Editorial introduction

The essays presented in this volume offer compelling evidence of the remarkable varieties of British political thought in the early modern era, 1500–1800. Written by the Directors of seminars that were organized to cover that era in approximately fifty-year segments at a time and were held from 1984 through 1987 under the aegis of the Center for the History of British Political Thought at The Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, DC, these chapters are the result – to that date – of the Center’s ongoing project: to explore in depth the changing patterns of British political discourse over approximately three centuries, from the English Reformation and the advent of print culture to the impact of the American and French Revolutions upon Great Britain. Sponsored by the Center (whose affairs are conducted by a Steering Committee of the three editors of this volume and Dr Lena Cowen Orlin, Executive Director of The Folger Institute), this volume hopes to contribute to the creation of a comprehensive history of British political discourse in this era, and a reconceptualization of that discourse.

These essays are informed by certain assumptions and principles and shaped by a special circumstance. First, the history of political thought that the chapters present takes the form of a history of political ‘discourse’; that is, they focus on the principal vocabularies or ‘languages’ which were available and exploitable for the conduct, discussion, vindication and criticism of political action and the principles on which it was seen to be founded. They also examine the major enterprises which were carried out or endeavoured in these ‘languages’. As a history of published discourse this volume is in consequence also a history of ‘theory’ or ‘philosophy’ – even of ‘literature’ – as these terms denote special levels of analysis and reflection or modes of writing and debate within the changing modes of political discussion. For this reason, the term ‘discourse’ is not used here – as it may be and sometimes is – with the single purpose of ‘deconstructing’ history and reducing it to the modes of seeking and exercising power encoded within language systems, but rather is used with the aim of including that
dimension in a history ‘reconstructed’ as the activity of language-using political creatures, deeply involved in what they were doing and seldom unaware of its ambivalences.

A second principle is that major works which have attained special prestige and authority are studied as they occur in the overall narrative. Such works are usually situated in more than one historical context and can be studied from more than one viewpoint. The ‘classics of British political thought’ receive the attention they deserve, but in terms not only of their canonical character but also of the process of their canonization.

Third, the authors of these essays assume that history takes place within a political system, or group of systems, consisting of the institutions which have constituted such systems, the events which have been perceived as affecting them, and the languages available for conducting them and articulating the political and human experience seen as entailed by and implicit in them. The history dealt with in these essays is one of theology, jurisprudence, princely culture, poetic literature, history writing, and political economy, these components varying in importance over the era. Another element of central significance to the early modern era and to the understanding of its political discourse is print culture, especially that based in London, with subsidiary centres in Oxford, Cambridge and a few other places, and generated by the English political system of which it was the most important articulation. The London-based print industry is the circumstance that has imposed certain patterns of selection on these authors’ presentation of history. For it is the product of that industry, preserved in great collections – of which George Thomason’s was the first – that has been the most important to us. What the essays present, then, is a history of English-speaking politics and political discourse as interpreted and transmitted by the print culture.¹ It need hardly be said that no full history of that print culture has been attempted, but some crucial moments are implicit: the advent of a humanist discourse and a print medium capable of conveying it; the explosion of unlicensed printing at the outset of the mid-seventeenth-century internal wars; the growth of journalism and another explosion of printed matter in the troubled late seventeenth century; the appearance of the novel and essay in the early eighteenth century; and the further expansion of the reading market throughout that century.

Fourth, as a consequence of the nature of early modern print culture,

¹ We have benefited from the advice regarding print culture of Elizabeth L. Eisenstein and Peter Blayney.
our history is dominated by the genres of political literature produced by that culture: the broadsheet, the pamphlet, the newsletter, the journal, and the essay, treatise or learned folio seen as interacting with all these. The era was one in which the clerisies were on the streets and in the market; great works of jurisprudence, divinity, philosophy and history can and should be read in the context of an occasional, polemical and public literature with which they in fact interacted.

Fifth, it might have been expected that a group of scholars working in the setting of the Folger Shakespeare Library would have devoted themselves to studying the interactions between the printed discourse of politics and the major printed genres – poetry, drama, the novel – for which the term ‘literature’ is conventionally reserved. Probably all contributors share the wish that we could have done even more\(^2\) in this direction than we have. William Shakespeare was perhaps the last great English poet unaffected by the constant production of political controversy in print; all his canonical successors – Milton, Marvell, Dryden, Defoe, Swift, Pope, Johnson, Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Scott – not only wrote their poems and other literary works surrounded by this component of a print culture, but contributed to it, very often in the prose genres peculiar to it. The history of the theatre and the rise of the novel can be studied as part of this history of print culture, and of course have been. But at present there is a division of labour between those who study genres which make them ‘historians of political thought’ and those whose studies make them ‘historians of literature’, and to some extent the two groups produce, for both good and ill, non-identical understandings of what ‘politics’ and even ‘history’ are.\(^3\) More needs to be done towards bridging the gaps between these understandings, and perhaps some day will be.

Sixth, since the archive on which this history of discourse is based is predominantly that laid down by the London printing industry, the history that emerges is decidedly Anglocentric. This can be defended. England was the dominant partner among the Anglophone cultures; its printed discourse was largely a dialogue with and about itself, and enough entered into it from the continental républiques des lettres to

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\(^2\) The seminar conducted in 1991 by Derek Hirst and Steven Zwicker was specifically concerned with the location of literary texts in the context of political polemic. See also Kevin Sharpe and Steven N. Zwicker (eds.), *The Politics of Discourse: The Literature and History of Seventeenth-Century England* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1987).

\(^3\) Historians and ‘new historicists’ constitute distinct though not competing groups. Their possible interactions are fruitfully developed in two recent works: David Harris Sacks, *The Widening Gate: Bristol and the Atlantic Economy, 1450–700* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1991) and Richard Helgerson, *Forms of Nationhood: The Elizabethan Writing of England* (Chicago, 1992).
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ensure that it was one of the discourses of Europe. Grotius entered the vocabulary of English political thought as Hobbes did that of the Netherlands. Yet there is a necessary enterprise of enlarging English into British history, to which this volume pays only limited attention. The political works of James I (as McI1wain called them)\(^4\) are shown to have been those of James VI, but after Linda Peck’s essay the British dimension appears only when Nicholas Phillipson and J. G. A. Pocock examine the eighteenth century.\(^5\)

But, since the completion of the series of seminars which give rise to this volume, two further seminars, conducted by Roger A. Mason and J. C. Robertson, have sought, in the first place, to establish a canon and a historical scheme for Scottish political thought,\(^6\) and in the second, by focusing on the Unions of 1603 and 1707, to establish the character of ‘British’ political thought as that concerned with creating and maintaining the Kingdom of Great Britain and its derivative settler societies beyond seas. Both seminars have been the origin of published volumes,\(^7\) and the book now presented may profitably be read in conjunction with these. A third seminar examined the imperial crisis and American secession of 1763–1776 in the light of the decision of 1707 that the union of England and Scotland should be an incorporation and not a confederation,\(^8\) and has left its imprint on the penultimate chapter of the present volume. It is beginning to seem likely that the picture may have to be completed by a study of Irish, Anglo-Irish and Scottish-Irish political thought down to the fateful Union of 1801. The history of British political thought includes the history of those who cease to be British, as well as those who become or remain so; the beginnings of American political thought are also the beginnings of Canadian.

Seventh, these essays deal with history on two levels. First, there is history as presented and interpreted by persons immediately involved in it, together with the history of their modes of responding to it – modes

\(^5\) Indeed, it is the necessity of treating such large subjects as the Scottish Enlightenment and the American Revolution which explains the allocation of two chapters to the first thirty years of George III’s reign; only the reiterated permission of his colleagues has justified one of the editors of this volume in what would otherwise have been an unforgivable encroachment.
\(^6\) They were preceded in this by Arthur Williamson, *Scottish National Consciousness in the Age of James VI* (Edinburgh, 1979).
\(^7\) R. A. Mason (ed.), *Scots and Britons: Scottish Political Thought and the Union of 1603* (Cambridge University Press, forthcoming); J. C. Robertson (ed.), *A Union for Empire: The Union of 1707 in the Context of British Political Thought* (Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).
\(^8\) ‘Empire, Confederation and Republic: From Atlantic Dominion to American Union’, see p. x, n. 2, above.
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which, over the early modern era, seem to have become increasingly historiographical and even, within limits, historicist. And second, there is early modern English and British history as presented and interpreted by the contributors to this volume, who are at the same time historians of discourse reading history in the light of the materials in which they are specialists, and historians working in the closing years of the twentieth century. As the latter, they are involved in and well aware of all the remarkable changes that have happened in the last twenty or so years, and are still happening, in Anglo-American historiography. In these linked capacities our authors would probably agree in hoping that they have indicated the contours of a post-revisionist history of the Anglo-British political system. It bears observing that the history of published discourse in a highly centralized print and political culture like the Anglo-British encourages its own perception of the debate over consensus and conflict, for one is studying the history of shared languages (and therefore of consensus) within which are found the histories of many bitter and profound disagreements (and therefore of conflict). Thus, conflict is found within consensus, sometimes breaking it down and sometimes transforming or restoring it. Revisionist historiography, as post-revisionists see it, emphasizes both the fragility and the durability of British political practices, and that on the whole seems to be the image conveyed by these essays.

Finally, the obvious point must be made: this volume is a collection of essays by different authors, who have discussed their contributions with each other and whose offerings have been co-ordinated by the editors to the limits within which such a thing is possible. The essays differ in the extent to which their authors have attempted to cover the field surveyed in the seminars they originally directed. Some authors – Guy, Kelley, Pocock – have sought to portray in breadth the changing diversity of languages of discourse in the periods their chapters cover; but even this cannot be done without selection and arrangement. Nicholas Phillipson has selected a limited number of themes and pursued them as far – and it is quite a distance – as they will carry him; while William Lamont, for reasons that will appear, has chosen to survey a crucial moment in the light of its historiography rather than its history. Other essays, those by Peck and by Pocock and Schochet in collaboration, were not based on any of the original seminar series, but were written especially for this

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9 The applicability of this term before the late eighteenth century is of course debatable. See Zachary Sayre Schiffman, ‘Renaissance Historicism Reconsidered’, History and Theory, 24 (1985), 170–82.

10 See the observations of Kelley and Peck below, pp. 48, 63–4, 78–9, 82–3, 102–6, and the references that are given.
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volume, to give it greater comprehension. This volume, then, is not the
work of a single mind. There is to date no unifying book-length study of
the field of early modern British political discourse by a single author,
but an essay published at the outset of the Center’s project suggests a
major outline with which it is interesting to compare the essays in this
book.11

This book is divided into three sections. The first, with its emphasis
on the sixteenth century but covering the years from 1530 to 1642,
depicts the ideology of counsel surrounding a post-medieval monarchy
and its court, engaged in bringing about that profound series of
transformations in the relations between sacerdotium and magisterium
which we subsume under the name of Reformation. A discourse of
humanism plays an effective part in this, and is reinforced by the advent
of typography, but the author sending his book to be printed is primarily
a counsellor to his prince or a client to his patron. There is an avid and
often heterodox lay public waiting to consume books, but the predomi-
nant discourse is still that of court and counsel; it is the gentleman and
doctor of laws John Hayward who is in trouble for publicizing the
deposition of Richard II 200 years after that event, not the obscure
mountebank William Shakespeare. Nevertheless, it is this closed and
courtly world of monarchy which wreaks the revolution that lies at the
foundation of all early modern English history, proclaiming in 1533 that
England is an ‘empire’, sovereign over itself in matters civil as well as
ecclesiastical, and leaving it to be decided whether this sovereignty is to
be exercised centrally (over a church both apostolic and ‘as by law
established’) by a crown imperial or a crown in parliament, but not less
sovereign or imperial for being there located. After the deep changes of
the 1530s, where there is a church there is also a congregation, and
where there is a court there is also a country. These pairs profoundly
desire unity, but may not always find it easy to achieve. As David Hume
perceived in the middle of the eighteenth century,12 after about 1603
the minds of men began to change, and what had seemed consensus
began to display incoherence.

John Guy and Donald Kelley explore the world in which court and
counsel co-existed with a discourse of law that taught every proprietor of
land his place in the national community, and a Christian humanism

Journal of British Studies, 24, 3 (1985), 283–310. See further the same author’s
‘Transformations in British Political Thought’, in Mark Francis (guest ed.), ‘Theory in
12  David Hume, The History of England (1754; edn of 1778, reprinted Indianapolis, 1983),
V, p. 18.
sought to co-exist with a potentially subversive priesthood, either in obedience to the heirs of the apostles or consisting of all believers. Linda Peck pursues the discourse of court and national church under the sometimes indiscreet shrewdness of James VI and I and the disastrous insensitivity of his son. The calamitous years between 1637 and 1642 are not here covered in narrative detail; but with Charles I’s departure from Whitehall in 1642 – to return only for his execution in 1649 – we enter upon the central trauma of English history and the great efflorescence of print culture and ideas in conflict that marks the years of civil war, dissolution of government and interregnum. These may be considered years either of profound constitutional and ecclesiastical conflict, or of a catastrophic breakdown that imprinted on the English mind forever the lessons that king and parliament must never again be separated and that dissensions among the clergy and the godly were the most likely causes of this disaster. In either reading, the decades in which Milton and Winstanley, Hobbes and Harrington, and later Sidney and Locke wrote and were read by publics as deeply perplexed as they were, are the epic years of the English political intellect, which still debates how far they were interpreting change or struggling to explain away anarchy. It is because this debate goes on and shows no sign of ceasing that William Lamont’s essay is a study in contemporary historiography; but it is because the notion of an ‘English revolution’ has been losing ground to that of the Interregnum as ‘the quest for a settlement’, that Pocock and Schochet have juxtaposed their study of Hobbes and Harrington with Lamont’s study of Conrad Russell, Christopher Hill and J. C. Davis. We have to move through Interregnum to Restoration if we are to break down the watertight compartments, divided and sealed at 1640 and 1660, into which English history has been organized, and understand that the English exposed themselves to a revolutionary experience, but rejected it with abhorrence before they could understand what it was. The rejection of priestcraft and enthusiasm, the attempt against all the odds to ensure that king and parliament would never again become separated, are keys to the history of the ‘long eighteenth century’ from 1660 to 1830, itself as much ‘the quest for a settlement’ as ‘the growth of political stability’.13

The history of that ‘long century’ is not co-terminous with a history of political stability. Howard Nenner’s perception of the Restoration period is resolutely constitutionalist; firmly, if unfashionably, he holds with Blackstone that amid all those ‘wicked, sanguinary and

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turbulent politics serious issues of law and liberty were known to be involved, and that English politics were about themselves and not merely a marginal explosion of the last European wars of religion. The parliamentary classes, willing to go to the edge of absolutism and beyond in their need to maintain unity with the crown, were unable to rely on the monarchy’s resolution to preserve the foundations laid down in the Act in Restraint of Appeals. The Restoration kings’ flirtation with political Catholicism underlined the ineradicable presence of nonconformity, and the Anglican ‘confessional church-state’ had to be maintained until 1830 precisely because it had been challenged at its roots between 1642 and 1662, and because there was continuing organized dissent from it. It was in large measure because the monarchy shifted between laxity and rigour in its relations with the church that it had to be challenged by both Tories and anti-clericals in parliament; the ambiguities in the position of John Locke, expounded for the most part elsewhere than in this volume, were the ambiguities of his age, though the extremism to which he had been reduced when he wrote the Second Treatise receives the emphasis which it has deserved since the researches of Peter Laslett. The unity of crown, church and parliament was restored by the Revolution of 1688–89 at the high price of legalized dynastic revolution and a partial toleration of nonconformists. Whether it is to be described in the classic constitutionalist language of an abandonment of prerogative for parliamentary monarchy, or of a return to the mixed and balanced monarchy momentously invented in the Answer to the Nineteen Propositions nearly half a century before, continues – to all appearances, endlessly – to be debated.

The debate is complicated by the shift in historical perspective that made it a commonplace of eighteenth-century readings of the Glorious Revolution that the crown’s prerogatives had been curbed but at the same time its influence enormously expanded. As the reader of this volume turns from part II to part III and the chapters written by Phillipson and Pocock, a profound change comes over the subject-matter and the historiography of British political thought. The classic themes of church and state, authority and liberty, dissolution and foundation of government, in no case disappear and are not lost to sight in an age of Augustan stability – neither Macaulay nor Trevelyan nor

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Plumb ever said that they were – but the discourse of *jus*, of authority and right, property and sovereignty, in which they were classically discussed, is joined, modified and within limits displaced by an entirely new discourse of commerce and culture, virtue and corruption, and perception of historical change. So strongly has the older discourse supplied the paradigms of ‘political thought’ that historians of this subject still have difficulty in coming to terms with the eighteenth century, though it is nearly thirty-five years since Caroline Robbins began enabling and obliging them to do so.¹⁷

Between the fall of James II studied by Nenner and the later years of Anne examined by Phillipson, there intervenes the extraordinary decade of 1688–98, during which a series of innovations convinced English and Scottish thinkers, for the first time, that they were living in a new and unprecedented stage of civil history. The needs of King William’s wars converted England from an unstable rural polity where the sword was in the hands of the subject and the danger of civil war endemic, to a powerful military state which must think about its parliamentary structure in a new financial and imperial age; cults of republican militia and Roman virtue were a critical, not merely a nostalgic, response. By 1707, the new state was enlarged into Great Britain by the Union with Scotland and faced itself in the character of an ‘extensive’ or ‘enormous empire’ of the Atlantic archipelago; while at the same time it was brought to be a major player in a European states-system, first, by involvement in William III’s grand alliance, and later, by the reactions and counter-reactions of the Treaty of Utrecht and the Hanoverian succession. The sovereignty of a Hanoverian crown in a Whig parliament was enforced, by such harsh measures as the Septennial Act, to ensure a regime capable both of shouldering these new responsibilities and of maintaining the unity necessary to guard against a danger of civil war which dynastic and ecclesiastical instability rendered by no means obsolete. As a further response to these uncertainties, we are at least learning to trace the character of an English and British Enlightenment; it appears clerical, conservative and verging toward Socinianism in the case of the English latitudinarians and later the Scottish Moderates, but anti-clerical, republican and frequently Spinozist in that of the English and Anglo-Irish deists and freethinkers.

Nicholas Phillipson explains how a cult of manners and politeness arose in answer to all of these disturbing challenges. It was ‘modern’ in the philosophical sense, celebrating the replacement of an ‘ancient’

philosophy that sought to perceive substances by a Lockean and Humean limitation of the intellect to studying its own workings, but still ‘ancient’ in the ethical sense that it preferred Ciceronian and Epicurean manners and morals to those of Christian devotion. The British Enlightenments were debates between ‘ancients’ and ‘moderns’, reflecting the shaping of ‘modernity’ in a society and culture still aristocratic and patronal enough to be called ‘early modern’ and an ‘ancien régime’. Pocock’s concluding chapters examine the defeat of David Hume’s never very strong hopes for a moderate political culture, and the advent of the ‘present discontents’ and the ‘imperial crisis’. These bring the foundations of authority and liberty back to the forefront of political discourse; the United States depart to found a new federalism and republicanism, and by the time of the French Revolution the United Kingdom can be seen shedding much of its neo-classicism and laying the foundations of a new liberal positivism and utilitarianism. Pocock states – he hopes with sufficient caution – the case for holding that while the structure of the British ancien régime predominated until 1829–32, the language of discourse and some of its social assumptions were ceasing to be ‘early modern’ in the decade of the 1790s. The character of The Folger Shakespeare Library and its Institute have made it expedient to halt the Center’s programme here; there is a case against, as well as a case for, going on to yet another half-century (say 1780–1830).

The study of political thought belongs both to the discipline of history and to that of political theory and philosophy. In his epilogue, Gordon Schochet examines the history which he has helped present, adopting the standpoint of a political theorist concerned with the contemporary state and its uncertain future. He reviews the early-modern history of discourse the better to ask in what ways the paradigms and values of the modern liberal state emerged from it; his concern here is not with teleology but with continuity. Turning to a present and future which we must term post-modern, he calls attention to the increasing contingency and marginalization of the ‘state’ which was once considered the focus of all civil existence, and asks what may be the consequences for both politics and civility. This leads him to consider the role of a shared discourse in maintaining the fabric of political life, and to enquire in conclusion whether the discourse of a stable society can persist without some sort of a past and a capacity to relate past and present to one another. His essay in political theory brings our historical enterprise into contact with a present and future in which, considered merely as historiography, it can be expected to continue.