

## Barry Cooper's Political Philosophy

We have been asked to speak to the political philosophy of Barry Cooper. As someone who is more a practitioner than a philosopher in political matters, I leave treatments of the content of his work to those still immersed in it. I will instead use the time granted me here to speak about the processes involved in Barry Cooper's empiricism – his *Vorgehensweise*, as they say in German. I will do it based on my own experience over the past twenty-odd years: first as his masters student at the University of Calgary, later as his co-translator and co-editor of *Voegelin Recollected* and, more recently as a student of questions on the humble plane of public affairs. My own *Vorgehensweise* will be largely anecdotal – recalling the freshly reclaimed dictum that the plural of anecdote *is* in fact data.

I will suggest to you that Cooper enlists three investigative processes. His first process is essentially a scholarly one, in the vein of Eric Voegelin. Its core is a sustained, highly focused analysis of texts as situated in the spiritual, political and biographical contexts of their authors. The second method is what might be called his signature quest for real-time exposure to a broad range of experiences and people. And his third, I will suggest, is

provocation. One finds *this one* throughout his written work, but above all in his commentary on public affairs.

I will address each process in turn.

### **Cooper as Scholar**

I promised anecdotes, data. I first encountered Barry Cooper as a grad student in the Department of Political Science at the University of Calgary in the fall of 1994. He had just been granted a Killam Research Fellowship to complete what would become *Eric Voegelin and the Foundations of Modern Political Science*. The fellowship had freed him of all teaching obligations that year. He was, as I recall, unenthused at the prospect of taking on a new grad student.

At a highly unorthodox first meeting, I convinced him to consider becoming my advisor. Soon after, I become his research assistant. That year, I observed Cooper at work in his first -- his scholarly -- mode of inquiry. It is one he enlisted with near-monastic discipline in the cramped quarters of his

seventh floor office. Here – as his wife Denise will also attest – one could almost always find him working, even on a Saturday night.

On a given workday, Cooper took few breaks. If one were alert, one might catch him as he headed for a leisurely spin at the U of Calgary gym.

Alternatively, one could knock at his office door, which one often did – indeed, in periods of *acute perplexity*, several times per day. The voice that answered was not always entirely free of irritation. But it answered. And on entering, one always received – albeit usually in encrypted form – the direction one sought. More often than not, one also received a staggering weight of books that one was advised to read – with *care* – before returning for further instruction.

For that was the first and highest lesson that Cooper imparted to his students: to read, closely, attentively. To read not simply for the sake of understanding, or even “thinking with” the author, but of penetrating to the excitement, the itch, that had given rise to the text in the first place. And ultimately to analyze, to assess, to judge the originating experience of the author and his or her intention to illuminate – or obscure – political reality.

Reading, thinking and writing: In Cooper's case, as in Voegelin's, it's a deceptively simple formula. And yet some version of it informs each of his grant applications and infuses all his serious work.

## **The Collector of Experiences**

Now let me turn briefly to his second empirical process – one taking him beyond his book-lined office and out into the world. Cooper's associations are broad – and to all but himself – eclectic. Examples? The Royal Society of Canada *and* the Bohemian Club of San Francisco; the Pennask Lake Fishing and Game Club *and* the Buddhist Naropa University in Colorado; the Waldorf school movement *and* the Friends of Science.

His informal associations are no less varied. On a given evening out with Barry, one might proceed to the condo of his friend's daughter, Mercedes, to drink some rye with Navy Seals; or, one could find oneself imbibing Schnapps and herring at the residence of the Swedish ambassador to Canada. One might go rafting down the Bow River, experiencing some alarming white water. Or – I've heard tell – he may even take you hunting.

This facet of Cooper's personality is a large part of his appeal to the young people he teaches. I suggest that it is a further aspect of his empiricism. Cooper is constantly observing, absorbing, interpreting – ostensibly, to philosophize on political things. But I detect another motive. Cooper revels in anecdote. He takes evident pleasure in describing the cloying perfume of our former Governor General, or the idiom of his conversations with Mafiosos in Montreal or ranchers in Alberta. He *really did* care how Voegelin cut his Christmas goose or how the ash of his cigar fell.

For a political philosopher, Cooper concern with selected details of lived experience verges on hazardous. Arguably, it is literary. And in fact, much of his work – especially his more colloquial stuff – has a pronounced literary feeling. Cooper also routinely invokes literature – as more reliable than, say, public opinion data – to inform his own reflections on a given regime.

## **The Provocateur**

Which brings us to *the regime, stupid* – and with it, the third method Cooper enlists in his investigations. The method is provocation. In this mode, he

seeks not primarily to elucidate, or even to persuade, but rather to provoke, to anger – and yes, at times to entertain.

Here one might invoke Socrates. In Plato's *Apology* he famously likened himself to a gadfly "which God has attached to the polis, and all day long and in all places [I] am always fastening upon you, arousing and persuading and reproaching you." Now, Wikipedia tells us that a gadfly might be a botfly or a horsefly. Of horseflies, it says that they are "often not deterred by attempts at swatting them away, and will persist in attacking, or even chase their intended target for a short time." Their bites are painful. Indeed, "the pain of a horse fly bite may mean that the victim is more concerned with assessing the wound, and not swatting the **interloper**. In any case defense is difficult, considering the agile nature of the fly."

That seems about right to me. In his mode of provocation, Barry Cooper is a very large horsefly to our small, smug nation. His targets range as wide as his interests: the Canadian media, public debt, Quebec separatism, Ontarian self-importance, military purchases, Aboriginal "whiners" and Maritime "losers." One weekly column described the good residents of British Columbia as Nietzsche's last men – in contemporary parlance, as "soft

consumers and rent collectors drinking lattes in the rain.” Cooper’s favorite targets are the so-called “nation-building” institutions: the Canadian Wheat Board, the Broadcasting Corporation, the Human Rights Commission, even the Supreme Court of Canada. But our horsefly has also attacked beyond the country’s borders. One favorite is the U.N. Another is what he has called – quite wrongly, in my view – the curious, moribund social movement of environmentalism.

What is the purpose of the stings and provocations, the arguments beyond the pale? I have often asked myself this question. An important clue appears in his 2009 book, *It's the Regime, Stupid! A Report from the Cowboy West on Why Stephen Harper Matters*. Deflecting in advance what may strike some readers as *excessive* arguments in this prolonged personal essay, he states:

“After all, the purpose of an essay is to push the envelope, to argue **as far as an argument will go**, and then to consider what it all means. Like a conversation, which is a kind of oral essay, it does not aim so much at proving a point or reaching an agreed-upon conclusion as shedding light on a problem. Facts are useful because they make the problem appear in the world. Literally, they create the phenomena that are analyzed to grasp a meaning.”

In organizing the facts to make political problems visible in the world, Cooper ultimately seeks to provoke a conversation. Those not distracted by

the pain of their bites might make the effort, as he invites readers of the Regime book to do, to think through some political philosophy.

I submit that those who make the effort will be rewarded. For Cooper's regime book enlists not one, but *all three* of the techniques I described here: the horsefly's persistent attacks, the magisterial scholarly analysis of foundational myths and texts, and the selective use of anecdote – not only to create phenomena but to probe the author's own memories and situate his perspective. This book, to my mind, provides perhaps the fullest reflection of Barry Cooper's methods as a political philosopher. In both this capacity and in his proven capacity as a wise and generous human being, we find a man who is infinitely more than the sum of his political opinions. Now if only – in the next edition of this book – we could do something about that sub-title.