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# SCIENZA & POLITICA

per una storia delle dottrine



## Where is the History of Political Thought Going?

Dove sta andando la storia del pensiero politico?

### ABSTRACT

After the recent publication of a couple of succinct and overarching essays covering the state of the field in the history of political thought (in the English language), Prof. Davide Cadeddu from the University of Milan expressed polemical remarks on some of their content. At the same time, he asked for comments on his own article, inviting the response several of English-speaking scholars (or scholars educated in anglophone cultural context).

In response to this challenge, ten colleagues

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Peter Burke (Emmanuel College, University of Cambridge)

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answered with texts of different length and complexity. Depending on each case individually, each scholar was either in agreement or disagreement with the statements previously formulated by him, henceforth eliciting, more or less implicitly, new reflections on the matter at hand.

**KEYWORDS:** History of Historiography; Intellectual History; History of Political Thought; European Historiography; Global History.

In seguito alla recente pubblicazione di alcuni saggi panoramici e sintetici, sullo sviluppo degli studi di storia del pensiero politico in lingua inglese, il Prof. Davide Cadeddu dell'Università degli Studi di Milano ha commentato polemicamente alcuni contenuti di essi e, al tempo stesso, ha sottoposto a critica il proprio testo, rivolgendosi a numerosi studiosi anglofoni (o formati in contesto culturale anglofono).

Alla provocazione hanno risposto una decina di colleghi

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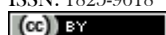
con interventi di diversa lunghezza e complessità, che, a seconda dei casi, dissentono o condividono i rilievi formulati e sollecitano, più o meno implicitamente, a ulteriori riflessioni in merito.

**PAROLE CHIAVE:** Storia della storiografia; Storia intellettuale; Storia del pensiero politico; Storiografia europea; Storia globale.

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## Why Try to Globalize the History of Political Thought?

John Dunn

It is inherently futile to prescribe how anyone else should approach and try to execute any piece of intellectual work. Education is exemplary or it is nothing. It seeks to offer models to follow, but these necessarily can be either taken or left. No one has to study the history of political thought. Anyone who does choose to do so must do so for reasons which come from their own horizon of experience. For anyone who does so choose those reasons need not be whimsical and can plainly be more or less compelling from the viewpoint of anyone else. They must make their choice with some heuristic purpose – because there is something which they in particular wish to find out. Their work is likeliest to prove of value to others if and only if that happens to be something which many others have good reason to wish to find out too.

There are two grounds for seeing very many others as having good reason to try to see the history of human thinking about politics more on the scale of the world as a whole<sup>1</sup>. The first is epistemic – an outcome of what has happened to political ideas over time and across space: the relative de-insulation of what might once at least have felt and appeared to be discrete political cultures and imaginaries im-mured in particular languages. This massive shift is surely and unmistakably a simple matter of fact. You can see it at a glance if you consider the categories like state, law, rights, constitution, democracy, church or deity. It comes out most vividly if you inspect this process through individual lives – as Philippe Sands for example does in *East West Street*<sup>2</sup> with the movement from Lwow/ Lemberg/Lviv through the stories of Rafael Lemkin and Hersz Lauterpacht, across the *Bloodlands* of Timothy Snyder's powerful book<sup>3</sup> of the categories of crimes against humanity and genocide to the Nuremberg trials and Putin's brutal assault on the people of Ukraine. The second reason, strongly suggested by this example, is the heavy political consequentiality which this movement carries. The enforced intimacy of these interactions, in a world with proliferating capacity for destruction on a vast scale and precipitous ecological collapse is intensely discomfiting and overwhelmingly dangerous. It is merely a political bet that this multiplicity of hazards could be alleviated by greater awareness of the discrepancies in political imagination across the world,

<sup>1</sup> J. DUNN, *Why We Need a Global History of Political Thought*, in B. KAPOSSY - I. NAKHIMOVSKY - S.A. REINERT - R. WHATMORE (eds), *Markets, Morals, Politics*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 2018, pp. 285-309; J. DUNN, *Why We Need a Global History of Political Thought*, in S. LI (ed), *Concepts and History: John Dunn's Lectures in China*, Beijing, China Renmin University Press; Singapore, Palgrave MacMillan, 2021, pp. 1-17.

<sup>2</sup> P. SANDS, *East West Street*, London, Vintage, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> T. SNYDER, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin*, New York, Basic Books, 2010.

but it is scarcely as desperate a gamble as the presumptions either that the balance of power can be trusted to take care of humanity's future altogether more effectively than it has contrived to in the past or that global catastrophe has become inevitable and can no longer be averted.

Is this view an invitation to conformity? If so, conformity with precisely what aside from lifting our eyes from the sand? In what sense could underlining the pressing political significance of the interactive coexistence of innumerable cultures be an incitement to cancel any? A more global awareness of the history of political thinking could neither occlude nor dispense with such knowledge as we have managed to accumulate of the history of political thinking in far narrower contexts over very lengthy spans of time. It could indeed only be parasitic on such knowledge. The world is awash at present with occasions for acute fear. It is hard to see the effort to view the history of political thinking on a large scale as one of them.



## Addressing Eurocentrism in History of Political Thought

Humeira Iqtidar

In arguing for opening up the discipline of History of Political Thought to debates beyond Anglo-American preoccupations Davide Cadeddu simultaneously proposes a dramatic disavowal of engagement with questions regarding gender and colonialism. What emerges is a contradictory call for taking *European* rather than English debates seriously at the same time as he questions the value of engaging with others previously ignored by academic historians of political thought. It is unclear if Cadeddu's primary concern is with a closing down of debate through the enforcement of a hegemonic direction for historians of political thought to pursue or with the substantive ideas that are beginning to shape the discipline. Unfortunately, there is little evidence of serious engagement with those substantive questions.

Cadeddu pushes back against the suggestion that there is something problematic with Eurocentrism by claiming that it is «quite Western centered...to think that Western historians should embrace all the possible perspectives and do everything»<sup>1</sup>. Might there be something other than wilful misunderstanding here? For, clearly, the argument for more global engagement is not for all “western” scholars to do “everything”. As an aside, postcolonial and comparative political theorists manage, of course, to straddle at least two traditions of thought often in multiple languages, but there is no doubt that it is a rather demanding task. In any case, the critique of Eurocentrism is not a requirement to do “everything”. Rather, it is an invitation to reflect on the ways in which the political and historical context might be constituted and conceptualised in a more robust manner than when colonial hubris prevented such a reckoning. For most theorists calling for such a consideration this does not amount to a rejection of European history and theory, but its enrichment through an understanding of the role colonialism played in foregrounding particular visions of Europe.

A sustained discussion of Eurocentrism is to be found in the works of scholars grouped under the rubric of postcolonial theory. These scholars alerted us to the complexity of assuming a clear delineation between west and non-west at the same time as raising important questions about the limits of European political theory. In this vein, Edward Said's (1978) seminal insights about the discourse of Orientalism are not meant to help us understand the Orient, but rather European or Occidental self-formation. Questions about colonial legacies and Eurocentric

<sup>1</sup> D. CADEDU, *Trusting the Process: Current Fashions in the History of Political Thought*, «Scienza & Politica. Per una storia delle dottrine», in this issue, pp. 239-250, p. 242.

frameworks are useful in the first instance in deepening our understanding of European ideas and their reach. Would it not enrich our understanding if we investigate the role of colonialism in European industrialization and development, previously seen as entirely internally generated?<sup>2</sup> Might an understanding of this co-constitution of colonizers and colonized strengthen our ability to understand how certain ideas, legal structures, political institutions and social norms were established in Europe?<sup>3</sup> Might the language of racism allow us to «probe salient discussions» in the writings of Hobbes, «potentially improving our understanding of his position»<sup>4</sup>? How might we understand European debates about freedom if we recognise the long running presence of slavery, not just physically through the presence of slaves in households in Netherlands, France and England, but also symbolically? The Jamaican theorist Stuart Hall made his famous claim regarding the long running presence of slavery in Europe by picking on a symbol of Englishness, the cup of tea, when he said that:

People like me who came to England in the 1950s have been there for centuries; symbolically, we have been there for centuries. I was coming home. I am the sugar at the bottom of the English cup of tea. I am the sweet tooth, the sugar plantations that rotted generations of English children's teeth..... Because they don't grow it in Lancashire, you know. Not a single tea plantation exists within the United Kingdom. This is the symbolization of English identity... what does anybody in the world know about an English person except that they can't get through the day without a cup of tea? Where does it come from? Ceylon - Sri Lanka, India. That is the outside history that is inside the history of the English. There is no English history without that other history.

At the very least, recognizing this actual and symbolic presence of slavery raises important questions for our understanding of political ideas related to freedom and equality within Europe. In highlighting the foundational role that slavery played in visions of freedom articulated by European thinkers like Hegel, scholars are beginning to open interesting questions regarding the specificity of such conceptualizations and their implications<sup>5</sup>. The challenge to Eurocentrism is a generative question about the uniqueness of European theory in its claims to be standing apart from the rest of the world while also providing universal principles for all.

This challenge may have come to the forefront due to globalization but is really driven by longer histories that need careful excavation and assessment. Echoing John Dunn, Charette and Skjonsberg<sup>6</sup>, suggest that the global turn raises important methodological questions for historians of political thought to consider including a more thoughtful demarcation of the context. Here I would caution that the global

<sup>2</sup> G. PRAKASH, *Who's Afraid of Postcoloniality?*, «Social Text», 49/1996, pp. 187-203.

<sup>3</sup> S. HALL, «Two Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities», in *Essential Essays, Volume 2: Identity and Diaspora*, edited by David Morley, New York, Duke University Press, 1991, pp. 63-82 1991; T. ASAD, «Can Europe Represent Muslims?» in A. PAGDEN (ed), *The Idea of Europe: From Antiquity to the European Union*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002, pp. 209-27.

<sup>4</sup> A. BLAU, *Thomas Hobbes in Racist Context*, «Hobbes Studies», 36/2023, pp. 9-27, p. 15.

<sup>5</sup> D. SCOTT, *The Traditions of Historical Others*, «Symposia on Gender, Race and Philosophy», 8, 1/2012; S. BUCK-MORSS, *Hegel and Haiti*, «Critical Inquiry», 26, 4/2000, 821-865.

<sup>6</sup> D. CHARETTE - M. SKJONBERG, *State of the Field: The History of Political Thought*, «History», 105, 366/2000 pp. 470-483, p. 480.



turn does not mean that globalization itself is new. I see corporate globalization today as producing a differently inflected global connection than say in colonialism did in the nineteenth century. A heightened awareness of global interconnectedness after a period of nationalisation and decolonization from the 1940s to 1970s, has made it easier to think again about past global connections. Critically, however, the global should not be thought of as connecting all parts of the world uniformly. Connections may be ‘lumpy’, to use Cooper’s term<sup>7</sup>, bringing together different parts of the world unevenly and some not very much at all.

Cadeddu raises the concern that such considerations might be «entirely useless»<sup>8</sup> if scholars are to observe a phenomenon that «has not been global». That is an entirely valid concern. Yet that assertion must also come with some reflection about the limits of such phenomenon then. Who is this very local phenomenon interesting for? It is unclear if Cadeddu is making an argument for delinking from global concern or for calibration and reflection regarding the scope of one’s work? The later would be immensely useful, of course, but does not require a rejection of more connected histories that question colonial frameworks. More critically, his reaction suggests a rather flat vision of the global. As I mentioned above, postcolonial theorists have cautioned against imaging uniform, unidirectional and equally pervasive global connections. There is also now a rich body of literature on global intellectual history that has also sought to problematize the term global<sup>9</sup>. Such connections might include zones of trade and exchange, travel and migration as well as occupation and war.

No doubt modern colonialism has had varying depth in different parts of Europe. Much postcolonial theory has focused on French and English colonialism. Spanish, Italian and German colonialism of the twentieth century and its implications for these countries is only now beginning to receive attention with an eye to its implications for contemporary dynamics in those countries. Thinking through the implications of colonialism, then, requires an understanding of the historical phenomenon as well as its role in knowledge production to unsettle previously held ideas in a productive manner. With questions rather than settled answers in mind one might approach Machiavelli with a view to thinking about the influence of the vibrant “mirrors for princes” scholarship in the Islamic tradition on Renaissance Italy<sup>10</sup>. We might investigate the erasure of 700 years of Islamic rule in Europe, especially Portugal, Spain, France and Sicily, and the implications of this excision

<sup>7</sup> F. COOPER, *What Is the Concept of Globalization Good for? An African Historian’s Perspective*, «African Affairs», 100, 399/2001, pp. 189–213.

<sup>8</sup> D. CADEDU, *Trusting the Process*, p. 241.

<sup>9</sup> S. MOYN – A. SARTORI, “Approaches to Global Intellectual History” in S. MOYN – A. SARTORI (eds), *Global Intellectual History*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2013, pp. 3–30.

<sup>10</sup> L. BIASIORI – G. MARCOCCI, *Machiavelli, Islam and the East: Reorienting the Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018; N. YAVARI, *Advice for the Sultan: Prophetic Voices and Secular Politics in Medieval Islam*, London, Hurst Publications, 2014.



for European identity today. Once we recognise, as much serious historical work does, that the works of Greek philosophers were preserved in Muslim Europe by Muslim, Jewish and Christian philosophers during the period called the Dark Ages in the rest of Europe, we have interesting avenues regarding the origins, travels and reception of ideas related to democracy or citizenship for instance. Some scholars are beginning to look at the impact of the commentaries by Islamic philosophers on the reception of Greek ideas in Renaissance Europe as well as in the 20<sup>th</sup> century on thinkers such as Leo Strauss<sup>11</sup>.

Thus, at the heart of the debate about Eurocentrism are questions about a particular, reified vision of Europe. Treating colonialism and Eurocentrism seriously prompt a reconsideration of the image of Europe where colonialism was erased from its internal histories even as modes of governance practiced upon the colonized were used against other Europeans and created lasting horror<sup>12</sup>. Thinking through Eurocentrism and colonial legacies together means working through important theoretical, historical and political questions. Cadeddu's harsh dismissal of decolonization as the "abstract list of authors and works that should interest us but do not interest us enough" is unwarranted and appears as a knee jerk reaction without any consideration of the depth of scholarship on decolonizing. Decolonizing, I have argued elsewhere<sup>13</sup>, is not a simple inversion of hierarchies of knowledge, nor does it entail a return to some pristine vernacular tradition of thought. Rather it involves painstaking working through of ideas across multiple traditions of thought, innovation and conceptual reformulation to address contemporary political challenges.

The reconstruction of the canon is linked not to a will to destroy but to create. With an eye to history, we can recognise that canons are, after all, always under construction<sup>14</sup>. Questions about the canon today are investigations into where we want to be tomorrow. To dismiss them without serious engagement may be unfair to others but is seriously damaging to ourselves.

<sup>11</sup> R. NAMAZI, *Leo Strauss and Islamic Political Thought*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2022.

<sup>12</sup> A. CESAIRE, *Discourse on Colonialism*, «Monthly Review Press», 1972, pp. 2-5; H. ARENDT, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1951, pp. 128-38.

<sup>13</sup> H. IQTIDAR, *Jizya Against Nationalism: Abul 'Ala Maududi's Attempt at Decolonizing Political Theory*, «Journal of Politics», 83, 3/2021, pp. 1145-1157.

<sup>14</sup> D. BELL, *What Is Liberalism?*, «Political Theory», 42, 6/2014, pp. 682-715.



## The Very Idea of a Global History of Political Thought

Iain Hampsher-Monk

When I was starting out in my career, my professor and mentor observed to me that «you can't say everything at once». It was, and is, good advice, although I have to say, as a journal editor, it is not as widely heeded as it might be.

The history of political thought, as now widely practised, takes the “history” bit seriously, but historical writing about political theory need not be *a* history. Treatments of relatively short episodes or of individual works of theory can be historical in the sense of being sensitive to the cultural, intellectual or broader hermeneutic context in which they occur or were written and thus explicatory of their subject. Such work is clearly historical, but not *a* history. It is on this view, not just the pastness of political thought that qualifies it as historical, but the treatment of the documents (or artefacts) recording that thought.

Nor does even *a* history have to be comprehensive. Indeed it hardly can be; the historian must always select their subject. And this is as true of the history of thought as it is of histories of everyday life, or dynasties. Even a very long history can treat of a narrowly constrained subject. John Pocock famously described his magisterial and two millenium long *Machiavellian Moment* as a “tunnel history” one that followed the twists and turns of a strand of western republican political thought within the competing political vocabularies of monarchy, empire, theocracy, or natural law.

The question of what it means to treat a subject historically does not, of course, admit of any simple answer. However, beyond the nuances of that, and of what kinds of historical subjects there are, we can contrast *any* historical treatment with treatments under other disciplinary rubrics that do not treat their subject matters as historical. Some modes of philosophy, and much social science, treat their categories as universals. For example, various thinker's claims about epistemology could be compared across time for their plausibility; and political systems (or theories) could be categorised in terms of sharing selected salient features and relations, irrespective of their historical location. By contrast, an historical sensibility might consider that it was rash to assume that Plato's account of the Forms was even trying to do the same kind of thing as were modern subscribers to the doctrine of “sense data”; or that it could be an aid to any kind of understanding to situate thinkers as disparate as Plato and Marx in a single category called “totalitarian”.

Even academic discourses are subject to fashion, and whilst there may be clear rationales for the originators of such changes, their epigones, particularly in the

modern professionalised academy, may follow with no sense of the original grounds for the innovation. “Global” is a new(ish) buzzword in the History of Political Thought. To qualify a subject matter, or an academic activity as ‘global’, within certain contexts (in certain Economic fields for example) is to genuinely identify (and so constitute) a qualitatively distinct and new subject of investigation, in the way, for example that the concept of “ecology” expanded the concerns of what was “natural history” into systemic and relational issues. But in other cases it may be less clear that anything distinctive is being indicated.

Global histories have been around for a long time. As an undergraduate I read to advantage, W.H. McNeill’s *A World History* (1967). The distinctive feature of McNeill’s global history was the aspiration to show the interactions between the four Old World civilisations China, India, The Middle East and Europe. But his story necessarily began as four histories of geographically distinct and largely isolated human cultures, related *seriatim* (you cannot say everything at once). A pivotal point in McNeill’s overall story, and a crucial part of his thesis, was the point in time (for him the Eighteenth Century) at which all these distinct cultures became aware of, and regularly interacted with each other – largely through the impact of Western Imperialism. He called this «the closing of the world ecumene». And it is only at this point that it became possible to tell a truly global history, rather than juxtaposing a series of side-by-side histories.

For writers such as McNeill, Mumford, Sloterdijk *et al.* the medium of globalisation is shared trade, institutional forms and technology. Their focus on the concept of a closed interactive world is clearly important even if we may disagree about the date it began. We know that the development of trade relations was much more precocious than hitherto thought. Even in prehistory, amber, faence beads and metalwork were traded across Europe and between Europe and the Middle east, and silk was traded between China and Ancient Mediterranean cultures as early as the 3rd Century BCE. But it’s unlikely that individuals were accompanying the journeys these objects made. Cultural artefacts, *qua* Objects, do not convey meanings, and certainly not the meanings that constitute political thought. Only speech, or writing can do that. A global history of political thought poses quite other problems of identity than a global history of trade.

One of the things that a ‘global history of political thought’ might designate – the attempt to relate the discrete traditions of political theorising that developed in say, Western Europe, China, India, Turkey, etc., seems to me to map onto the structure of McNeill’s argument. But such a history would be ‘Global’ only in the sense of putting alongside, within the same covers as it were, what were discrete intellectual histories and stories that have long been available separately.

I don’t suggest that these political cultures were isolated in the sense that pre-Columban America and Europe were, nor do I wish to suggest that there weren’t,



for there clearly were, peripheral, synthetic or creole political *practices* at their interstices, often of considerable interest and sophistication, (Hellenistic Egypt, the Kushan Empire, or even l’Ouverture’s Haiti). But the significance of these for our subject depends on how generously we define “thought”. In the sense that, as Collingwood insisted, ‘all history is the history of thought’ they clearly count. But to the extent that political thought is construed as a self-consciously theorised abstraction from practice, it tends to be conducted (and certainly written down) only in the relatively rarified, mostly elite contexts within the metropole’s institutions and traditions of practice. To the extent that this is not true, there are indeed interesting histories to be told. But some have been lost to the central narrative, and many of them have been being told for some time; the Arabic reception of Greek political theory for example and the re-reception of Greek political thought (initially via its Arabic reception) into Western Christianity, thought the reception of Western (mainly Jesuit) intellectuals in China, and their accounts of Chinese culture in their Latin homelands. An increasing interest and scrutiny of the impact of such insights into “others” and indeed the emergence of some creole political cultures and any political theorising they generate is clearly an appropriate object of study for our contemporary multicultural world and could be said to form a part of a “global turn”. But even to the extent that ‘theory’ can be reconstructed from them, they would not in themselves form a global history.

But it might be objected, there is surely there is something to be said for juxtaposing the histories of the major political-theoretical cultures even before they began to seriously interact with one another?

There is indeed a mode of doing this, but it belongs to social science, and not to history. Historical subjects are unique, and to be understood in terms of their temporal development, not in terms of their supposed likeness to other exemplars (Of what?). In social science we explore phenomena in terms of the characteristics of the classes to which the phenomena belong, and of the range of other phenomena, or variables to which they are causally susceptible in the hope of generating generalisable claims. We might consider “hydraulic societies” to be such a discrete category, and set out to see what social or political beliefs or institutions seem to follow from such a reliance on the collective management of water resources. Or we might ask what socio-political doctrines seem to prevail in polities whose economies rely principally on the extraction of some one natural resource, Salt (Halstatt A), Oil (Gulf States), or Gas (Russian Federation).

It might be claimed that a discourse describing and comparing the occurrence of such social formations over time could, in a loose kind of way, call itself a History, but, in the absence of demonstrating intellectual connections, it would be so only in the sense of dealing with subjects contingently situated serially in time. To

describe one thing as standing in a purely temporal relation to another (earlier, later, simultaneously) does not establish an *historical* connection. A record of the dates of volcanic eruptions would not be a history but a chronicle (or, less grandly, a *list!*). Even a record of different human cultures' understandings of volcanic eruptions would not be a history (although it might constitute one if it told a story demonstrating that there was some hermeneutic content that the later understanding owed to the earlier). Lists of phenomena considered in isolation as exemplars of a type may form the basis of attempts to theorise in a social scientific mode; but mere temporal priority cannot be said to connect things – even ideas – *historically*.

A global history of political thought, then, construed as a universal (or even part of a universal) narrative presupposes the existence of universal historical connection – that is, shared thought, hermeneutic connection, linguistic transfer. Artefacts in themselves are not enough. Nor is the narration of simultaneously occurring but unconnected political thought. When and how this connection and sharing happened and between whom are all interesting questions. But a global history presupposes an actually existing global hermeneutic. In this sense a global history is a severely limited field.

Nevertheless, the idea of global history (no article) can serve to reframe the study of less-than global histories, and direct focus to different areas of study. In this sense we can recognise and celebrate a “global turn”. That is to say, a turn away from the study of the working out of the internal logic of the theories of the major world civilisations or political languages within those cultures; and a turn towards what might be called a hermeneutics of the margins, the peripheries, the syncretic, or towards the career of individual concepts or term(s) passing across linguistic boundaries, all of which, however difficult, is surely to be welcomed. In that sense whilst signalling the problematic and limited character of a Global history of political thought, the emergence of a *Global turn* in the history of political theory or indeed thought, is precisely of our time.



## Comment on Cadeddu: The Cambridge Turn

Richard Bourke

The purpose of studying past thought has long been debated. In particular, the history of political theory has been controversial. One reason for this is that the subject has throughout comprised two disciplines – history and philosophy – making the combination intrinsically «porous», in Davide Cadeddu’s phrase<sup>1</sup>. For some, the point of the enterprise is critical in nature; for others, it is essentially historical. In accordance with the first approach, it seemed to Gilbert Ryle and Karl Popper alike that the reason why modern philosophers might write on a figure such as Plato was to correct the errors discoverable in this illustrious predecessor<sup>2</sup>. Reacting against this style of commentary in the late 1960s, members of what became known as the Cambridge School preferred to examine thinkers on their own terms. As is well known, their attitude was formed in opposition to prevailing styles of thought, including work associated with Leo Strauss, C. B. Macpherson and the mainstream literature in the history of philosophy. This last pursuit was usually carried out by philosophers themselves. Their aim had been to evaluate the cogency of thinkers who came before them. In fact, this had long been the stance adopted by philosophers through the ages: Plato criticised Homer, Aristotle rejected Plato, Descartes challenged scholasticism, Hume spurned Malebranche, and Kant repudiated Hume.

Kant, for one, was explicit about his procedure. Philosophers, he believed, could only ply their trade by engaging with the ideas of their philosophical forebears. One did not simply “think”, as if in a vacuum: one thought about a canon of previous thinkers. However, Kant went on to insist that this engagement should not take the form of passive reception. The newcomer was to employ their capacity to reason critically about the tradition handed down to them. In effect, the Cambridge School rebuffed this goal of *critical* engagement. For J.G.A. Pocock, John Dunn and Quentin Skinner, interpretation strove to understand rather than criticise. Their practice was indebted to philological techniques which had influenced theology and jurisprudence since the sixteenth century. The basic premise was, roughly speaking, historicist: it was assumed that earlier philosophers were best understood in their own context rather than by the lights of later commentators. The question was not whether Hobbes or Harrington was true, but what they meant.

<sup>1</sup> D. CADEDU, *Trusting the Process: Current Fashions in History of Political Thought*, «Scienza & Politica. Per una storia delle dottrine», in this issue, pp. 239-250, p. 249.

<sup>2</sup> G. RYLE, *Plato’s Progress*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1966; K. POPPER, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984, 2 vols.

It is tempting to see this outcome as a result of handing over the discipline of the history of ideas from philosophers to historians. Philosophers, it might have been thought, evaluate doctrines whereas historians explicate their significance. However, the fact is that philosophy had itself turned historicist before professional historians arrived on the scene. The new direction is most obvious in the works of Hegel. Famously, in the Preface to the *Philosophy of Right*, he wrote that philosophy «is its own time comprehended in thoughts»<sup>3</sup>. This implied that thinkers were rooted in their history. Plato served to illustrate the point: «Plato's *Republic*», Hegel claimed, «is essentially the embodiment of nothing other than Greek ethics»<sup>4</sup>. Unlike Kant, Hegel did not try to explain Plato's thought by reference to a contemporary canon of philosophical reasoning<sup>5</sup>. Instead, he strove to locate him within his original Athenian milieu.

This kind of historicism risks stirring allegations of antiquarianism. If the significance of philosophy was purely context-specific, bygone specimens effectively faced obsolescence. From this perspective, Plato might be interesting as an historical relic, but not as a still-relevant interlocutor. In the early 1970s, the Cambridge School gave rise to similar criticism. John Dunn argued in 1969 that Locke had nothing to teach us<sup>6</sup>. In the same year, Quentin Skinner proposed that earlier thinkers were products of their time. It followed that they could not be repositories of timeless wisdom<sup>7</sup>. But why, then, should we study the classic texts?

Following on from their youthful and perhaps rash interventions, Dunn and Skinner began to feel the force of this demanding question. Were archaic philosophies nothing more than remnants from the past, or could they offer some kind of enduring enlightenment? In their different ways, both historians came to think that a canon of thinkers could indeed instruct us. Relinquishing the stance taken up in 1969, it was now claimed that Locke could clarify the nature of trust and that Machiavelli could help us delineate the character of freedom<sup>8</sup>. Yet this was in effect to travel in a circle. If the distinguishing feature of historic norms was that they belonged to an earlier epoch, how could they enjoy exemplary status in a later era?

Long before the emergence of a Cambridge approach to interpretation, Hegel had indicted the historical shortcomings of previous scholars. Specifically, he charged historians of philosophy like Jacob Brucker with anachronism. Most

<sup>3</sup> G.W.F. HEGEL, "Preface" to *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. Allen W. Wood, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991, p. 21.

<sup>4</sup> *Ivi*, p. 20.

<sup>5</sup> R. BOURKE, *Hegel's World Revolutions*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2023, Part III, Chapter 7.

<sup>6</sup> J. DUNN, "Preface" (1968) to *The Political Thought of John Locke: An Historical Account of the Argument of the "Two Treatises of Government"*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1969.

<sup>7</sup> Q. SKINNER, *Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas*, «History and Theory», 8, 1/1969, pp. 3-53.

<sup>8</sup> Q. SKINNER, "The Paradoxes of Political Liberty" in *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values: VII*, ed. S. McMurrin, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1986, pp. 225-250; J. DUNN, "What is Living and What is Dead in the Political Theory of John Locke?" in *Interpreting Political Responsibility*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1990, pp. 9-25



obviously in his treatment of the ancients, Hegel claimed, Brucker had distorted their ideas. Projecting notions derived from his own «bad metaphysics» onto the theories of remote thinkers, he radically misconstrued their meaning<sup>9</sup>. He drew implications from their arguments that formed no part of their intentions. For Hegel, the only solution was to adopt an historically sensitive hermeneutics: to take the thought of earlier thinkers on its own terms.

Nonetheless, at the same time, Hegel saw that historical study did not yield pure historicism. That is, he believed that an historical exposition of texts was entirely fitting, yet this did not have to serve an historicist worldview. In other words, historical exegesis did not entail historicist relativism. Here we enter the complexities of Hegel's system of thought. He recognised that Plato belonged to an earlier «form of life», yet this did not exempt his work from philosophical judgement. Diverse «shapes of spirit» were not radically incommensurable<sup>10</sup>. It might be that mummification fitted in with Egyptian culture just as Newtonianism was a product of early modern Europe. But that was not to accord divergent viewpoints equal rational status. On the contrary, on Hegelian premises, all perspectives were neither equally valuable nor true.

However, crucially, this conclusion did not position the interpreter as an external critic. Expositors who, on Hegel's model, were philosopher-historians, did not stand above their predecessors. They did not hold them to standards of which they had no conception. Instead, their job was to trace the immanent failure of earlier schemes of thought. Refutation, as Hegel argued in the *Phenomenology*, is not achieved by means of «outside affirmations»<sup>11</sup>. Doctrines are not so much disproved as overcome; or, if you prefer, contradiction was a form of dialectical supersession. Moreover, this process of supersession is not just a sequence of transitions. It is equally a procession of «untruths» progressing through confusion to belated insight<sup>12</sup>. Each stage in this labour of sceptical inquiry yields its own standard. But this does not excuse precursor norms from successor verdicts. To conclude with Hegel's most powerful illustration: although slavery is intrinsically wrong it was «valid» for the Romans and it has become explicitly nefarious for us<sup>13</sup>.

<sup>9</sup> G.W.F. HEGEL, «Preface to the Second Edition» of the *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Basic Outline, Part I: Science of Logic*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010, p. 14.

<sup>10</sup> S. HOULGATE, *Introduction to Hegel: Freedom, Truth and History*, Oxford, Blackwell Publishing, 2005, Chap. 1.

<sup>11</sup> G.W.F. HEGEL, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, ed. Michael Inwood, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2018, §24.

<sup>12</sup> *Ivz*, §78.

<sup>13</sup> G.W.F. HEGEL, *Philosophy of Right*, §57A.







## Why Do So Many Scholars Try and Fail to Draw Contemporary Insights from the History of Political Thought?<sup>1</sup>

Adrian Blau

### 1. Introduction

Is history of political thought merely of antiquarian interest? Yes, it often is – and rightly so. Many of us have no wish to use historical texts for presentist purposes, or find that our texts have little to add. This is entirely legitimate. Understanding texts is good in itself, helps other scholarly goals, and can be personally fulfilling: our research is Aristotelian, not just utilitarian.

But many people do seek to apply historical ideas for contemporary purposes. And a surprising number fail. These failures damage efforts to take the history of political thought seriously. Indeed, some striking failures come from those who are particularly vocal about the contemporary value of the history of political thought.

These failures also undermine guidance about textual interpretation. We cannot criticise people who over-generalise about “the Enlightenment” or “18th-century thought” if we then over-simplify about “the modern social sciences”, “contemporary liberalism”, or “20th-century philosophy”. We cannot advocate contextualising texts and recovering authors’ intentions while only applying this to authors we like. We cannot teach students to read texts closely, carefully and charitably if we only do so for authors writing before 1971.

What explains these failures? Why do many scholars draw unconvincing contemporary insights from historical texts? Why do some scholars engage inadequately with the contemporary issues or literature? Why are some scholars, so careful when referencing historical texts, so casual for contemporary texts?

Obviously, the boundary between history of political thought and political theory is porous, as Davide Cadeddu notes<sup>2</sup>. This paper’s central claim is that many more scholars are willing to cross this porous boundary than do it successfully.

Historians should take particular note here, as they know how annoying the reverse situation is. Historians are rightly frustrated when outsiders dip into historical texts, read them wrongly or simplistically, or misuse them for their own purposes. But it is equally frustrating when historians do similar things to outsiders. History is hard – but so is political science, political theory, and philosophy.

<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of some of the ideas in this paper was published in the *American Journal of Political Science* (2021). I reiterate my thanks to the people I thanked there.

<sup>2</sup> D. CADEDU, *Trusting the Process: Current Fashions in History of Political Thought*, «Scienza & Politica. Per una storia delle dottrine», in this issue, pp. 239-250, p. 249.

The present is a foreign country: they do things differently there. Not too differently, in many cases: it may not take long to engage sufficiently with relevant contemporary scholarship or issues to show the value of historical perspectives. Yet some people's contemporary insights fail because they seem unwilling to spend even a few hours or days on such engagement.

Some readers might see my paper as part of the long methodological battle between historians and political theorists/philosophers. Actually, much of my work challenges this dichotomy: even when historians ask primarily historical questions, they must sometimes think theoretically/philosophically, and vice versa<sup>3</sup>. This paper makes the same argument. My concern is that so many historians see themselves as historians *and nothing else*. Political theorists, by contrast, are often more flexible, engaging more readily with relevant ideas and literatures. There are many exceptions on both sides, of course.

I would say – although I know some disagree – that historians won the 1960s and 1970s debates, demonstrating in methodological writings and in actual interpretations that historical texts are easily misunderstood if read non-contextually. Both historical accuracy and contemporary relevance are now regularly sought by political theorists such as Teresa Bejan, Katrin Flikschuh, Lisa Herzog, Humeira Iqtidar, Leigh Jenco, Duncan Kelly, Robert Lamb, Melissa Lane, Jacob Levy, Karuna Mantena, Kari Palonen and Melissa Schwartzberg. Historians have made many political theorists raise their game.

This paper focuses more on the reverse situation: historians sometimes need a higher gear when on other scholars' ground. When we use the history of political thought to draw contemporary insights, we are in key respects doing political theory, political science, philosophy, or suchlike. We need to think *partly* like scholars in those areas, or at the very least, read enough of those literatures to show who our insights benefit. History alone does not get us far enough.

Sections 2 and 3 discuss successful and failed uses of historical texts for contemporary purposes. These sections cover similar ground to my earlier publication on these issues, although my examples differ<sup>4</sup>. Section 4 extends that earlier analysis by asking why there are so many failures. Section 5 covers methodology – the steps by which we reach, test and justify our conclusions. Our “methodological” literature says little about actual methodology, though, and the same applies to drawing

<sup>3</sup> See especially A. BLAU, *How Should We Categorize Approaches to the History of Political Thought?*, «Review of Politics», 83, 1/2021, pp. 91-114; A. BLAU, *Textual Context in the History of Political Thought and Intellectual History*, «History of European Ideas», 45, 8/2019, pp. 1191-1210; A. BLAU, *Interpreting Texts*, in A. BLAU (ed), *Methods in Analytical Political Theory*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2017, pp. 243-269; A. BLAU, *Methodologies of Interpreting Hobbes: Historical and Philosophical*, in S. LLOYD (ed), *Interpreting Hobbes's Political Thought*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 2019, pp. 10-28; and A. BLAU, *Philosophical Analysis*, in C. NEDERMAN – G. BOGIARIS (eds), *Research Handbook on the History of Political Thought* (forthcoming).

<sup>4</sup> A. BLAU, *How (Not) to Use the History of Political Thought for Contemporary Purposes*, «American Journal of Political Science», 65, 2/2021, pp. 359-372.



contemporary insights from historical texts. Section 6 covers mentality – the other side of the coin from methodology. Too many scholars are too confident about drawing contemporary insights without spending enough time or effort to bolster their analysis. Section 7 concludes by arguing that even if one seeks contemporary contributions as a historian, which is Quentin Skinner’s approach, one cannot do so *only* as a historian (and nor does Skinner). One needs to do so partly as a political theorist, a philosopher, or whatever kind of scholar one is engaging with.

## 2. The state of the field: successes

As Cadeddu notes, people have long sought contemporary insights from historical texts<sup>5</sup>. I am unsure why he denies that recent efforts *partly* respond to concerns about narrow antiquarianism<sup>6</sup>. My main worry, though, is that Cadeddu only discusses the positive side of these efforts.

True, the positive side is well worth stressing. There have been many successes. I have previously discussed the revival of republican liberty by Quentin Skinner and Philip Pettit – respectively, a historian and a political theorist/philosopher<sup>7</sup>. Given this paper’s central message, about the need to combine history with other scholarship, I would stress that both authors are explicit that neither would have been as successful on their own<sup>8</sup>. Skinner, while primarily a historian, is an astute philosopher<sup>9</sup>. But even he needed a philosophical fillip.

Another success-story is virtue ethics. Like republican liberty, it has sparked much new thinking and research, in fields as diverse as philosophy, education, environmentalism, business and sport<sup>10</sup>. Virtue ethicists typically amend the original ideas, e.g. dropping the assumption of a single objective good, just as republican liberty theorists have dropped its historical sexism<sup>11</sup>.

Iain Hampsher-Monk questions such partial uses of ideals<sup>12</sup>. But why does drawing contemporary insights require us to apply a historical idea in its entirety? Since ideas are always linked to other ideas, must we apply those ideas too? That is not

<sup>5</sup> D. CADEDU, *Trusting the Process*, p. 247.

<sup>6</sup> D. CADEDU, *Trusting the Process*, p. 247. See e.g. Q. SKINNER, *Liberty Before Liberalism*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998, pp. 107-108.

<sup>7</sup> A. BLAU, *How (Not) to Use*, p. 359.

<sup>8</sup> See references in A. BLAU, *How (Not) to Use*, p. 369.

<sup>9</sup> See e.g. Q. SKINNER, *Hobbes and Republican Liberty*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008, p. 24, p. 45, p. 108, pp. 132-138.

<sup>10</sup> E.g. M. AUSTIN (ed), *Virtues in Action: New Essays in Applied Virtue Ethics*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. On republican liberty’s productiveness in other fields, see A. BLAU, *How (Not) to Use*, p. 359.

<sup>11</sup> M. NUSSBAUM, *Non-Relative Virtues: an Aristotelian Approach*, in M. NUSSBAUM – A. SEN (eds) *The Quality of Life*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1993, pp. 242-269, p. 243; J. ANNAS, *The Morality of Happiness*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1995, especially pp. 4-7 and pp. 450-452; P. PETTIT, *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997, p. viii, p. 6, p. 48, p. 96, p. 133.

<sup>12</sup> I. HAMPSHER-MONK, *The Contemporary Use of Historical Thought*, «Studies in Social and Political Thought», 3, 1/2000, pp. 3-18, pp. 16-17.

how the history of political thought itself works – consider Kant’s use of Rousseau, or Rousseau’s use of Hobbes<sup>13</sup>.

Many scholars thus rightly modify historical ideas for contemporary purposes. Melissa Lane’s application of Plato to contemporary environmentalism is «inspired by the ancients» via «unabashed appropriation» which «rejects or reshapes» some ancient ideas, e.g. dropping naive assumptions about altruism, while «reshap[ing] the Platonic model to be useful to those beginning from a liberal and democratic perspective»<sup>14</sup>. Bernard Williams seeks «some extension of ancient thought, greatly modified», to escape flawed notions of rationality in most contemporary moral philosophy<sup>15</sup>. Raymond Geuss criticises contemporary liberal notions of public/private and adopts Dewey’s way of defining public and private in terms of consequences. But Dewey’s account is incomplete, so Geuss uses examples and thought experiments to improve it by including «overlapping publics»<sup>16</sup>. Robert Lamb seeks «to animate the spirit of Paine’s thought in a novel, productive, yet faithful way, and to include his voice in conversations from which he has traditionally been excluded». But the ensuing interpretations involve «the *historical* meaning and implications of Paine’s arguments and are not merely the results of a philosopher thinking he can do what he likes with old texts»<sup>17</sup>.

There are many other success stories, and often without making large changes to historical ideas. John Dunn shows what is living and dead in Locke’s political thought<sup>18</sup>. Nadia Urbinati criticises modern individualism for being more egocentric than it used to be<sup>19</sup>. Annelien de Dijn uses historical analysis to question contemporary assumptions about democracy, equality and liberty being in tension<sup>20</sup>. Bernard Manin offers many useful historical ideas about democracy, e.g. likeness representation, and election as aristocratic not democratic<sup>21</sup>. Teresa Bejan, following and expanding Elizabeth Anderson and Jeremy Waldron, draws contemporary insights about equality from 17th-century England<sup>22</sup>. Humeira Iqtidar uses Maududi to supplement the ‘equality of what?’ debate: do different aspects of equality need different defences?<sup>23</sup> Melissa Schwartzberg shows advantages of Aristotle’s account of

<sup>13</sup> A. BLAU, *How (Not) to Use*, p. 361.

<sup>14</sup> M. LANE, *Eco-Republic: Ancient Thinking for a Green Age*, Oxford, Peter Lang, 2011, p. 6, p. 23, p. 43, p. 183.

<sup>15</sup> B. WILLIAMS, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2006, p. vii.

<sup>16</sup> R. GEUSS, *Public Goods, Private Goods*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2001, pp. 84-86, pp. 93-94.

<sup>17</sup> R. LAMB, *Thomas Paine and the Idea of Human Rights*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2015, p. 6, p. 9.

<sup>18</sup> J. DUNN, *Interpreting Political Responsibility: Essays 1981-1989*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1990, pp. 9-25.

<sup>19</sup> N. URBINATI, *The Tyranny of the Moderns*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2015.

<sup>20</sup> A. DE DIJN, *Freedom: An Unruly History*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2020.

<sup>21</sup> B. MANIN, *The Principles of Representative Government*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997.

<sup>22</sup> T. BEJAN, *What Was the Point of Equality?*, «American Journal of Political Science», 66, 3/2022, pp. 604-616, pp. 604-605, pp. 614-615.

<sup>23</sup> H. IQTIDAR, *Conservative Anti-Colonialism: Maududi, Marx and Social Equality*, «Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society», 32, 2/2022, pp. 295-310, pp. 309-310.



democratic equality over contemporary justifications of political equality, and argues that historical defences of juries help us deflect recent attacks on democracy<sup>24</sup>. Kinch Hoekstra not only offers a completely new interpretation of Hobbes on natural equality, but draws from it a contemporary insight: ‘we must acknowledge one another as equals because we will otherwise be inclined to destroy one another’<sup>25</sup>. Gareth Stedman Jones recovers valuable aspects of political economy buried after the French Revolution<sup>26</sup>. Duncan Kelly uses historical analysis of liberty as propriety to enrich current debates about left-libertarianism, justice and contractualism<sup>27</sup>.

The above answers are substantive, raising new questions or even answers about contemporary issues. Historical analysis can also help us methodologically. Iqtidar questions the authority of contextualism by noting that Islamic scholars have been doing contextualist analysis for over 1000 years<sup>28</sup>. John Rawls developed new methodological contributions partly by reflecting on Kant’s and Sidgwick’s methods<sup>29</sup>. Geuss and Andrew Sabl, by contrast, seek methodological inspiration from Lenin and Hume, respectively<sup>30</sup>.

So, there are many successes in drawing contemporary insights from historical texts. We will disagree about what succeeds or fails, of course, and about the degree of success or failure. I do not think that all of the above examples succeed entirely. But I now discuss examples which do not succeed *on their own terms*.

### 3. The state of the field: failures

One common problem is not supporting claims with adequate references/examples, and thus not demonstrating who commits a claimed error, who benefits from a historical insight, or what the historical insight offers that is new. For example, Alice Ristroph does not back up her suggestion that unlike Hobbes, current scholars already assume that punishment is justified<sup>31</sup>. Antti Tahvanainen highlights

<sup>24</sup> M. SCHWARTZBERG, *Aristotle and the Judgment of the Many: Equality, Not Collective Quality*, «Journal of Politics», 78, 3/2016, pp. 733-745, pp. 733-735, pp. 743-744; M. SCHWARTZBERG, *Justifying the Jury: Reconciling Justice, Equality, and Democracy*, «American Political Science Review», 112, 3/2018, pp. 446-458, pp. 446-448, pp. 456-458.

<sup>25</sup> K. HOEKSTRA, *Hobbesian Equality*, in S. LLOYD (ed), *Hobbes Today: Insights for the 21st Century*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013, pp. 76-112, pp. 77-82, pp. 108-112.

<sup>26</sup> G. STEDMAN JONES, *An End to Poverty? A Historical Debate*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2004, pp. 1-14, p. 231, p. 235.

<sup>27</sup> D. KELLY, *The Propriety of Liberty: Persons, Passions and Judgement in Modern Political Thought*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2011, 259-276.

<sup>28</sup> H. IQTIDAR, *Meaning, Context, Interpretations in the Islamic Tradition: Provincializing Skinnerian Contextualism*, in preparation for A. BLAU (ed), *Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas* (forthcoming).

<sup>29</sup> J. RAWLS, *Political Liberalism*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1993, pp. 89-129; J. RAWLS, *Preface*, in H. SIDGWICK, *The Methods of Ethics*, Indianapolis, Hackett, 7th edition, 1981, pp. v-vi.

<sup>30</sup> R. GEUSS, *Philosophy and Real Politics*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, pp. 23-30, p. 99; A. SABL, *Hume’s Politics: Coordination and Crisis in the History of England*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2012, pp. 229-427.

<sup>31</sup> A. RISTROPH, *The Imperfect Legitimacy of Punishment*, in S. LLOYD (ed), *Hobbes Today: Insights for the 21st Century*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013, pp. 190-208, pp. 207-208.

diversity in 17th-century republicanism: this «complex web ... may help us to reflect on our current understanding of the same matters»<sup>32</sup>. This contribution needs expansion and references. Fonna Forman argues that 18th-century cosmopolitanism saw a «fusion of traditions» that «ultimately produced a muddled, self-contradictory and potentially dangerous composite, still evident in cosmopolitan thinking today»<sup>33</sup>. Examples of such cosmopolitans are needed. Anthony Black states that we can still learn from the Islamic “Royal Advice” literature, which «contains practical insights analogous to those of Machiavelli without a pathological rejection of humanitarian values»<sup>34</sup>. This claim needs an example, not least because even without these Islamic thinkers we can apply Machiavelli’s insights while avoiding brutal consequentialism (just as Skinner and Pettit apply republican ideas of liberty without the original sexism).

Most of these oversights seem easily fixable. But sometimes, a lack of references raises doubts about the insight. Jürgen Overhoff writes that Hobbes’s «important lesson» is that «we ought to perceive ourselves as always fully and personally responsible for our ethical and political conduct regardless of how strongly we believe ourselves to be exposed to social - or natural - constraints of whatever degree»<sup>35</sup>. No references are given to people who disagree with this, including the large legal literatures on diminished responsibility for children and people with certain mental conditions. Yet those exceptions, if legitimate, already indicate constraints to Overhoff’s Hobbesian claim. Might other constraints exist too?

Or consider Neil McArthur’s application of Hobbesian ideas to debates about the welfare state and consumption taxes. McArthur’s analysis is rather brief, both as regards engaging with contemporary issues/scholarship, and as regards the argumentation needed to establish Hobbes’s potential contributions<sup>36</sup>. It is unclear whether McArthur’s insights would survive a deeper engagement with the issues and literature.

My bigger worry, though, is where contemporary authors are read unfairly or inaccurately. (We all do this in places; my article doubtless does so too.) I worry most when this is done repeatedly to the same author. Consider Rawls, who is often misread, or inadequately engaged with, by historically minded critics. Rawls is especially badly treated by Raymond Geuss, a serial misreader of scholars who he

<sup>32</sup> A. TAHVANAINEN, *Free Elections and Freedom of Speech in English Republican Thought*, in Q. SKINNER - M. VAN GELDEREN (eds), *Freedom and the Construction of Europe. Volume II: Free Persons and Free States*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013, pp. 128-145, p. 144.

<sup>33</sup> F. FORMAN-BARZILAI, *From European to Cosmopolitan Freedom*, in Q. SKINNER - M. VAN GELDEREN (eds), *Freedom and the Construction of Europe. Volume II: Free Persons and Free States*, pp. 266-282, pp. 277-282.

<sup>34</sup> A. BLACK, *The History of Islamic Political Thought: From the Prophet to the Present*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2011, 2nd edition, p. 351; see also p. 114.

<sup>35</sup> J. OVERHOFF, *Hobbes’s Theory of the Will: Ideological Reasons and Historical Circumstances*, Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield, 2000, pp. 233-423.

<sup>36</sup> N. MCARTHUR, “*Thrown amongst Many*”: *Hobbes on Taxation and Fiscal Policy*, in S. LLOYD (ed), *Hobbes Today: Insights for the 21st Century*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013, pp. 178-89, pp. 185-189.



dislikes, as Paul Sagar notes<sup>37</sup>. Although Geuss's 2003 critique of Rawls is incisive and detailed<sup>38</sup>, several later commentaries fall short<sup>39</sup>. Indeed, some of Geuss's criticisms of Rawls had already been amply discussed and answered from the 1970s onwards<sup>40</sup>.

Certainly, the history of political thought *can* be used to challenge Rawls. For example, Céline Spector shows that Rawls's selective reading of Rousseau – «a Rousseau without passions, a Rousseau without tensions» – helped Rawls overlook these passions and tensions in his own theory<sup>41</sup>. Michael Freeden shows that Rawlsian liberalism, if it is liberalism, is a historically unusual liberalism<sup>42</sup>. This does not refute Rawlsian liberalism but invites Rawlsians to ask what they are missing.

Like Geuss, Skinner has offered a detailed and incisive critique of Rawls (using Machiavelli)<sup>43</sup>, but some of his more recent criticisms are quicker and less convincing. Skinner criticises Rawls's prioritising of the right over the good because «it refuses to acknowledge that it may sometimes be necessary – especially in times of crisis – for the maintenance of individual rights to give way to broader notions of the public interest», whereas historical analysis reminds us that occasionally «the person whose life most urgently needs to be saved is the person of the state»<sup>44</sup>. But Rawls explicitly permits this in *Political Liberalism*<sup>45</sup>.

Skinner also reads Rawls as offering an invisible-hand defence of the common good. «If we all pursue our own enlightened self-interest, we are assured, the outcome will in fact be the greatest good of the community as a whole»<sup>46</sup>. But the pages from *A Theory of Justice* which Skinner references here make a different claim, about the common good as a foundational idea (*starting* with basic equal liberties), not an outcome<sup>47</sup>.

Geuss's and Skinner's misreadings of Rawls might seem particularly unfair given Rawls's efforts at reading historical philosophers humbly and charitably<sup>48</sup>. But my

<sup>37</sup> P. SAGAR, *A Broken Clock*, «Oxonian Review», 25, 3/2014. <http://www.oxonianreview.org/wp/a-broken-clock>.

<sup>38</sup> R. GEUSS, *Neither History nor Praxis*, «European Review», 11, 3/2003, pp. 281-292.

<sup>39</sup> See the discussion in A. BLAU, *How (Not) to Use*, p. 367, and to some extent p. 361.

<sup>40</sup> S. FREEMAN, *book review*, «Ethics», 120, 1/2009, pp. 175-184, pp. 179-84.

<sup>41</sup> C. SPECTOR, *Rousseau at Harvard: John Rawls and Judith Shklar on Realistic Utopia*, in A. LIFSCHITZ (ed), *Engaging with Rousseau: Reaction and Interpretation from the Eighteenth Century to the Present*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2016, pp. 152-167; quotation at p. 167.

<sup>42</sup> MICHAEL FREEDEN, *Ideologies and Political Theory*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1996, pp. 226-275, especially p. 227, pp. 231-232, pp. 237-239, pp. 241-242, pp. 259-261.

<sup>43</sup> Q. SKINNER, *Machiavelli on the Maintenance of Liberty*, «Politics», 18, 2/1983, pp. 3-15.

<sup>44</sup> Q. SKINNER, *The Sovereign State: a Genealogy*, in H. KALMO – Q. SKINNER (eds), *Sovereignty in Fragments: The Past, Present and Future of a Contested Concept*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010, pp. 26-46, pp. 45-64. Geuss overlooks the same passage when making this criticism of Rawls in a different way: see R. GEUSS, *Philosophy and Real Politics*, p. 83.

<sup>45</sup> J. RAWLS, *Political Liberalism*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1993, pp. 354-356.

<sup>46</sup> Q. SKINNER, *The Republican Ideal of Political Liberty*, in G. BOCK – Q. SKINNER – M. VIROLI (eds), *Machiavelli and Republicanism*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990, pp. 293-309, p. 301.

<sup>47</sup> J. RAWLS, *A Theory of Justice*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1971, p. 243, p. 246.

<sup>48</sup> J. RAWLS, *Lectures on the History of Moral Philosophy*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2000, pp. xvi-xvii.



point still applies if Rawls, like Rousseau, was a despicable, misogynistic, child-abandoning monster who deserves not only to be in the canon but also shot out of one.

What worries me most is where historically-minded thinkers have such disdain for large bodies of literature that they dismiss them out of hand. John Dunn sometimes seems to have this mentality. Several scholars note his tendency to caricature<sup>49</sup>. Dunn's caricaturing becomes particularly problematic where he would actually benefit from scholarship he dismisses.

Consider Dunn's "contempt" for purely empirical political science. (Indeed, Dunn denounces *all* of «the modern social sciences»<sup>50</sup>). This should not give one licence to ignore such research, however. Dunn asserts that political science has not contributed to the question of «which ... forms of government or practices or presumptive purposes and informing principles have merit and deserve allegiance»<sup>51</sup>. This ignores, among other research, the huge literature on the quality of democracy (e.g. Arend Lijphart's *Patterns of Democracy*, which requires little technical skill to read and understand). Engagement with similar research would also have helped Dunn's analysis of democracy's strengths and weaknesses. There are many respects in which future generations of scholars should emulate John Dunn; but deep disdain for much contemporary scholarship is not one.

#### 4. Explaining these failures

Why do many scholars draw unconvincing contemporary insights, lacking precision about who makes the mistakes being criticised, or who could benefit from the claimed insights? Why are some scholars, rigorous in their historical analyses, so relaxed about engaging with contemporary literatures and issues?

Answering these questions requires more than just intellectual analyses of these errors. We also need *causal* explanation, which includes the structures and mind-sets fostering such errors. Rigorous causal explanation of these issues would need interviews or ethnography, so my answers below are largely speculative<sup>52</sup>. For reasons of space, I simply address two factors which may help to explain the problem: inattention to actual methodology in our "methodological" literature, and an overly bold mentality.

<sup>49</sup> J. ELSTER, *Socialism*, «London Review of Books», 15 November 1984, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v06/n21/jon-elster/socialism>; J. GREEN, *book review*, «Political Theory», 46, 1/2018, pp. 155-160, p. 157; A. ROBERTS, *book review*, «Governance», 28, 1/2015, pp. 113-122; A. BLAU, *How (Not) to Use*, p. 366.

<sup>50</sup> J. DUNN, *The History of Political Theory and Other Essays*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995, p. 31; J. DUNN, *Why We Need a Global History of Political Thought*, in B. KAPOSSY - I. NAKHIMOVSKY - S. REINERT - R. WHATMORE (eds), *Markets, Morals, Politics: Jealousy of Trade and the History of Political Thought*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2018, pp. 285-309, p. 294.

<sup>51</sup> J. DUNN, *Breaking Democracy's Spell*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2014, p. 57.

<sup>52</sup> For a similar analysis of a different issue, see A. BLAU, *Social Science and its Critics: an Ideological Analysis*, «Social Philosophy and Policy», (forthcoming).



## 5. Our impoverished “methodological” literature

Underpinning failures to draw contemporary insights from historical texts is our “methodological” literature’s inadequacy concerning actual methodology. Here, I must stress an extremely important point. “Methodology” means different things, but I define it as “the logic of inference”, i.e. the steps by which we reach, test and justify our inferences.

The “methodological” literature in the history of political thought and intellectual history says surprisingly little about methodology. There is little practical guidance on day-to-day questions of textual interpretation, and almost nothing on the fundamental issue of how to *test* our claims<sup>53</sup>. The main emphasis is on “meta” issues, e.g. whether to analyse texts like a contextualist, a philosopher, or a Straussian. These meta issues are important. But they also encourage us to see ourselves in separate “boxes”.

There are three problems with the box-fitting approach. Many typologies have large gaps: for example, Terence Ball’s typology excludes much political theory. Many contain caricatures, as with John Pocock’s poorly referenced portrayal of political theory and philosophy<sup>54</sup>. In different ways, Ball’s and Pocock’s accounts misrepresent the practice of the history of political thought.

The second problem is when box-fitting approaches imply that we fit into different, exclusive boxes: you can be a contextualist, or a philosopher, or a Straussian, say, but you cannot do more than one of these. Actually, though, every scholar needs techniques used in more than one “box”<sup>55</sup>.

That point is particularly important here. When we seek contemporary insights from historical texts, we are *to some extent* doing political theory or philosophy (or, sometimes, political science, psychology, or suchlike). At this stage, we should think and write – if only temporarily and partly – from that other perspective too.

Of course, historians may want some distance from what they are challenging (which is why I wrote «to some extent», «temporarily» and «partly» above). I return to this point in the conclusion. But maintaining some distance should not mean ignoring or misreading the relevant literature. You cannot make a successful contemporary insight if your insight accuses people of making errors which they do not make, as section 4 illustrated.

The third and related danger of the box-fitting approach to studying history of political thought is that it offers little guidance on *how* to do what one wants to do.

<sup>53</sup> Exceptions include A. BLAU, *History of Political Thought as Detective-Work*, «History of European Ideas», 41, 8/2015, pp. 1178-1194, and A. BLAU, *Interpreting Texts*.

<sup>54</sup> A. BLAU, *How Should We Categorize*, pp. 94-101.

<sup>55</sup> See especially A. BLAU, *How Should We Categorize*; A. BLAU, *Interpreting Texts*; and A. BLAU, *Philosophical Analysis*.

There are occasional exceptions, such as Michael Freeden's and Arthur Melzer's guidance for ideological analysis and Straussian esoteric interpretation, respectively<sup>56</sup>.

My own writings also reject box-fitting approaches and offer practical guidance. I reject the "schools of thought" approach (contextualism/philosophy/Straussianism etc.), and argue that we ask six main kinds of questions – about actions, mental states, concepts and theories, logical implications, normative evaluation, and modifications/improvements. These six questions divide into primarily empirical and theoretical questions; but crucially, even those asking primarily empirical questions (like most historians) still need some theoretical analysis, and vice versa<sup>57</sup>.

Empirical analysis requires a detective's tools. My paper *History of Political Thought as Detective-Work* offers practical suggestions for tackling the partial and ambiguous evidence which typifies historical analysis<sup>58</sup>. Philosophical analysis – which I again stress is still intrinsic to empirical/historical research – requires philosophical tools; I outline these in a chapter where I distinguish between philosophical tools which everyone uses, and those which are primarily for political theorists and philosophers<sup>59</sup>.

Unfortunately, such practical guidance is fairly rare, including about drawing contemporary insights from historical texts. There are many discussions of *whether or not* to use the history of political thought for contemporary purposes<sup>60</sup>. But I know of only two extended discussions of *how* to do so, by Skinner and by me<sup>61</sup>. I examine and question Skinner's ideas in the conclusion. And my own article discussed common mistakes more than actual methodology. But in effect it offers a "checklist" of questions which amount to something of a methodology:

- (1) Have I correctly/plausibly interpreted the historical texts? If needs be, have I amended the historical ideas suitably? (Should I be explicit about this? Or if I am agnostic about whether my historical interpretations are correct/plausible, should I be explicit about that?)
- (2) Am I clear about whether my claimed insight questions authority, questions existing answers, asks new questions, and/or offers new answers?
- (3) Am I trapped by history – do more recent developments (empirical, conceptual, etc.) undermine my claim?

<sup>56</sup> M. FREEDEN, *Ideologies*, chapters 1-2; A. MELZER, *Philosophy Between the Lines: The Lost History of Esoteric Writing*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2014, pp. 288-299, pp. 323-324.

<sup>57</sup> A. BLAU, *How Should We Categorize*, pp. 101-109.

<sup>58</sup> A. BLAU, *Detective-Work*.

<sup>59</sup> A. BLAU, *Philosophical Analysis*.

<sup>60</sup> A few examples – there are many more – are: J. WALDRON, *What Plato Would Allow*, in I. SHAPIRO – J. WAGNER DECEW (eds), *Theory and Practice: Nomos XXXVII*, New York, New York University Press, 1995, pp. 138-178; HAMPSHER-MONK, *Contemporary Use*; D. RUNCIMAN, *History of Political Thought: the State of the Discipline*, «British Journal of Politics and International Relations», 3, 1/2001, pp. 84-104, pp. 86-93; J. FLOYD, *Is Political Philosophy Too Ahistorical?*, «Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy», 12, 4/2009, pp. 513-533; L. JENCO, *Methods from Within the Chinese Tradition*, in SOR-HOON TAN (ed), *The Bloomsbury Research Handbook of Chinese Philosophy Methodologies*, London, Bloomsbury, 2016, pp. 273-288; pp. 275-281; and J. ROBERTSON, *The Turn to the Modern in the History of Political Thought*, <https://web.archive.org/web/20211020061017/https://intellectualhistory.web.ox.ac.uk/article/turn-modern-history-political-thought>.

<sup>61</sup> Q. SKINNER, *Liberty Before Liberalism*, pp. 107-120; A. BLAU, *How (Not) to Use*.



(4) Have I exaggerated the value of the insight?

(5) Have I explicitly and precisely shown for whom the claimed insight matters, e.g. who makes the alleged mistake or who could learn from the historical insight? At the very least, have I given one example?

(6) Have I correctly understood and referenced the relevant contemporary issues and/or literature? Should I ask an expert? How long will I need to engage with relevant issues and scholarship?

(7) How much space will I need to draw the insight convincingly, or at least adequately? Can I do it at the end of a journal article, or should I publish it separately (perhaps with a co-author) and get an extra publication? If writing a book, will I need a whole chapter? If my claim is speculative, have I presented it too boldly?

These questions would help scholars avoid common pitfalls. But they involve basic scholarship and referencing more than methodology. There is considerable scope to refine and expand (or reject!) this guidance. I hope other scholars will do so.

I may regret this offer, but I invite historians who are PhD students or early career researchers to send me a draft chapter or article in which they seek contemporary insights, even brief ones, in case my (usually non-expert) comments might help.

## 6. From methodology to mentality

Many good scholars are Hobbesians: they are motivated partly by fear. They worry about whether their evidence is reliable, whether their inferences are plausible, whether other inferences might work better, and so on. Exceptional people do not need such fears; Hobbes himself was not Hobbesian in this respect<sup>62</sup>. But most of us benefit from a degree of fear. Self-satisfaction makes excellent research harder.

Many good scholars are Hobbesian in a related respect: they are more humble than vainglorious. Hobbes, again, was hypocritical here: he was more worried about other people's pride than his own. But Leviathan was the king of the proud, and Hobbes knew that pride and vainglory threatened peace.

For scholars, one implication of humility is the recognition that moving beyond our expertise can be hard. *Nosce teipsum*, as Hobbes notes: if it took us much time and effort to become experts in our areas, why think that we can easily move into other areas?

Another implication is that the claimed insight sometimes requires more space than we might have. Can we successfully explain our insight in a few hundred words or less, often at the end of an article where we do not have further space to expand?

Sometimes the answer to both questions is "yes". I believe that Isaiah Berlin's *Two Concepts of Liberty* can successfully be challenged via historical analysis in

<sup>62</sup> On Hobbes's arrogance and obstinacy, see the simply wonderful book by D. JESSEPH, *Squaring the Circle: the War Between Hobbes and Wallis*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1999.

one or two paragraphs, and without much philosophical knowledge or sophistication. But this is probably rare, perhaps because Berlin's argument is unusual in being *based* on historical claims which are easily refutable.

In short: if you are a historian who is frustrated by 8000-word philosophical papers which include unconvincing 100-word discussions of complicated historical issues or historical philosophers, why assume that things are very different if you write an 8000-word historical paper which includes a 100-word application to a contemporary issue or philosopher? Political theorists often need an entire section for their contemporary insight<sup>63</sup>.

Unfortunately, too many scholars seem to think that it *is* easy to draw contemporary insights, and that they can do so effectively in a few sentences. One lesson from Hobbes's writings is that fear and humility often help research. Or, to put it in a way that Hobbes would have rejected: there is a golden mean between fear and foolhardiness, and a golden mean between humility and vainglory.

## 7. Conclusion

Quentin Skinner, asking whether we can draw contemporary insight from historical texts, notes that the contexts of these texts are so different from ours that even when their answers are applicable today, they are not *directly* applicable: «we must learn to do our own thinking for ourselves»<sup>64</sup>.

Yet Skinner also writes that he offers his contemporary contributions *as a historian*<sup>65</sup>. Can we “do our own thinking for ourselves” *only* as historians? Primarily as historians, yes; only as historians, no. Even historical analysis of historical texts will involve some philosophical analysis, as noted above, and this also applies when seeking contemporary contributions. For example, Skinner's contemporary insights about republican liberty reflects his philosophical ability to differentiate republican and negative liberty: his claims would fail if dependency/non-domination were actually a subset of non-interference.

Sometimes, such analysis, and such engagement with the literature, requires much time, effort and skill, maybe even a co-author. Sometimes they require little time, effort or skill. But the fact that some excellent scholars seem unwilling to expend even a little time, effort or skill is not something which should, to quote Cadeddu, «cheer the reader»<sup>66</sup>.

<sup>63</sup> E.g. T.M. BEJAN, *What Was the Point of Equality?*, pp. 614-615; M. SCHWARTZBERG, *Aristotle and the Judgment of the Many*, pp. 743-744; M. SCHWARTZBERG, *Justifying the Jury*, pp. 456-458.

<sup>64</sup> Q. SKINNER, *Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas*, «History and Theory», 8, 1/1969, pp. 3-53, p. 52.

<sup>65</sup> Q. SKINNER, *Quentin Skinner on Meaning and Method* (interview with Teresa Bejan), <https://web.archive.org/web/20170710072150/http://www.artoftheory.com/quentin-skinner-on-meaning-and-method/>. For what this means in practice, see Q. SKINNER, *Liberty Before Liberalism*, pp. 107-120.

<sup>66</sup> D. CADEDDU, *Trusting the Process*, p. 249.



Michael Frazer's book *Enlightenment of Sympathy* used Hume, Smith and others to offer new hypotheses for contemporary psychologists. Frazer tells me that he spent a summer reading the psychology literature; this was sometimes "painful", but often interesting and enjoyable. «The main thing is that it takes time», he says, «not that it's necessarily unpleasant; some historians might enjoy it»<sup>67</sup>.

It seems to me that political theorists writing primarily historical books are more likely than historians are to go the extra mile to establish contemporary contributions. The primarily historical books by Teresa Bejan, Michelle Clarke, Ross Carroll, Michael Frazer, Duncan Kelly, John McCormick and Andy Sabl have between half a chapter and two chapters for the contemporary analysis<sup>68</sup>.

As a very rough test of how often historians do the same, I examined the endings of recent books in a respected publisher's history of political thought series. I do not want to "punch down" at junior scholars, so I will not name names; but in my view the most successful contemporary contributions were by the non-historians, who were willing to go into detail about the issues and contemporary scholarship. Less than half of the historians offered contemporary insights; of the ones who tried, in my view only one succeeded, two were moderately successful, and a handful were inadequate. In one case, the claimed insights would have been obvious to any expert in that field. Too often, rhetoric trumped reason: the endings of these books were more lyrically beautiful than substantively insightful.

I talked above about the value of fear and humility. When seeking contemporary insights, we should worry about whether something only seems insightful to us because we are not experts. If it seems insightful based merely on a newspaper knowledge of the issues and a vague sense of what experts say, we would be very brave to assume that we have offered real insight for experts. Fortune favours the brave, says Machiavelli; but the missing link is *virtù*. The *virtuoso* historian increases their prospects of drawing successful contemporary insights by spending a few days, perhaps a few weeks, engaging with relevant issues and scholarship.

Here, we can adapt a useful methodological tool of contextualist historians. When studying historical authors, one can ask who their audiences were - who they were appealing to or trying to convince - to help us recover their motivations, which in turn helps with many interpretive issues<sup>69</sup>. The flip side of that methodological

<sup>67</sup> M. FRAZER, personal communication, 22 May 2023.

<sup>68</sup> T. BEJAN, *Mere Civility: Disagreement and the Limits of Toleration*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2017, pp. 144-174; R. CARROLL, *Uncivil Mirth: Ridicule in Enlightenment Britain*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2021, pp. 214-219; M. CLARKE, *Machiavelli's Florentine Republic*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2018, pp. 166-170; D. KELLY, *The Propriety of Liberty: Persons, Passions and Judgement in Modern Political Thought*, pp. 259-276; J. MCCORMICK, *Machiavellian Democracy*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011, pp. 170-188; A. SABL, *Hume's Politics*, pp. 229-427.

<sup>69</sup> E.g. J. HANKINS, *Rhetoric, History, and Ideology: the Civic Panegyrics of Leonardo Bruni*, in J. HANKINS (ed), *Renaissance Civic Humanism: Reappraisals and Reflections*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000, pp. 143-178, pp. 156-178.

point applies here. When we seek contemporary insights, it may help to have in mind an audience not only of one's peers, but also of the people one is challenging or seeing to contribute to. Or a more open-minded version of them, if the real ones are too obstinate to accept criticism.

Overall, I worry that there has been too much vainglorious trumpet-blowing about the contemporary value of historical analysis. Such trumpeting is certainly not just done by historians: I have criticised political theorists and philosophers who do the same<sup>70</sup>. We all fall short in such matters, of course<sup>71</sup>. But some of those who are most strident about the contemporary value of history have, I fear, damaged this important cause by making overly bold claims and then, sometimes, falling well short.

Fortunately, we can be optimistic about the future. There have been many successes in using historical texts for contemporary purposes, and we can thus emulate good practice while trying to avoid common pitfalls. But crucially, one needs a flexible mentality: one cannot just make contemporary contributions *as historians*. New generations of historians must escape the mind-forged manacles of disciplinary boundaries. When we move from history to political theory, or political science, or philosophy, we need to think at least partly like a political theorist, a political scientist, or a philosopher. This is a crucial aspect of what it means to do our thinking for ourselves.

<sup>70</sup> A. BLAU, *book review*, «History of Political Thought», 36, 2/2015, pp. 390-394.

<sup>71</sup> For those who want to take aim at my own attempt to draw contemporary insights from the history of political thought, see A. BLAU, *Cognitive Corruption and Deliberative Democracy*, «Social Philosophy and Policy», 35, 2/2018, pp. 198-220.



«It is good to study what we are interested in»:  
Response to Professor Cadeddu.

Alexandra Chadwick

I thank Professor Cadeddu for the opportunity to respond to his thought-provoking piece, which is itself a response to two recent discussions of the current state of the discipline of the history of political thought. The main issue Cadeddu identifies is that of «scholar's interest», and it is this theme to which I would like to address my remarks. In particular, I consider Cadeddu's claim that «it is good to study what we are interested in, not what we should study to align ourselves with a current cultural trend»<sup>1</sup>.

The claim arises in a discussion of the “canon”, and calls to “expand”, “decolonise”, and even “reject” it. Cadeddu is concerned that «the need to respect the individual freedom of choice and interest» is not sufficiently considered. The specific, practical effect Cadeddu is worried about, I take it, is that opportunities for scholarship on well-known texts and authors will be limited (perhaps even discouraged), by a research agenda which aims, for “political reasons”, to shift focus away from “western male” thinkers<sup>2</sup>. The wider, underlying, claim is that the research agendas of scholars should not be driven by the priorities and preferences of a particular society (or part of it) at a particular moment in time.

Two responses to Cadeddu's distinction between scholarly interest and “cultural trend[s]” come to mind. First, that it builds up a false dichotomy. Scholarly interests do not arise in a vacuum: the texts and themes we find interesting, and the ways in which we interpret them are bound to be influenced by the contexts in which we, the readers, are formed. I presume, then, that the problem Cadeddu sees is that there is something about the priorities and preferences dominating contemporary scholarship which – contrary to the stated aim of “expanding” the sources and contexts with which we engage – actually contract and constrain the opportunities for historical work, by removing possibilities for research in well-known and much-studied areas.

Whether and how such a worry is justified with regard to current scholarship in the history of political thought is an empirical question that I cannot answer. However, as a general point it seems not unreasonable that all professional research – that is, research which is not funded by the researcher's own money – should be able to make the case that it is of interest not only to the researcher, but also to others. This is not at all to say that the only research that should be funded is that

<sup>1</sup> D. CADEDU, *Trusting the Process: Current Fashions in the History of Political Thought*, «Scienza & Politica. Per una storia delle dottrine», in this issue, pp. 239-250, p. 248.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*.



which speaks to a society's immediate concerns (which would be a recipe for solipsism and short-sightedness), but rather that the scholar's interest is not justification enough. Those of us who work on canonical authors ought to be able to explain why, for example, yet another piece of research about Thomas Hobbes is worth funding, to the same extent that work on lesser-known figures should be justified by reference to something other than the mere fact that they are less known.

This leads me to my second response to Cadeddu's distinction. To speak of «align[ing] ourselves with a current cultural trend» implies that research outside the canon will not always be driven by genuine interest – understood as «curiosity about a person or thing» – but interest in another sense: that of «benefit, profit, advantage»<sup>3</sup>. On the one hand, it seems unlikely that calls to expand the canon are not grounded in curiosity: how can we fail to be curious about lesser-studied thinkers and ideas? But on the other, if research outside the canon is automatically valued above work on well-known thinkers and themes, there is perhaps the worry that researchers – especially early career researchers, who must compete for jobs and grants – are funneled into projects which they would not otherwise have chosen. To find this problematic one need not agree with Cadeddu that «individual freedom of choice and interest» is inherently worthy of respect<sup>4</sup>, nor even that it can exist, separate from cultural trends, to the extent to which he suggests. Rather, one need only acknowledge that it risks researchers beginning projects they are not best placed to complete, and abandoning research which would build on their existing knowledge and experience.

In this regard the warning with which Charette and Skjönsberg conclude their article seems particularly important: «as (Western) historians move beyond the west, they have even more reason to stay conscious of their own limits, cultural and linguistic, when posing questions to the past»<sup>5</sup>. These limitations mean that successful attempts to expand the canon geographically will require collaboration, and time. For many of us, at least, institutional conditions do not favour slow research and co-authored “outputs”. So, even if we have a genuine curiosity in moving “beyond the west” – a “legitimate interest” to use Cadeddu's term<sup>6</sup> – it is unlikely we will be able to pursue it effectively, unless the material conditions in which we carry out our research allow and encourage collaborations with scholars from different contexts and backgrounds, whose input would inevitably enrich current scholarly parameters, and increase our understanding of our position in the global intellectual landscape<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, accessed online 18.5.23 <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/97735?rskey=INHSYJ&result=1#eid>.

<sup>4</sup> D. CADEDDU, *Trusting the Process*, p. 248.

<sup>5</sup> D. CHARETTE – M. SKJÖNSBERG, *State of the Field: The History of Political Thought*, «History», 105, 366/2021, pp. 470–483.

<sup>6</sup> D. CADEDDU, *Trusting the Process*, p. 245.

<sup>7</sup> I am grateful to Oberto Marrama for discussion of these points.



## The Redemptive Possibilities of Historical Political Theory

Duncan Kelly

Davide Cadeddu's reflection upon the relationship between political theory and the history of political thought is an iterative intervention<sup>1</sup>. It begins by building on one recent stock-taking of the "state of the field" in current debates about the history of political thought, which poses the challenge to numerous of the "canonical" texts and contexts from Euro-American political thought, of the global or transnational quality of those ideas and texts, so often left out of earlier discussions. But what if we leave the texts and questions of their globalization or non-globalization, and ask why it is there might be some well-considered need for a more global or globalized history of political thought. Here, the answer begins to fragment. Obviously, the turn to a "global" history is itself laced with often provincialized and provincializing assumptions. Models of world history as *Weltgeschichte*, the coming to terms with itself of the dialectical play of reason or spirit moving through history, looking at its evolution in the rear-view mirror, is a guiding thread of Hegel's speculative philosophy. Nevertheless it presumed a hierarchy of orders within an internationalized system of politics and commerce, and pushed the development of world history into a particular direction; and while it might be possible to reconstruct Hegel's thought without this theological teleology, whether in Marxist or non-Marxist variations, it certainly presumed to make all those under the apex of its European civilizational hierarchy into conscripts of a modernity as irresistible as it was exclusionary. Redemption narratives of political thought that took these documents of civilizational progress as simultaneously the documenting of histories of barbarism, are well-known, particularly in the Jewish-messianic forms of quasi libertarian Marxism, like that associated with Walter Benjamin. There is nothing intrinsically progressive, other than in a literally directive sense, about globalizing the histories of political thought without also simultaneously provincializing them. Otherwise, there is no horizon beyond the ideological coordinates of either liberalism or socialism, an obviously limiting presumption, as anti-colonial and post-colonial critics have long made central.

Yet this was also, in different ways, behind some of the themes that structured the dramatic disciplinary reconstruction of the history of political thought undertaken by those loosely curated as the "Cambridge School" in the period of decolonization. While not seemingly driven by anything akin to a post-colonial agenda, though for some interpreters, perhaps connected more to a context of British

<sup>1</sup> D. CADEDU, *Trusting the Process: Current Fashions in the History of Political Thought*, «Scienza & Politica. Per una storia delle dottrine», in this issue, pp. 239-250.

imperial decline than is usually considered in the by now vast literature on the methodology of historical approaches to political thought, the need to reconstruct an historical approach that could get beyond the utopias of liberalism or socialism was clearly central to the work of many of those who have been either centrally, or loosely, associated with the nomenclature of the approach. It was also central to the evolving, post-1968 revival of a distinctively Italian (well, Piedmontese) tradition in the history of ideas by Arnaldo Momigliano, and latterly Carlo Ginzburg, where structural claims and conceptual histories combined to outmanoeuvre ideological simplifications, and which also suggested that the history of ideas might carry the most potent impact, if it studied the most alien, most distant, moments, persons, and periods<sup>2</sup>.

What then might it mean for historical forms of political theory in these modes, to carry something akin to a «redemptive charge»? This terminology comes from a recent essay by John Dunn on the pressing need for a global history of political thought in a world of huge inequality, exclusionary solidarities, and climate crises across the many different parts of the world. And it offers Davide Cadeddu another way into this kind of question in several ways. First, by wondering about the relationship between histories of political thought and contemporary political theory. Here, two remarks are worth making. One suggests that the relationship is presentist and personal; the political theorist in the present chooses their values to the extent that they are consciously able to, and then uses the history of political thought to explore the resonances of those ideas in the past, that may remain tractable or viable in the contemporary moment, whether as critique, potentiality, or diagnostic. Another suggests that there is little significant difference, structurally speaking, between political theory and the history of political thought, in that debate about what political theory is today, and how it is constituted, must be simultaneously structured through its own historical self-consciousness. How arguments are put together, how they came to be, what in them makes certain kinds of orders normatively desirable or structurally orienting, focuses in the present upon similar problem spaces or predicaments that histories of political thinking embodied in the past. Here, one must engage in a continuous act of interpretation (as thick description even), as precisely the activity through which meaning, in this case political meaning, is constructed and made usable. How might this carry a redemptive charge? Well perhaps we might find buried treasure, paths not taken. That is one, by now, rather common view, though with a distinctive bite; namely, that by so doing it is possible to find a kind of distance from the present, from what is all too easily naturalised (at least under the modern ideological forms of socialism, liberalism, or more

<sup>2</sup> Cf. E. PERREAU-SAUSSINE, *Quentin Skinner in Context*, «Review of Politics», 69, 1/2007, pp. 106-122; A. MOMIGLIANO, *A Piedmontese View of the History of Ideas*, in A. MOMIGLIANO, *Essays in Ancient and Modern Historiography*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1977, pp. 1-9, pp. 4-6.



broadly capitalism), and be reminded that such political and economic coordinates are in fact artificially constructed, historically contingent, and therefore changeable by human beings. In another, more obviously pressing way, it might suggest the possibility of redemption for misdeeds, mistakes, and misfortune, both intended and unintended.

More particularly, this might be among the most important possibilities in a period of climate catastrophe, where a global history of political thought could hold a redemptive charge powerful enough to carry through into forms of political understanding that might route plausible trajectories through the myriad challenges of planetary habitability for global politics. This is not, however, where much historical political theory has developed. Perhaps it should. In the hands of Jonathan Lear, for example, it is made to ask questions as to the possibility of a form of radical hope in the face of cultural devastation, or of an understanding of mourning as part of the fabric of living with and through generosity. These are driving questions connecting psychoanalysis, history, and philosophy, and political theory needs to take them seriously. Considering the possibility of ethical life following cultural devastation in and of certain indigenous communities, or seeking a psychically healthy use of the imagination in the face of an increasingly uninhabitable planet, makes use of a distinctively human capacity to reflect upon our own actions as agents of change, allied to the reality of mourning as a creative, continuous, response to the interplay of worldly living on a singular planet whose habitability we need, but which comes with no reciprocity or embodied connections<sup>3</sup>. In so doing, we may be minded to seek out exemplary exemplars able to provide us with guides to living well amid catastrophe, chaos, and crisis, as well as exemplary episodes or diagnoses from past political thought to at the very least remind us of the complexities and possibilities of politics then, as well as now.

The redemptive charge of exemplarity is one way in which past political ideas have been brought to bear on the dissonant experience of there being many “worlds”, but only one “planet”, through which human habitability and developmental globalization have intertwined. In his pioneering writings on the dissonance between a singular planet whose earth systems render human life habitable, with the many different worlds that exist within the globe and which are part and parcel of uneven and unequal histories of capitalism, climate, and decolonisation, Dipesh Chakrabarty has revived certain themes from Kant to Arendt via Heidegger among others, to construct a negative universal history, whose philosophical anthropology might redeem an older idea of progress as enlightenment. Tracing the ways in which

<sup>3</sup> J. LEAR, *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2015; J. LEAR, *Imagining the End. Mourning and Ethical Life*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2022, esp. pp. 62ff.

earth systems scientists have shifted our sense of the planetary in relation to wider systems, has altered the ways in which historians see the earth and its global histories. This climate parallax, it seems, is part of an ongoing process or shifting boundary condition in which debates about the Anthropocene or its others takes place, and where the various political choices open to those in the “critical zone” of habitable planetary boundaries, are fought over<sup>4</sup>. These might range from the presumptive forms of sovereignty or anti-sovereignty based politics outlined by Geoff Mann and Joel Wainwright, through to the dynamics of boundary politics and making kin with other forms of life<sup>5</sup>.

An environmental history of political thought suggests way towards a reckoning with the ways in which past, and present, of those often within the Euro-American canon of the subject did in fact have a stronger awareness than typically presented, of the ecological and energy-dependent foundations of their claims about what freedom required, and how far (or not) it could extend outwards from domestic, into international space. For Pierre Charbonnier in recent writing, this suggests a powerful genealogy of the necessary interplay between affluence or abundance, and political liberty, as it has come to be understood, in the hope of reviving a more “natural” foundation for thinking about such questions beyond market societies only. This might both provide space for as yet unidentified forms of critique, but also shows how a long-thread, part of which braids Grotius (on land), with Proudhon (on labour), into the democratic present (via Tocqueville) and the post-war political economy of the great acceleration, unfolded into a necessary (and necessarily imperial) dialectic, whereby autonomy and extraction were normalised as the economic and scarcity-driven foundations of domestic liberty. To revive a conception of autonomy without affluence will need major reform of mainstream political concepts, to say nothing of mainstream politics<sup>6</sup>. Indeed, recognizing the power of political ideas to transform our present, and in turn to be shaped by them, is necessarily an historical and contemporary activity at the same time. To this end, perhaps, there really is not so significant a distinction between political theory in the present, and the history of political thought that lies behind it, as is so often presumed. For if globalization has sent us stumbling into the realm of the planetary, global histories of political theory offer one structural route to possible political redemption in the guise of political education or judgment. As John Maynard Keynes, an earlier member of the first-generation “Cambridge School” noted, while the problems of modern politics are shaped by economic ideas and structures (and therefore also

<sup>4</sup> D. CHAKRABARTY, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2021; D. CHAKRABARTY, *One Planet, Many Worlds: The Climate Parallax*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2023. Cf. B. LATOUR – P. WEIBEL (eds), *Critical Zones: The Science and Politics of Landing on Earth*, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 2020.

<sup>5</sup> G. MANN – J. WAINWRIGHT, *Climate Leviathan*, London, Verso, 2019; D. HARAWAY, *Staying with the Trouble*, Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2016.

<sup>6</sup> P. CHARBONNIER, *Affluence and Freedom. An Environmental History of Political Ideas*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2021, p. 85, p. 90, p. 246.



ecological ones), those who have power in the present rarely understand where those ideas come from. Measuring the distance between past and present by changing the position of the observer, challenging the nostrums of public rhetoric in favour of an historical focus on political possibility, has always been one way of speaking truths to such ignorant forms of power. Now, more than ever, the distant and the intimate are measured against one another too, through the climate parallax. And it is this changed angle of vision that seems to dangle redemption in front of our noses, if only we can help mourn some of the worlds we have lost, by providing hope for some more generous futures. A more humanly demanding task for historians of political thought is hard to even imagine.





Some Thoughts on *Trusting the Process*.

David Leopold

I am very happy to accept Davide Cadeddu's invitation to offer some brief comments on *Trusting the Process*<sup>1</sup>. I do so in the same spirit that he evokes in his own reflections on two recent surveys of the "state of the field" in the history of political thought; namely, that it can be fruitful to "reason in dialogue", not least when we don't restrict our comments to points at which we might all agree.

I begin, however, with a clarification. Cadeddu's discussion is driven by an engagement with those recent surveys – a short book by Richard Whatmore, and an article by Danielle Charette and Max Skjönsberg<sup>2</sup>. However, in an attempt to avoid a problematic regress, or at least to mitigate against unnecessary complexity, my own comments are largely restricted to Cadeddu's own reflections. I will not be much concerned here – at least, not directly – with the two surveys that provoked those reflections.

In what follow, I engage briefly with four issues raised in *Trusting the Process*. Broadly speaking these concern: the parochial character of some discussions of method in the Anglophone literature; some tensions between scholarship and intellectual fashion; the relationship between the history of political thought and political theory; and the idea of the canon.

First, I welcome Cadeddu's reminder that the Anglosphere is not Europe. Framed like that, it might sound as if I am making an obvious point, or, worse still, being facetious. Neither is the case. The thought may appear obvious, and yet it is, at least in practice, serially neglected or ignored in much of the English-language literature on these topics. For example, accounts of the development of methods and approaches in the history of political thought often seem to assume that before the so-called Cambridge School – from now on I take the "so-called" as read – the world only contained "presentists" (who imagine that historical authors are simply giving different answers to the same perennial questions), Marxists (who reduce political ideas and arguments to class interests), and Straussians (who search for, and of course find, esoteric lessons hidden in the texts alone). The reminder that this is both parochial and implausible is gently made – Cadeddu mentions Federico Chabod and Gennaro Sasso almost in passing – but the point is a powerful and important one. German and Italian audiences, familiar with the historicist traditions

<sup>1</sup> D. CADEDU, *Trusting the Process: Current Fashions in History of Political Thought*, «Scienza & Politica. Per una storia delle dottrine», in this issue, pp. 239-250.

<sup>2</sup> R. WHATMORE, *The History of Political Thought: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2021; and D. CHARETTE – M. SKJÖNSBERG, *State of the Field: The History of Political Thought*, «History. The Journal of the Historical Association», 105, 366/2020, pp. 470-483.



in their respective national cultures, might rightly wonder at their exclusion from many of the broad historical narratives sketched in the English-language literature. Alongside the parochialism and implausibility, there is also, as Cadeddu notes, a nice historical irony here. After all, the context of the Cambridge contextualists themselves confirms the benefit of broadening these linguistic and cultural horizons, since the influence of Benedetto Croce on R. G. Collingwood might seem to form an important part of any account of the early methodological views of Quentin Skinner (the latter's debts to Collingwood being personally acknowledged and widely recognised).

Second, I am sympathetic to some of what I read as Cadeddu's resistance to the lure of intellectual fashion, and his related insistence on the value of scholars pursuing the authors and texts that engage them most. In my own field (political theory), the spectacle of a new generation of graduate students rushing into exactly the same voguish subject space, somehow all simultaneously convinced that this is where the action is, is not always an edifying one. The relevant (once-neglected-now-fashionable) issues might well be important and interesting, but it seems unlikely that everyone just happens to be suddenly and simultaneously engaged in an authentic and autonomous manner by the same subject matter (which just happens to be the next big thing). In short, a problematic pressure to conform can be found, not only in the familiar tyranny of the status quo, but also in the more seductive lure of fashion. Cadeddu is surely right to value the scholarly freedom to follow one's own interests, fashionable or not. I share the conviction that knowledge and understanding are often advanced by individual scholars ploughing their own furrows, and that desirable scholarly communities respect pluralism and dissent in theory and practice. Of course, that resistance to fashion can be expressed in a reactionary manner, but it seems unlikely that the proper celebration of dissidence and non-conformity is a threat to progressive values.

Those two observations concern issues where I find myself broadly sympathetic to Cadeddu's remarks. I turn now to two points of possible disagreement; two places where I am perhaps a little more skeptical of, or a little less enthusiastic about his comments.

Third, the observations about the relation between the history of political thought and political theory in *Trusting the Process* are, in places, a little abbreviated and unclear to me. Part of the problem may just be that contextually people mean very different things by "political theory". I agree that that the relation between the history of political thought and political theory is «complex and problematic» as well as unavoidable<sup>3</sup>. However, given both the shifting disciplinary divides here, and the scalar nature of porosity (that it admits of degrees), I am not minded to share Cadeddu's resistance to the suggestion that the relationship between the

<sup>3</sup> D. CADEDU, *Trusting the Process*, p. 250.



history of political thought and political theory is increasingly «porous»<sup>1</sup>. I also think it is important to say a little more about both the nature of that complexity, and the possible benefits of attending to it. Not least, as will become apparent, I think that those benefits run, so to speak, in both directions. Cadeddu is surely right to suggest that historians of political thought have normative commitments, awareness of which can help explain their having an interest in particular texts or contexts. However, there might be other benefits here as well. For instance, critical reflection on their own political values and philosophical assumptions might alert historians to the salience of certain interpretative blind spots. Consider, for example, the reflective and self-conscious atheist who recognises that they might *consequently* have to work much harder at uncovering the power of religious arguments in the context of, say, Early Modern Europe. The benefits of recognising some of the many connections here can also flow in the other direction. Contemporary anglophone political philosophy, for instance, is obviously itself a historical product, and practitioners actively aware of that fact are perhaps more likely to be alert, both to the possibility of questionable assumptions and arguments that the contemporary discipline might otherwise take for granted, and to the existence of alternative historical approaches that might offer some illumination of their own subject matter. The past offers a rich repository of unfamiliar and innovative ideas, and some exposure to that material can be of great benefit to even the most historically “unmusical” of political theorists. By way of a slightly flippant provocation to students resisting this thought, I have been known to rehearse my own conviction that G. W. F. Hegel is smarter than anyone who has an article in the next issue of «Philosophy & Public Affairs».

Fourth, and finally, I think I find myself more relaxed than Cadeddu, about certain kinds of egalitarian challenges to the idea of the canon. The issues here are complex, but a few remarks might suggest at least something of my views. It is important to recognise that these kinds of challenge do not have to involve, or encourage, a misrepresentation of the past. For example, drawing attention to the misogynist or colonial context of, say, nineteenth-century liberalism, can rather be a way of identifying a historical feature that was in danger of not being fully appreciated and understood. More generally, attempts to expand the canon can involve appeals to entirely appropriate criteria for inclusion; challenging the authoritative standing of particular authors and texts is precisely how worthwhile canons get to be established and kept alive. There is no single canon, but rather many different contenders extending across time and culture, and the worthwhile examples have always been pluralistic and open-ended. Attempts to challenge and contest the inclusion of some, and the exclusion of others, look to be a central element in developing

<sup>1</sup> D. CHARETTE – M. SKJÖNSBERG, *State of the Field*, p. 475.

and delivering on claims that these narratives offer complexity and insight. Such challenges can be a sign of health, the contemporary form taken by the serious and ever-evolving effort to work out just which and who the more «complex» and «interesting» texts and authors are<sup>5</sup>. Finally, I offer some reassurance to a continuing sceptic, by way of an example. In Britain and North America around 1900 it was blindingly obvious to contemporaries that Henry George was a political and philosophical giant whose place in the canon of the history of political thought was assured. A hundred years later, most students I ask have either never heard of him, or would struggle to attach a text or a thought to the name. In short, the difficulties involved in predicting, let alone engineering, changes to the canon should not be underestimated.

<sup>5</sup> D. CAEDDU, *Trusting the Process*, p. 250.



## Response to Davide Cadeddu *Trusting the Process*

Peter Burke

I have never been a historian of political thought, although I would describe myself as an intellectual historian (indeed, a former member of the “Sussex School”). Like other history students at Oxford, I took a compulsory course in the history of political thought (notably Aristotle, Hobbes and Rousseau) in the 1950s. I also taught a course in the subject at Cambridge in the 1980s. For this reason, I think about the subject from the perspective of teaching rather than research.

From this point of view, I disagree with Davide Cadeddu’s dismissal of a global history of political thought. I agree with Professor Cadeddu that researchers should be allowed to choose their own topics, just as I agree with his fear that many Anglo-phone scholars in the field seem to ignore contributions to it in other languages, even by major figures such as Chabod, Meinecke or Masao Maruyama.

On the other hand, I am closer to John Dunn in sensing a need for a global turn in teaching political thought, especially 20<sup>th</sup>-century thought, expanding the canon to include figures such as Fanon, Gandhi, Qutb and Mao, to prepare students for life in a globalizing world. Hence the figures just mentioned were chosen on the historical grounds of their impact on the world rather than the philosophical grounds of their originality.

Turning now to “context”, this idea, as Professor Cadeddu notes, is much older than its use by Quentin Skinner in 1969, and as Cadeddu also notes, it has a number of meanings, ranging from the sentences immediately preceding and following a given text to the grander and vaguer ideas of “social”, “political” or “intellectual” contexts<sup>1</sup>. Needless to say, Skinner’s article should itself be placed in context, that of a historian’s reaction against the way that political writings were presented as virtually timeless in textbooks on political thought written by American philosophers or political scientists for their students<sup>2</sup>.

A similar reaction against timelessness was expressed by Arthur Lovejoy and his colleagues when they founded *The Journal of the History of Ideas* in 1940. Originally a multidisciplinary journal with contributions from philosophers (including Lovejoy himself), historians and literary critics, the JHI has become, in our age of increasing specialization, the organ of a new discipline, “history of ideas” or

<sup>1</sup> Q. SKINNER, *Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas*, «History & Theory», 8/1969, pp. 1-53; P. BURKE, *Context in Context*, «Common Knowledge», 8, 1/2002, pp. 152-77.

<sup>2</sup> A well-known example is G. SABINE, *A History of Political Theory*, London, G.G. Harrap & Co, first published in 1937 but often reprinted.

“intellectual history”, which has taken institutional form in academic courses, chairs, societies and more journals.

Since the “Sussex School” has already been mentioned, it may be of interest to set down a few memories before they disappear. In 1962, I was appointed an Assistant Lecturer in History at the new University of Sussex. I thought of myself simply as a historian, but I thought that it might be interesting to set up a one-year MA in the History of Ideas. I mentioned this to Asa Briggs, the senior historian at Sussex (where there were no departments) and he immediately told me to go ahead.

Some colleagues expressed interest in teaching the course: the philosopher Michael Moran, the sociologist Hellmut Pappé, the economist Donald Winch, the classicist James Shiel and the historian John Burrow. A few years later, when “subject groups” were established at the suggestion of a firm of consultants (McKinsey), our group needed to choose a name. After a brief discussion we chose “intellectual history”, recommended by Burrow because it implied that other historians were unintellectual!



## A Response to Professor Cadeddu

Richard Whatmore

Something of a chill goes down my spine when I discover that a leading expert in the history of political thought has anything to say about *A Very Short Introduction*. The reason is that rather than being intended as a survey of the field or a substantial intervention into questions of the nature of the discipline and the various tribes comprising it, the *Very Short Introduction* was planned to be what it says on the tin, an introduction. The objective of the book was and remains to give new readers a sense of what the discipline entails, and ideally hook them into the subject, rather than impress people who already know precisely what they are doing. But, of course, even a basic introduction expresses an author's views. When reading Professor Cadeddu's comments I found myself almost always in agreement, and indeed surprised that I had been so sloppy in my utterances. But I also want to defend myself, at least a little. Here goes.

Let me start with canons of authors and texts. They are entirely natural and indeed inevitable for all of us as we, as teachers above all, decide what is worth reading, what is vital, and whose work ought to be recommended to guide the following generation. And the HPT canon has to include Quentin Skinner, John Pocock, Franco Venturi and Judith Shklar while debating the inclusion of others such as Istvan Hont, Hanna Fenichel Pitkin or Pierre Rosanvallon, just as that of a generation earlier might have included Leo Strauss, Hannah Arendt, Raymond Aron, Peter Gay, Isaiah Berlin and Peter Laslett or, depending on your political stance, Jacob Talmon or C. B. Macpherson. And there are always alternative canons, perhaps including for scholars in the US Lynn Hunt, Keith-Michael Baker or Joyce Appleby, and new canons, which might include Nadia Urbinati or scholarship inspired by Foucault. Most of these names could be replaced and contested.

And if you study the history of political thought you realise that canons of authors and texts tend to be arbitrary and forever shifting. An author deemed canonical themselves changes their identity, often in line with the texts of that author deemed canonical. This can be said above all of Marx, with the sometime humanist of the West and the sometime Bolshevik of the East, but another example is Hobbes, known for centuries mainly through the French translation of *De Cive* by Samuel Sorbière, rather than *Leviathan* commented upon everywhere today. Rousseau, for example, knew *De Cive* but not *Leviathan*. There have been times when there was a reasonably clear sense of a canon in particular countries or regions, from ancients to moderns, often in times of calm rather than crisis, an example

being the end of the nineteenth and the early twentieth century. Then, however, with the First World War and after, everything shifted, and then again after the Second World War, and now afresh with the new or not-so-new social movements of the present. An example is the burgeoning interest in Hannah Arendt, not included in *The Cambridge History of Twentieth-Century Political Thought* published in 2008, but now facilitating the blooming of a thousand PhD theses. An earlier example is Pufendorf, as influential as any figure in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and largely dismissed in the nineteenth and twentieth. For Pufendorf, however, things are currently improving<sup>1</sup>.

One of the great achievements of Quentin Skinner has been the success of his argument that canonical texts are nothing in isolation. Philosophers get everything wrong by reading the significant text alone. That you can only understand any text by reference to those around it, is an insight that has largely been carried through and to some extent defines the practice of the history of political thought today. And this leads me to a second point of Professor Cadeddu's, which is that the *Very Short Introduction* gets the history of the history of political thought wrong because in Italy or elsewhere the discipline has a history which I neglect in my Anglocentric account. But the point was made early in the book that every nation writes its own disciplinary history and that there are national histories of political thought everywhere, the lineage of which depends on the nation in question. The key fact I'll defend is that the earlier disciplinary histories, everywhere, were different to those that emerged after the work of Skinner, Dunn, Pocock, Venturi, Shklar and others, who began to define themselves as historians of political thought and to create groupings of fellow scholars who had similar identities in their own institutions. Academics are tribal and I don't think this had happened before. If it had, it was without the emphasis upon getting the history right. Of course, every scholar is unique and if we compare Shklar and Skinner, despite their longstanding friendship, there were numerous methodological tensions (entirely normal too).

And Skinner's and Pocock's emphasis upon getting the history right was a response ultimately to the Second World War; I think the history of political thought is indelibly connected with the outcome of the war and its aftermath, when the USA proved different to its British predecessor as a superpower. To put it simply, political thought before World War One in Europe was sometimes optimistic, producing histories akin to the Scottish accounts of the progress from rudeness to refinement. It also tended to be conducted by people who did not think of themselves primarily or even secondarily as historians of political thought. The identity emerged, unsurprisingly, with the words and phrases, with the award of chairs in the history of political thought. Names used matter.

<sup>1</sup> K. HAAKONSEN – I. HUNTER (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Pufendorf*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2022.



Let me give an example. One of the most influential historians of political thought in the first half of the twentieth century in Britain was Ernest Barker, renowned for his work on Plato and Aristotle. Barker was the son of a miner turned farm-labourer, whose remarkable mother pushed him to gain a scholarship at Manchester Grammar School. Oxford followed, where he read classical moderations in 1895, followed by *literae humaniores*, known as “Greats”, in 1897, and then Modern History in 1898. Lectureships in modern history at Oxford followed, although Barker’s classical interests led to his first monographs, and he moved between faculties rather like intellectual historians today. Rather than intellectual history defining his identity or the history of political thought, it was “Greats” he related in his autobiography, that generated a cross-disciplinary spirit and sense of intellectual mission.

At the beginning of World War One Barker was approached to write about the history of political thought for a more general audience. Barker’s *Political Thought in England 1848 to 1914* appeared as part of the Home University Library of Modern Knowledge, edited by the Oxford historian H. A. L. Fisher, Gilbert Murray the classicist and J. Arthur Thomson, the expert on corals. The book was first published 1915 with 7 reprintings up to 1927, a 2<sup>nd</sup> edition in 1928, and a 3<sup>rd</sup> impression in 1932. Barker covered the Idealist School of T. H. Green, F. H. Bradley and Bernard Bosanquet, the Scientific School of Herbert Spencer, in addition to lawyers and political thought, the political theory of literature, and economics and politics. Ultimately, the work was optimistic, describing a series of debates about reforming the modern state to better suit the needs of diverse and geographically distant populations. The sense of a public good that could be defined for everyone pervaded the book.

Barker was both an Idealist and a Liberal, appreciative of the associations that had been so crucial to Britain’s distinctive development but sceptical of an excessive reliance upon them as sources of solutions to all problems. Like so many of his generation, Barker had been inspired by F. W. Maitland’s Ford Lectures of 1897, on the subject of “Township and borough”, which introduced Otto von Gierke, the German jurist and exponent of pluralism, to a British audience. Yet when, thirty years later, Barker himself translated another part of Gierke’s *Genossenschaftsrecht* as *Natural Law and the Theory of Society* (1934), he was far less positive about associations and their capacity to operate in conjunction with the state in conditions of liberty and harmony. Barker’s world had shattered with the First World War and he was unable to add anything, he reported, to his *Political Thought in England 1848 to 1914* while acknowledging in subsequent editions that anyone who read it would recognise that so much in political thought had changed. How Barker tried and to a large extent failed to put the Humpty Dumpty of late nineteenth-century



notions of public good back together, using the glue of political thought, is recounted in the outstanding work of Julia Stapleton<sup>2</sup>. Barker was appointed Professor of Political Science in Cambridge from 1928, the first holder of the chair established by the Rockefeller Foundation. He began to contribute to courses in the history of political thought first established by John Robert Seeley in the nineteenth century. Yet Barker would never have called himself a historian of political thought but rather a historian of culture and civilization, a person whose identity was at one with the legacy of his education in “Greats”<sup>3</sup>.

In the 1940s Barker wrote more about the British Empire, part of a broad reflection by public intellectuals on the nature of Englishness and the likely future of Britain if the war was won. He published a book in 1941 called *The Ideas and Ideals of the British Empire*. *Ideas and Ideals* commenced with an epigraph from the 1926 Balfour Committee of the Imperial Conference on inter-imperial relations, stating that “The British Empire is not founded upon negations. It depends essentially, if not formally, on positive ideals. Free institutions are its life blood. Free co-operation is its instrument. Peace, security and progress are among its objectives”<sup>4</sup>. Barker hoped that the empire might remain intact while changing its structure to challenge metropolitan and British dominion. He had been supporting the idea of confederations of nations to maintain peace since 1918<sup>5</sup>. But a sense of having his world rocked and the loss of an ability to see into the future marked Barker’s last years. Despite the victory of the allies over the Nazis in World War Two, the idea that opportunities existed to create a better world was rejected by him. “Greats” was no longer enough.

Barker was convinced that Britain had played a major role in the past life of Europe and the world and that in consequence British political thought mattered. He also believed that little identifiably British was going to shape the future. Here he clashed with a F. A. Hayek, a scholar who had a similar view of Britain but for whom the post-1945 intellectual mission was much clearer. Hayek’s *The Road to Serfdom* published in 1943 was also a reflection upon Britain. In Hayek’s view the tragedy of the twentieth century was what he termed a reversal of the direction of ideas which had been dominant across Europe for the past 200 years. The tragedy was that liberalism, which grew in conjunction with British power and cultural influence, had been challenged by German ideas and culture. The result was the horrors of the twentieth century. Hayek wrote with exceptional clarity and is worth quoting him at length in consequence:

<sup>2</sup> J. STAPLETON, *Englishness and the Study of Politics: The Social and Political Thought of Ernest Barker*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994.

<sup>3</sup> E. BARKER, *Traditions of Civility*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1948.

<sup>4</sup> E. BARKER, *Ideas and Ideals*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1951, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.

<sup>5</sup> E. BARKER, *A Confederation of the Nations, Its Powers and Constitution*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1918.



For over two hundred years English ideas had been spreading eastwards. The rule of freedom which had been achieved in England seemed destined to spread throughout the world. By about 1870 the reign of these ideas had probably reached its easternmost expansion. From then onwards it began to retreat and a different set of ideas, not really new but very old, began to advance from the East. England lost her intellectual leadership in the political and social sphere and became an importer of ideas. For the next sixty years Germany became the centre from which the ideas destined to govern the world in the twentieth century spread east and west. Whether it was Hegel or Marx, List or Schmoller, Sombart or Mannheim, whether it was socialism in its more radical form or merely “organisation” or “planning” of a less radical kind, German ideas were everywhere readily imported and German institutions imitated. Almost of the new ideas, and particularly socialism, did not originate in Germany, it was in Germany that they were perfected<sup>6</sup>.

Hayek’s now well-known argument was that fascism in Germany had socialist origins and it was entirely natural that subsequently fascist Germany had the largest socialist party before the First World War. Even in the 1940s, Hayek argued, Russian discussions of socialism commenced where the Germans left off, and the English socialists were foolishly unaware that the questions they were interested in had been discussed by Austrians and Germans in depth between 1875-1925. Socialism was a war on western civilization. Long before the Nazis, socialists in Germany had indicted Western Civilization, no longer defined in the old sense of the Occident but rather as a culture west of the Rhine, defining what was Western as Liberalism, Democracy, Capitalism and Individualism, Free Trade and any form of Internationalism or love of peace<sup>7</sup>. The problem originated in misunderstandings of liberty. German socialists associated liberty with wealth or power, because of the argument that if you lacked either, you were not truly free.

Aspiring to make the world free in this sense necessitated the destruction of liberty, made plain to Hayek in the work of the French socialist standard bearer Claude-Henri de Saint-Simon. Socialists, despite clothing themselves in liberty flags, were closet authoritarians and no place on earth was safe, especially if the collectivist impulses manifest in wartime were maintained into a subsequent peace. Had Hayek read Barker’s *History of Political Thought* – and we know that he did read Barker’s other writings from references in subsequent publications such as *The Constitution of Liberty* (1960) – he would have said that Barker too, in his praise of idealism and the importance of planning, had been infected by the German virus<sup>8</sup>. But was it really German? Contemporaries of Hayek, such as Jacob Peter Mayer, the main editor of *Political Thought. The European Tradition* (1939), more attuned to the history of Catholicism, thought Italy to be the source. Whatever the origin, creating antidotes to the fanatic impulse in European history became the

<sup>6</sup> F. A. HAYEK, *The Road to Serfdom* (1944), London and Henley, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1976, p.16.

<sup>7</sup> *Ivi*, p.17.

<sup>8</sup> It is worth noting that Barker in 1914 published a xenophobic pamphlet, *Nietzsche and Treitschke: the worship of power in modern Germany*, in which he praised Kant, said Hegel was “great” yet too enamoured of state authority, and damned Nietzsche and Treitschke for promoting the doctrine of “power, more power and always power”. He noted that «both were ultimately of Slavonic origin», E. BARKER, *Nietzsche and Treitschke: the Worship of Power in Modern Germany*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1914, pp. 4-5.

mission of the social sciences, and the history of political thought, for Hayek or Mayer and numerous others, was to play a vital role in defining historical alternatives and the paths that might have been taken.

When I wrote about racism, colonialism and other evils in the *Very Short Introduction* the point I wanted to make was that fanaticism is ever-present in European political thought. Hayek's point that fanatics so-often wear liberty caps is of deep significance. But opposition to fanaticism is equally marked and the renaissance in the history of political thought was largely inspired by this, as Professor Cadeddu has made clear in his own writing<sup>9</sup>. One of the most remarkable developments after 1945 was that Jewish scholars, who had suffered the most at the hands of Europe's fascists, tended to be in the vanguard of the study of the history of political thought. Rather than damning the past or moralising about the depths of the evils they had witnessed, sometimes at first hand, many became world experts on figures, such as Rousseau, who were themselves widely identified as the source of the disease of totalitarian democracy. The simple point I want to make is that the history of political thought in the 1950s and 1960s, including the Cambridge School, was part of a reassessment of the causes of the horrors of the twentieth century, in which you studied historical figures in the hope of contributing to the building of antidotes to fascism, Peter Gay's «the party of humanity»<sup>10</sup>.

We are now living in a period in which what counts as fanaticism has been broadened for many social groups. In this process, the history of political thought has to adjust itself to new questions, while being aware that, as always, standard-bearers promising liberty and progress may be false prophets. This is certainly Pocock's view of the global turn. Other developments are unquestionably positive. When I was dealing with my old mentor Donald Winch's papers they included a copy of *The Bulletin*, the University of Sussex newspaper which, for the week ending 5<sup>th</sup> October 1973, gave pictures of every person in a managerial position at the institution, including Winch and the Vice Chancellor Asa Briggs. Legions of men ran the institution and no woman can be found. This revolution is a healthy one, although I am not saying that gender or race or class or any category needs to be reified or directly associated with the public good, to use Barker's old language. My view is that the history of political thought, when undertaken as a historical and contextual exercise, tends to make an individual a radical egalitarian in the sense that humans associated with every characteristic are capable of good and of evil.

One final point. Hayek was not in terms of his sense of self a historian of political thought, but he had evidently undertaken a great deal of work in the field and was singularly insightful. Sticking to disciplinary identifiers is normally fleeting too.

<sup>9</sup> D. CADEDDU, *Julien Benda's Political Europe and the Treason of Intellectuals*, «History of European Ideas», 49, 4/2023, pp. 708-721.

<sup>10</sup> P. GAY, *The Party of Humanity. Essays in the French Enlightenment*, New York, Knopf, 1964.



But I don't think that political philosophy can be undertaken without historical labour, ideally via a version of the history of political thought entirely neglectful of current disciplinary boundaries. The problem for all of us is the turn against history, partly for moral reasons but also because of the ignorant presumption that our technological advances mean the problems of politics are now different. This is why I think the history of political thought is in crisis. One particular worry, which people complain to me about all of the time, is that brilliant scholars working in European history are no longer able to get into the profession. They did things differently in 1945.