, especially as it relates to certain broader cultural movements in the Western world. Second, to provide a more nuanced interpretation of the socio-historical component of political science, exploring what could be called the “context” of modern democratic life. In doing so, I hope to explore some of the possibilities and limitations of the field of political science and its ability to recover classical realism in our post-modern world.

I. Introduction
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2. The Content of Modernity
Plaza’s critical emphasis upon the content of modern theory puts him in good company with the predominant post-war Aristotelian and Thomistic scholarship in the United States. This interpretative tradition is critical of the philosophic and political currents in the West, and America in particular, and can trace its proximate origins in the re-emergence of the theologico-political problem initiated by Leo Strauss. The critique offered by Plaza is also a welcome variant of recent critical works analyzing the contemporary American social and political fracturing that has become increasingly normative in academic and public discourse. Plaza’s critique of modernity, wherein he intersects political theory and religion, positions Plaza most notably alongside the works of Patrick Deneen, Joshua Mitchell, Mark Mitchell, Mark Lila, and D.C. Schindler, to name just a few.

In continuity with this particular interpretative tradition, Plaza portrays modernity in a manner that recalls the all-too-common monistic methodology stifling the fields of political theory and political science in

1 Correspondence to editors@realityjournal.org.

Table of Contents
1. Introduction......................................................................................................................... 1
2. The Content of Modernity............................................................................................. 1
3. The Context of Modernity .............................................................................................. 4
References Historically Layered ......................................................................................... 8

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recent decades. Rogers M. Smith has observed this trend to be the overwhelming focus of contemporary political science, and the particular sub-field of American political thought, known as historical institutionalism. According to Rogers, this broadly “scientific” approach primarily examines the interactions between and across institutions, outlining how these institutions become a leading catalyst for various social conflicts or movements. In addition to this, historical institutionalism tends to prioritize the role of political parties, group organizations, and the plethora of government agencies as the leading explanations characterizing modern political life.

While it is certainly the case that these two methodological approaches in political science are necessary components of its practice, they often neglect a primary locus of social and political life. The truncated form that is contemporary political science tends to either reject, or at least significantly downplay, the fundamental role theory and ideas play in human affairs. Too little serious attention is given to the fact that public policy, the deliberative process guiding legal jurisprudence, and the structures of governance and political rule are continually nourished by the ideas of all those involved. Political structures and institutions receive the form they have from the worldview of those who gave life to these institutions, as well as by those that continue to sustain, and work within, them over time.

As such, the predominant methodology of contemporary political science tends to neglect the explanatory power of ideas in shaping, and changing, the course of political life. Perhaps there is no more recent witness to the deficiencies of political science today than the 2016 American presidential election. Not only did it become evident that the predictive tools were incapable of accurately portraying who was most likely to win. More than this, there was an alarming inability to give an account for why Donald Trump was able to win the presidency. Embedded within the public commentariat was a deeply entrenched Rawlsian approach, attempting to analyze data politically, not metaphysically. This was bound to fail in its explanations. The “end of history” dialectic of the post-1989 democratic world, and the immutability of progress, became unhinged from its deterministic trajectory. Yet, the present models used to interpret the prevailing data could not comprehend the election results.

In returning to Plaza’s account, it becomes clear that modernity is not simply a particular historical time period that follows the late medieval and renaissance era. Rather, his ahistoricist explication underscores the fact that the modern age needs to be conceived as a set of first principles, whose inner logic “constrains” one to go in the only direction such principles allow. In this respect, Plaza’s insight echoes Etienne Gilson’s, specifically drawing attention to the relationship between first principles and conclusions:

In the first place, philosophers are free to lay down their own sets of principles, but once this is done, they no longer think as they wish—they think as they can...any attempt on the part of a philosopher to shun the consequences of his own position is doomed to failure. What he himself declines to say will be said by his disciple.

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The logic of modern philosophic thought can also be readily witnessed in the present politicization of human sexuality and gender, especially prevalent in Western nations. In a 2018 op-ed essay for the *New York Times*, author Andrea Long Chu details the personal experience of transitioning from a biological male to a female. What we read in this curious and shocking account is that the narrative framework for the author hinges upon the modern reversal of a central axiom in classical political realism, namely, that “art imitates nature.” As the author contends, the purpose of seeking the transition from male to female is not in order to attain some level of happiness. Rather, the goal is to display the individual will’s ability to transcend the limits (maybe even disorder) of nature itself. The author concludes the story with the following declaration:5

...I still want this, all of it. I want the tears; I want the pain. Transition doesn’t have to make me happy for me to want it. Left to their own devices, people will rarely pursue what makes them feel good in the long term. *Desire and happiness are independent agents.*

What is worth observing in the above judgment is the *new conceptual framework* the author places before the reader. In short, a plea is being made for medical practice to be more firmly grounded in the patient’s desire as the standard for health. To increase the patient’s health would seem to entail increasing one’s autonomy regarding the very purpose and function of the human body. Such an understanding with respect to medical practice is indicative of more than just a shift in patient care. Indeed, patient care is being pulled by a grand philosophic shift. Being healthy becomes centered around a manipulation grounded in one’s personal preferences or desires, thereby undermining the doctor’s capacity *qua* doctor to realign the patient with the healing source that is nature itself. Interestingly enough, Pope Francis has described this phenomenon as the *technocratic paradigm*. This self-enclosed paradigm,6

exalts the concept of a subject who, using logical and rational procedures, progressively approaches and gains control over an external object. This subject makes every effort to establish the scientific and experimental method, which in itself is already a technique of possession, mastery and transformation. It is as if the subject were to find itself in the presence of something formless, completely open to manipulation. Men and women have constantly intervened in nature, but for a long time this meant being in tune with and respecting the possibilities offered by the things themselves. It was a matter of receiving what nature itself allowed, as if from its own hand. Now, by contrast, we are the ones to lay our hands on things, attempting to extract everything possible from them while frequently ignoring or forgetting the reality in front of us.

In theory, much of modern science has rejected the Aristotelian doctrine that the aim of science is to discover the form or nature of what things are.7 Modern science has exchanged knowledge of nature with the ability to manipulate it for the sake of greater power and dominance. This is precisely the stated goal of Francis Bacon’s *New Organon*, whereby knowledge is reduced to engineering and coercion. In the same way, this is how Pope Francis portrays modern science, conceived in the Cartesian vision of “a technique of possession, mastery and transformation.” For Pope Francis, without seeing nature as “form,” it eventually succumbs to domination and procedural control. In this light, the relationship between human be-

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6 Pope Francis 2015: *Laudato Si*, #106.
7 It is worth mentioning, however, that trends of contemporary scientific practice can certainly be placed within the categories formal and final causality, which are the hallmarks of Aristotelian and Thomistic definitions of science. See Michael Tkacz 2013: “Thomistic Reflections on Teleology and Contemporary Biological Research,” *New Blackfriars* 94: 654-75.
ings and nature is more vividly portrayed as one of antagonism, where “human beings and material objects no longer extend a friendly hand to one another; the relationship has become confrontational.” Much of the extreme environmentalism today is grounded in precisely this vision of human beings and nature as enemies.

3. The Context of Modernity
Plaza’s critique of modernity is offered with respect to a unique shift in the history of thought, one which is ultimately concerned with the intellectual content characteristic of the modern age. As mentioned above, numerous cases have been made that such an approach is almost entirely neglected in contemporary political science. And while this is certainly the case, recovering a kind of realism in political science, or in politics more generally, necessitates something of a more nuanced account of modern democracy. While more could be said with respect to this judgment, let me give two brief preliminary remarks.

First, it is easy to consider modernity or liberalism as an entity that has some kind of actual existence in an abstract realm. In principle, I do not see anything wrong with this understanding of modernity. However, I am in agreement with Adrian Vermeule’s claim that critics of the modern age can tend to neglect the personal desires and intentions of modern individuals themselves. A second preliminary observation stems primarily from Alasdair MacIntyre’s fundamental insight about all forms of tradition-constituted inquiry. The aim of recovering a classical realist vision which gives credence to the proper order of being (metaphysics as first philosophy) will always be interpreted through the particular lens and categories of thought that constitute a given condition. This can be understood by observing Alexis de Tocqueville’s remark that Americans are the most “Cartesian” of all democratic nations. That Americans can be seen as the descendants of Descartes is not simply a judgment of philosophical doctrines. The interpretive key is Tocqueville’s qualifier, which is that Americans have never actually read Descartes. Somehow, the generic intellectual framework of Americans with respect to authority, reason, and truth cannot be entirely explained as the effect of the “modern intellectual turn.”

In this respect, it becomes clearer why we must attend to the context that is modern life, and more specifically, democratic life. This is not to be portrayed as a fundamental disagreement with respect to Plaza. Rather, as mentioned above, my approach is to highlight what might aptly be considered the other side of the same coin. In this vein, I will briefly turn to Tocqueville, and his insight concerning the socio-historical nature of modern democratic life.

There is no better description of Tocqueville’s perceptive vision of democratic life than his primary distinction between the social conditions of aristocratic and democratic man:

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10 Defining democracy in the following way is not to claim that this is the only definition of democracy given by Tocqueville. For an exploration of Tocqueville’s multi-layered understanding of democracy, see James T. Schleifer 2000: The Making of Tocqueville’s Democracy in America, 2nd ed., 325-39.
Aristocracy links everybody, from peasant to king, in one long chain. Democracy breaks the chain... Each man is thereby thrown back on himself alone, and there is a danger that he may be shut up in the solitude of his own heart.\textsuperscript{11}

According to Tocqueville, what is unique about modern democratic citizens is that they are brought into this new world cut off. No longer is their identity encompassed by one’s name, family, or geographic place. Democratic citizens will come to have the normative experience of being uprooted and unsettled. Seeing the world generationally, wherein we could look forward envisioning our great-grandchildren and also remain connected to the past by living near our families, has reached its end. While it is certainly the case that every age and civilization must address the perennial human task of how to live together in this world, we cannot neglect Tocqueville’s judgment with respect to the modern world: “a new political science is needed for a world entirely new.”\textsuperscript{12}

There is a profound and unsettling feature of this new reality. Tocqueville illuminates this existential angst by portraying the democratic citizen as one looking over the ruins of a bygone world and celebrating its end. However, filled with an almost crippling fear of what lay ahead, democratic man cannot muster the courage to look forward at the new world not-yet made. What is it that makes this turn to an unmade world so terrifying? In short, it is the stripping away of those various identities that were the fundamental component of life in society. As the associations of civil society continually wither away, citizens live in a condition whereby the gap between them and the state is void. Churches, families, and neighborhoods become undermined by an administrative state apparatus that, slowly and softly, fills the void once bolstered by the various forms of associational life. The good that arises from the variety of freedoms we experience in this new age can leave us with a renewed type of civic vigor. Civil society will become the locus of creating new identities. In this vein, being stripped of long-held identities, we might come to see ourselves as “more than kings.”\textsuperscript{13}

The administering of this Tocquevillian lens is not novel. Among other reasons, the account that I have laid out here hopefully focuses attention upon the challenges related to the common criticisms of modernity. Perhaps more than any other, the most proximate challenge to the call for a recovery of classical realism is the rise of identity politics. The scourge of identity politics is not easily rebutted by a rhetorical endeavor that looks to recover the classical realism of Platonic or Aristotelian political thought.

My brief attempt to implore Tocqueville hopefully answers the reasons for this. At one level, the increasing rates of social isolation and loneliness in Western nations provide conditions for types of conformity and civic breakdown that do find a real origin in this new social condition that is modern liberal democracy. I hesitate in calling this an “epidemic,” but it is certainly the case that Tocqueville’s over-arching worry for democratic citizens is a proclivity towards isolation.

\textsuperscript{11} Alexis de Tocqueville 1835: Democracy in America, eds. Harvey Mansfield and Delba Winthrop, 483-84. All references to Democracy in America are from this edition.

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid, 7.

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid, 665.
In conjunction with this is the emergence of the “holy” in contemporary politics,\textsuperscript{14} exemplified by identity politics more broadly. It is certainly the case that traditional religion has been on the decline over the last several decades. This, however, does not mean that religion has disappeared. It is has simply moved to a different domain, namely, the realm of politics. In this respect, liberal or democratic politics can morph into a kind of religion. As Adrian Vermeule contends,\textsuperscript{15}

...liberalism has a soteriology, an eschatology, a clergy, and sacraments, centered on the confession and surrender of privilege, the redemption of declaring oneself an “ally,” the overcoming of the dark past of prejudice and unreason—a past that is itself always in motion, so that the night of unreason may well suddenly come to mean what everyone believed last year.

Echoing Vermeule, we could add that a movement such as identity politics is not merely a new form of religion. This contention would usurp its own self-understanding. As a religion, identity politics is not only a set of doctrines, but is patently liturgical. The pseudo-liturgical activity of identity politics reveals its connection to the new condition of modern man. Its worship is made visible in public denunciations of illiberalism, racism, xenophobia, hatred, privilege, nourished by its nominal telos where humanity become witness to the final overcoming of all forms of discrimination and oppression.\textsuperscript{16} The vitality and tenacity of identity politics becomes intelligible by seeing it within this deracinated liturgical context. In this way, liturgy truly is the “source and summit”\textsuperscript{17} of identity politics.

This intellectual swindle on the part of the Gnostic could be restated as an act of self-deception, one that is animated by an underlying will to power that disguises itself as an intellectual move. Such an impetus within man beckons him toward absolute mastery. It results in a complete rebellion against the transcendent itself, as the subject feels imprisoned within the order of being. Even though man is nowhere near the top of this hierarchy, he wishes to be. In examining the depths of the will to power, Nietzsche states: “To rule, and to be no longer a servant of a god: this means was left behind to ennoble man.” Through this will to power, then, the Gnostic man attempts to make himself God ruling over all of existence. This profound self-deception becomes the dogma of a political mass movement which hails the Gnostic thinkers as “prophets.” These mass movements in turn take on the character of a religion, but it


\textsuperscript{15} Vermeule 2018: “Integration from Within.”

\textsuperscript{16} I say “nominal” here because a significant part of the ideology concerning identity politics is that injustice in this world, ultimately, appears to have no end. Thus, the actualization of equality is not simply the goal of the movement, but the goal that can never be realized.

\textsuperscript{17} \textit{Sacerosanctum Concilium} argues that “…the liturgy is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; at the same time it is the font from which all her power flows. For the aim and object of apostolic works is that all who are made sons of God by faith and baptism should come together to praise God in the midst of His Church, to take part in the sacrifice, and to eat the Lord’s supper (10).” If we can envision identity politics as a pseudo-religion, with a public liturgy that is the true source of its “apostolic works, then the employment of this quote becomes clearer. In this light, Schall’s argument that one of the best ways to understand modern political movements is through the study of ancient Christian heresies proves illuminating. See fn. \#14 above.
is only a kind of ersatz religion with man at the head, rather than God. To identify oneself as a Marxist, then, becomes akin to identifying oneself as a Christian or Jew.

-Francisco Plaza, “Political Science and Realism” [READ ONLINE]

The deeply religious character of modern politics allows us to affirm Plaza’s reliance upon Voegelin and Maritain as rather illuminating. To overcome the disorientating forces stemming from an excessive emphasis upon particulars, or an abstract utopian lens, something more than reason will be needed. To put it differently, the battle against Enlightenment rationalism, what Benedict XVI called the “pathologies of the limitations of reason,” entails the engagement of a source that transcends what human intelligence can know, but which is nevertheless not opposed to it. I would contend that, contra Strauss, without the medieval tradition and a more robust account of the relationship between reason, revelation, and political life, the attempt to recover the principles of classical political realism will be deeply insufficient.18

The Christian understanding of revelation, in a real way, can help to save philosophy and political life from its own distortions and misunderstandings. Political life is necessary for human beings, since we are naturally political. Human beings are also religious animals, but politics is not the locus of salvation. Perhaps this is the most disturbing component of modern political movements, namely, the attempt to conceive of politics as salvific. Plaza is right that we need to recover a metaphysics that is true, one which gives us access to Being. This ability to access the ground of existence will continually need the strength to be unhinged from the short-sighted lens of a philosophical and political rationalism. In this respect, we will need both classical realism and religious faith, rightly understood.

18 Robert C. Bartlett claims that liberal democratic citizens are sorely in need of recovering Aristotle’s defense of the primacy of contemplation. However, in doing so, Bartlett’s Aristotle is transformed into a materialist, since the object of contemplation is nature self-enclosed on itself, since there is nothing that transcends nature. Bartlett’s concern with rise of religious fanaticism makes him turn away from a much richer account of the relationship between faith, reason, and political life. See Robert C. Bartlett 1995: “Aristotle’s Science of the Best Regime,” American Political Science Review Vol. 89, no. 1 (March): 152-60. While providing a more nuanced defense of the practice of political theology, Mark Lila falls into a similar problem that Bartlett does, namely, by neglecting to consider the thought of Augustine and Thomas Aquinas. See Mark Lila 2007: The Stillborn God: Religion, Politics, and the Modern West.
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Brian Jones, “Classical Realism in a Democratic Context” | 8
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