

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-13085-1 - British Political Thought in History, Literature and Theory, 1500-1800

Edited by David Armitage

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Introduction

David Armitage

The field of research and teaching known as the history of British political thought has been one of the most fertile areas in anglophone historical scholarship of the last half-century. Its practitioners can be found in universities across the English-speaking world and increasingly beyond it as well. Their writings have provided prescriptions of method as well as models of practice for students of political thought working in other languages and on other political traditions, even those which were founded on different philosophical principles and which have developed along quite distinct historical trajectories.¹ Over the past fifty years, students of British political thought have mapped its contours from the late fifteenth century to the early nineteenth century.² In this enterprise, the term ‘British’ has been construed ever more broadly, to encompass the political reflections of any of the inhabitants of Britain and Ireland, of the migrants who left those islands, and of their descendants who settled around the globe. The history of British political thought is therefore becoming an enterprise almost as expansive in its subject-matter as it has been in its international impact.

For the last twenty years, the study of this history has been associated particularly with the Center for the History of British Political Thought at the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, DC. The Center was founded by J. G. A. Pocock and Gordon Schochet in 1985. In that year, Pocock laid out a vision for its work in a manifesto that was generous geographically, generically and methodologically: ‘The “great texts” of English, Scottish, and American political thought are secure in their places within our program, but at the same time the “history of political thought” we seek is a history of language, literature, publication,

¹ Castiglione and Hampsher-Monk 2001. ² Pocock, Schochet and Schwoerer 1993.

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and audience. It embraces the ephemeral tracts and pamphlets as well as the great texts.³ Since 1985, the Center has pursued this vision through over thirty seminars and conferences out of which more than fifteen books as well as numerous articles and essays have emerged.⁴ The Center's twentieth anniversary in 2005 offered an occasion to review the field's achievements and its prospects from the perspective of the three disciplines where its work has so far had its greatest uptake: history, English literature and political theory. The chapters in this volume arose from that occasion but all aim to transcend a specific moment to reflect more broadly on the disciplinary dialogues that have so far shaped the history of British political thought and that will continue to inform it in future.

The last two decades have witnessed changes in the arguments within academic fields as great as the shifts in the relations among them. For example, at the moment of the Center's founding, the 'linguistic turn' was still a relatively novel (and, for some, anxiety-provoking) move for historians to undertake.⁵ Twenty years later, most historians, especially those who term their interests cultural, social or intellectual history, have absorbed its lessons and can wield its tools without undue anxiety in their search for the meanings of past utterances, acts and events. Similarly, literary scholars who were taking up embattled positions during the so-called 'Theory Wars' of the mid-1980s have now moved on to calmer debates in a period self-consciously described as 'after Theory'.⁶ The so-called 'New' Historicism is no longer quite so new and has become a familiar resource for scholars across a wide range of literatures.⁷ Moreover, in the same period, the social sciences have become more hospitable to interpretive and hermeneutic approaches which complement, but more often counter, positivist models of research.⁸ Historians have thus become more alert to questions of language and meaning at a time when scholars of literature have been more eager to write historically and when at least some social scientists have returned to history and to hermeneutics. Such a moment of convergences across

³ Pocock 1985a, p. 284.

⁴ Schochet, Tatspaugh and Brobeck 1990–93; Peck 1991; Schwoerer 1992; Pocock, Schochet and Schwoerer 1993; Mason 1994a; Robertson 1995a; Burgess 1996; Smith 1998a; Morgan 1999a; Connolly 2000; Ohlmeyer 2000; Mendle 2001.

⁵ Jay 1982; Toews 1987; Pagden 1987b.

⁶ Kastan 1999.

⁷ Gallagher and Greenblatt 2000.

⁸ Skinner 1985; Winch 1990; Scott and Keates 2001.

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disciplinary boundaries bodes well for the future of collaborative work in interdisciplinary fields such as the history of British political thought.

Many of the individual chapters in the volume engage directly with these broad disciplinary developments; taken together, they offer an array of models and methods for the future history of British political thought. Though they are collected in sections that acknowledge the primary disciplinary affiliations of their authors, they all address matters of common concern to students of British political thought. As J. G. A. Pocock, Gordon Schochet and Lois Schwoerer point out in their opening overview, the history of British political thought as it has been practised at the Folger Center and elsewhere arose originally from the concerns of historians but over the past half-century it has been in constant (if not always mutually comprehending) conversation with political theory and it has drawn increasingly on the methods of literary scholarship. It has done so within a broad but bounded chronology running from the decades before the Reformation to the generations after the French Revolution. That both these sets of events were pan-European in scope indicates the ample geography within which the field has developed. A series of exploratory workshops held at the Center in recent years on the networks of political exchange between Britain and Ireland on the one hand and continental Europe on the other has traced that geography; future efforts in this direction may expand the geography yet further. Studies will soon appear of British political thought in predominantly non-anglophone areas (such as South Asia).⁹ Students of British political thought are thus testing the manifold possibilities for globalizing their subject, just as other intellectual historians are beginning to do.¹⁰

For the moment, though, historians of British political thought continue to pursue their work mostly within the lines set by the historiographies of early-modern Britain and Ireland. The four chapters by John Morrill, Colin Kidd, Nicholas Canny and Tim Harris each test the limits of historiographical models for understanding the thought and actions of historical agents, especially those in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Morrill's survey of recent developments in what was once called the 'New' British history offers an array of possible

⁹ For example, Travers forthcoming.

¹⁰ Bayly 2004, chs. 3, 6, 8; compare Schneewind 2005; McGill 2005; Armitage 2006; and Ivison, in this volume.

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approaches, most of which he sees as 'reproduc[ing] distinctive frameworks of reference that can be found in the history itself, such as those he terms 'incorporative', 'federal' and 'perfect', according to the differing conceptions of political union debated during the seventeenth century. If Morrill is somewhat sceptical about much of the history that has been written within such frameworks, Colin Kidd has another solution to offer from within the period itself. He avoids the twin dangers of retrospection and teleology by focusing on what contemporaries themselves would have described as *British* political thought: that is, the so-called 'matter of Britain', 'a distinctive and long-running genre of political argument which debated the location of authority within the island of Britain, or sometimes the British Isles'. Kidd argues that attention to the matter of Britain demands interdisciplinary work but not necessarily the kind that arises when current disciplines adopt one another's questions and procedures. Serious students of early-modern conceptions of the matter of Britain may need to be equipped with a working knowledge of ecclesiology, feudal jurisprudence and heraldry but will be ill-furnished if they borrow tools too readily from toilers in other fields such as political theory.

The place of Ireland and Scotland within the matter of Britain was as vexed a question for contemporaries as it has proved to be for those who study their history. Nicholas Canny's chapter makes this point especially clearly. If *British* political thought is taken as the norm, political thinking conducted within (and about) Ireland comes to seem increasingly anomalous between the mid-sixteenth and the mid-seventeenth centuries: in the earlier period, 'political discourse in Ireland . . . was but a provincial echo of political culture in Britain' but 'that which flourished there a century later was radically different from British norms both in form and in ambition'. However, if placed in the broader context of pan-European political and religious thought, the course of Irish political thinking becomes more comprehensible, not least because Irish political actors were consciously engaged in cosmopolitan conversations that were not confined to Britain and Ireland alone.

As the example of Ireland shows, historians of political thought must accommodate the scope of their inquiries to the scale at which their subjects conducted their arguments, whether that was local, regional, national or transnational. This question of scale is also the problem Tim Harris confronts in his chapter through an examination of political thinking in Britain and Ireland between the Exclusion Crisis of the late 1670s and the immediate aftermath of the Glorious Revolution in the

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early 1690s. Like Kidd, he argues that the questions asked of the past largely determine the answers that come back in return. The ‘Britannic turn’ in early-modern historiography will only provide adequate answers to questions contemporaries themselves viewed in the terms of the Three Kingdoms of Britain and Ireland; such a perspective can reveal patterns otherwise hidden to historians who frame their inquiries nationally but, equally, in many cases the national scale may be a more appropriate level at which to work. ‘Depending on the questions we ask,’ Harris concludes, ‘sometimes the Three-Kingdoms perspective is going to come into sharp focus, at other times the national (or local, or continental) will.’

Scholars of early-modern literature have not confronted such matters of the appropriate geographical scale for their research, at least until recently.¹¹ For many purposes, they have not needed to, because nationally-defined canons of literature have been investigated and interpreted within frameworks of genre, trope, technique and form that have rarely been circumscribed by specific national contexts. Andrew Hadfield’s study of republicanism in early-modern English (meaning ‘English-language’) literature illustrates this point well. He firmly reminds those historians and political theorists who have been interested in recovering the heritage of republicanism that, for most English writers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, republicanism was neither an autonomous political language nor a practical political programme but rather ‘a literary phenomenon . . . because it consisted of a series of stories’, such as the rape of Lucretia, the assassination of Julius Caesar and the rise of Augustus.

All these republican narratives found their way into the work of William Shakespeare, of course, but that does not mean that we should therefore deem him a ‘republican writer’. As Jean Howard shows in her chapter, the dramas which made up the bulk of Shakespeare’s oeuvre did not ‘elaborate a consistent political position’. Indeed, the very fact that many of the techniques of early-modern English drama used dramaturgical principles inherited from the morality plays and were also closely akin to the widely-shared Renaissance rhetorical procedure of arguing *in utramque partem* (on both sides of a question) meant that Shakespeare’s plays could only be vehicles for testing political thinking through what Howard calls ‘embodied representation’. Embodying ideas

¹¹ E.g., Baker and Maley 2002.

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in this way could also have radical implications, as when persons who may generally have lacked political agency within their own society were represented on stage as taking political initiatives, as in *The First Part of the Contention* (2 *Henry VI*). However, such representations do not allow us to call Shakespeare a ‘democratic’ writer, any more than *Henry V* made him an aggressive monarchist, for example.

Historians who study British political thought may also need to be reminded that texts not usually canonized as literary may nonetheless deploy literary techniques. That is the central message of Steven Zwicker’s chapter on the overlapping literary strategies of irony, disguise and deceit found in a wide array of texts including the pungent histories of Tacitus, the elusive poetry of Dryden and the comic drama of Congreve. He argues that historians, interested as they mostly are in discursive and argumentative works, have tended to study the ‘horizontal dimension’ at the expense of the ‘vertical dimension of political languages, their performance at specific moments and under particular strain’. One might restate this by saying that historians of all kinds, and not just historians of political thought, are generally more concerned with the diachronic than with the synchronic dimensions of their subjects. Zwicker argues that greater patience with the seeming instability of literary language and genre can reveal that vertical, synchronic, dimension usually hidden to history.

Conversely, it might seem, Karen O’Brien argues in her study of ideas of imperial liberty and benevolence in the poetry of the long eighteenth century, the diachronic study of literary texts (particularly poetry) may itself uncover not just forms of political thinking but even novel political thoughts that conventional materials of historical research do not contain. She proposes that such ideas emerged from an ‘inter-generic conversation’ in which poets sometimes took the lead. In particular, she shows that conceptions of imperial trusteeship and benevolence, especially as directed towards indigenous peoples around the globe, can be found earlier in the poetry than in the formal prose or much of the political practice of the period. In light of this, historians may need to follow her advice to seek new archives (such as those comprising poetry), while also heeding Zwicker’s counsel to be more aware of – and even to revel in – the very literariness of the materials that make up the richest of those archives.

As we have seen, the diachronic and the synchronic dimensions of political thinking have parallels in differing geographical scales (local or national, national or transnational) on which the history

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of British political thought might be conducted. At the risk of inducing intellectual vertigo, we might add to these intersecting dimensions those of political thought as past action and political theory as a present resource. Here we enter the domain of our third and last suite of chapters, those by students of political theory. Duncan Ivison's experiment in globalizing the history of political thought picks up where Karen O'Brien's study of imperial benevolence leaves off, by implicitly treating the question why such benevolence might have been necessary at all, and what part a seemingly benign language, such as that of subjective (or individual) rights, played in the malevolent spread of empire around the globe. By placing one specifically British manifestation of that language – John Locke's – into histories at once local to the early-modern period and global in extent, Ivison shows that 'history provides a critical resource for surveying the uses of various concepts and theories over time, and especially the conflicts and choices that were made around the concepts and values we now take for granted', such as rights themselves.

A similar concept that can likewise be taken for granted is the separation between public and private on which our conception of rights largely depends. Joanne Wright's chapter shows how misleading it would be – both historically and conceptually – to read back contemporary distinctions between public and private into the past. As Wright acknowledges, the impetus behind inquiries into historical conceptions of the public and the private arose initially from late twentieth-century feminist theory: without present pressures, then, we would not be animated by study past problems. However, as many other chapters in the volume illustrate, the shape and scale of current concerns can only be imposed on the past at the cost of misunderstanding, at best, and conceptual violence, at worst. Yet the gulf between past and present is not unbridgeable. In the case of a writer as acute as Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle, the distance between her concerns and ours can in fact be theoretically salutary: 'we neither share her precise concerns, nor see public and private from her perspective, but her language is not so different from our own that we cannot gain some insight from her analysis'. The fact that Wright's prime example of this is drawn from a literary work – Cavendish's closet-drama, *The Convent of Pleasure* – only affirms the interdisciplinary implications of such an insight.

The gulf between past and present is spanned historically by the transmission of texts and hermeneutically by the analysis of those texts: or, so our last two chapters, by Kirstie McClure and Richard Flathman,

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lead us to conclude. McClure consciously draws methodological inspiration from literary theory (in particular, the work of Mikhail Bakhtin on ‘speech-genres’) and from cultural historians who have investigated the material transmission of texts to investigate the manifold meanings accumulated, and sometimes shed, by texts as they travel through many hands across time and space. Meaning, she argues, cannot be divorced from form, especially the material form in which ideas are transmitted. Every reader selects and recombines the apparent (and not so apparent) meanings within a specific text; however, some readers have more power to affect meaning by virtue of their roles as editors, annotators, excerpters or anthologists. The works that make up pillars of the canon, among intellectual historians and political theorists (and, we should add, among literary scholars), are not quite as solid and imposing as they might seem, at least if our aim is to comprehend the full range of meanings they have acquired over time. Examples like the *Vindiciae Contra Tyrannos*, John Locke’s *Two Treatises* and Edmund Burke’s *Vindication of Natural Society* amply affirm a point that could be made with a host of other works: ‘To the extent that political theorizing consists in offering not simply a perspective on the political world but also an orientation to action within it, its containment within conventional genre distinctions looks more like a matter of academic convenience than a characteristic of historical expressions’.

The question of what might count within political theory as either ‘orientation[s] to action’ or ‘historical expressions’, and what might be the relation between the two, is the subject of Richard Flathman’s concluding chapter. Just as the volume begins with an historian’s scepticism about historical categories, in John Morrill’s chapter, so it ends with a political theorist’s doubts concerning history’s relevance for the manifold possibilities for studying and writing political thought. Precisely because past utterances were so varied in their forms, and also because present concerns will differ from theorist to theorist and from context to context, Flathman does not find it possible – let alone necessary – to choose between what he calls ‘the canonical and conceptual conceptions of the study/writing of political thought’. Either will have its value, but only depending upon the question at hand to be studied or the problem to be resolved. Often we may not need to make the choice because more than one possibility will have to be in play simultaneously. In such cases we will find ourselves, in the teasing words of Ludwig Wittgenstein, ‘between the games’ of different disciplines.

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Quentin Skinner reminds us in his Afterword that the study of past thought never ceases to reveal aspects of our own ways of thinking that might otherwise remain obscure to us: ‘As our world revolves, it catches light from the past in ever-changing ways’. Conversely, we might recall that because the objects from the past that we study are themselves multifaceted we may only be able to examine one of their faces while simultaneously obscuring others from our view. To comprehend all the features of complex forms, like those of political thought, demands that we adopt multiple perspectives upon them. But we can only do this in collaboration with others who view those same objects in rather different lights. The chapters in this volume have been written in just such a spirit, to open up new perspectives on the multiple histories that might yet be written of British political thought.

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CHAPTER I

*The History of British Political Thought: A Field and its Futures**J. G. A. Pocock, Gordon Schochet and Lois G. Schwoerer*

The ‘history of British political thought’ as a field of research has its own history which is now more than half a century old. Two impulses drove its early development. The first, British in origin, arose from the work of scholars active at Cambridge University since about 1950: among them Peter Laslett, J. G. A. Pocock, J. H. M. Salmon, Quentin Skinner, John Dunn, Gordon Schochet and others too numerous to list, to whom the term ‘Cambridge School’ has been applied. The other, American in origin, arose from the work of Caroline Robbins, Douglass Adair, Bernard Bailyn and their associates who explored English and British political thought in the late-seventeenth and eighteenth centuries – notably the ‘commonwealth’ critique of the Hanoverian regime – so as to lead towards American rebellion and independence, republicanism and federalism.¹ These two impulses have continued to operate within the history of British political thought and have served largely to shape the problems it has encountered and discovered.

‘The Cambridge method’, as it has become known, consists in the assignment of texts to their contexts. These ‘contexts’ are of many kinds and need to be carefully defined, but if one is the context of historical and political circumstances, another is the context of political language. In early-modern England, Britain and Europe, ‘political thought’ was expressed (a) in Latin and in a number of vernaculars; (b) in a diversity of specialized discourses constructed by distinct if intersecting clerisies, among whom ecclesiastics, jurists and humanists may serve as an initial classification; and (c), in England at least, in an imperfectly controlled print culture, where ‘broadside’, which are ephemeral and usually directed to the less learned, contributed significantly to the context of political language. Since the beginning of the Cambridge enterprise,

¹ Robbins 1959; Bailyn 1967; Adair 1974.