1 Introduction
The history of political thought and the national discourses of politics

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A number of studies over the past two decades have explored the national context of movements and ideas with a predominantly universalist character or aspiration.[1] Although this has often meant a revision in our understanding of how such ideas and movements developed and of the impact they made, the approach chosen did not entirely go beyond the now widely accepted scholarly othodoxy of presenting ideas 'in context' – even if the identity of the appropriate context often remains a point of contestation.

The idea of this volume – of nationally contextualising the history of political thought – presents, however, a number of difficulties that were not germane to these other studies. This is so on account of the peculiar nature of the subject of our investigation, which can be understood both as an academic discipline, 'the history of political thought', but also in more substantive terms as a form of discourse, the history of 'political thought'. Such an ambivalence is exemplified to the point of ambiguity in the chapters comprising the volume. As we collected, reflected and commented on the essays provided by our illustrious contributors, we realised in just how many directions this particular field can be ploughed. Hence rather than offering a state-of-the-art picture, the present volume opens up an array of problems for the location and study of the history of political thought. From such a perspective, the 'national context' approach functions to place in sharp relief the intricate web of issues in which our subject matter is implicated. Indeed, as Stefan Collini rightly notices in his postscript, the use of the anglophone expression 'history of political thought' can only heuristically designate the subject of this volume, since equivalent expressions of which use is made in other national traditions to designate the 'discipline' – though not necessarily the 'discourse' – diverge from each other in important

[1] Cf., for instance, Roy Porter and Mikulas Teich (eds.), *The Enlightenment in National Context* (Cambridge, 1981).

respects. In this introduction, we point to some facets of chapters within this book that comprise the kaleidoscopic picture that a 'national tradition' perspective gives of the history of political thought.

We begin with what is perhaps the less obvious of the two meanings already identified, but which, in a sense, is partly to blame for the complications besetting the other. It has been suggested that a 'political culture' is a 'set of discourses and practices' through which members of a political community make claims upon each other and interact politically.[2] One of the operations which comprise a political culture is to 'define the meanings of the terms in which the claims are framed'. Reconstructing the history of political thought – not necessarily as a self-standing activity, but as part of the exercise of political reflection in which some form of memory is involved – is one of the ways in which such an operation is carried out. This would seem fairly uncontroversial. But addressing the history of political thought in the way in which the chapters of this book do – from within, and sometimes across, different national contexts – is mildly, and in diverse ways, subversive of a well-established account of the history of political thought. It is subversive because it suggests a particularist reading of what is often understood, if not in its genesis at least in its consolidation and development, as a cosmopolitan or even universalist (at least, if one might be permitted the phrase, 'Western universalist') enterprise. So paradoxically, it would appear that modern nation-states give rise to particularist political cultures where people who reflect on the character of these cultures nevertheless see them as the bearers of a common historically articulated body of works and practices derived from classical Greece via important way-stations such as Rome, medieval Christianity and feudalism, the Renaissance, Reformation and Enlightenment – a complex process well described in Janet Coleman's chapter. One prominent and persistent idea within national histories of political thought is therefore a pre- or trans-national narrative linking philosophers who self-consciously addressed one another across spatial and cultural divides from which – at least in aspiration – they felt themselves emancipated. Such a view inspired the early modern essays in the genre, which emerged from the attempts of thinkers in the natural law tradition to identify their own provenance.[3] The persistence of this universalist and cosmopolitan ideal

[2] Keith Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution: Essays on French Political Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 4–7.

[3] Cf. R. Tuck, 'The "Modern" Theory of Natural Law', in A. Pagden (ed.), *The Languages of Political Theory in Early-Modern Europe* (Cambridge, 1987), pp. 99–119; I. Hont, 'The Language of Sociability and Commerce: Samuel Pufendorf and the Theoretical Foundations of the "Four Stages Theory"', in Pagden (ed.), *The Languages of Political Theory*, pp. 253–76; and K. Haakonssen, *Natural Law and Moral Philosophy*

is central to the argument developed by Malachi Hacohen on the intellectual self-image of the assimilated Jews in *Mitteleuropa* at a dramatic historical juncture of the twentieth century, and it plays an important part – if mainly through its absence – in Victor Neumann's reconstruction of the troubled past of that region.

To the extent that such a narrative is truly nationally conditioned, this old universalist ideal is subverted. Yet it is only mildly so, not least because we have already come to suspect that such an ideal is unattainable, and moreover that it may distract attention from the very circumstances which enable us to make sense of political-theoretical productions. Indeed there might be said to be another account of the history of political thought which is essentially political, particularist and related to, if indeed it is not the condition of, a free society. John Pocock has written of 'a certain kind of history . . . which is the creation of a political society that is autonomous, in the sense that it takes decisions and performs actions with the intention and effect of determining its character and the conditions under which it exists'.[4] This would ensure that the political society is both making its history and narrating it – two activities that, in Pocock's own account, are often hard to separate. The intuition that a history of political thought is in some way related to the nurturing and sustenance of politics in a society, and is, in turn, determined by it, is one on which we shall have more to say below. More generally, the fact that, in the modern world, political society has coincided with communities acting within the boundaries of nation-states gives a particular significance to the way in which the national context may determine both the role and the understanding of political thought and of its history. The issue at stake here is not therefore what separate national traditions may have contributed *to* the history of political thought, but whether there could be a shared narrative account *of* it which can be considered, in any meaningful sense, 'the same' discourse of politics. On this account, the universalist ideal may turn out to be unfeasible because it represents an unhistoricized version of that which can only be understood as historical.

Whilst recognising that the influence of the national character of political cultures might be subversive of one kind of ideal of the history of political thought, the perceived absence, or political inadequacy, of a

(Cambridge, 1996). A similar, universalist and cosmopolitan inspiration can be found in the origins of the history of philosophy as a genre, cf. Eugenio Garin's account in 'La storia "critica" della filosofia del settecento', in *Dal rinascimento all'illuminismo: studi e ricerche* (Pisa, 1970), pp. 241–84.

[4] J.G.A. Pocock, 'The Politics of History: the Subaltern and the Subversive', *Journal of Political Philosophy* 6, 3 (1998), pp. 219–34.

national culture can dominate it. Such a consideration is at the centre of the contributions of Wolfgang Mommsen and Victor Neumann. The reason, in both cases, is to be found in the strongly *discoursive* nature of political theory as an activity that can only be sustained in societies where a minimum amount of liberty and freedom of expression is guaranteed. In so far as the history of 'political thought' contributes both to maintaining a certain stability of meanings in a political culture and to ensuring a 'conversation' between generations, self-reflexive political thinking is indeed as Pocock suggests a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for a free society. It is this deeply communicative nature of political thought that emerges in Coleman's analysis of the role of the classical canon in the history of political thought. In a different sense, this is also true of the way in which issues of interpretation and understanding have exercised historians of political thought in the past two or three decades, bringing back to the forefront of the discipline issues of meaning, intentionality and empathetic understanding. The essays by Quentin Skinner, Melvin Richter, Pierre Rosanvallon, Terence Ball, Jeremy Jennings and Iain Hampsher-Monk bear witness to this in diverse ways and with various agendas in mind, but they seem to agree that the restoration of agency and language as central concerns has contributed to revitalise an interest in the history of political thought, and that this has come about as part of wider cultural processes affecting each national culture in peculiar ways.

This cultural quality of political thought and of its history is no less evident when one considers the converse example: cosmopolitanism. This is illustrated by Hacohen's discussion of Popper and of how his construction of the history of the 'Open Society' and its enemies is deeply rooted in the experiences of his generation of Jewish cosmopolitan intellectuals. This, in itself, does not make his ideas less compelling, but it puts them in a different perspective, questioning some of the claims of a cosmopolitan culture successfully to displace the nation state as the focus and bearer of a history of political thought. Yet, the possibility of a 'rooted' cosmopolitanism suggests that the 'national' dimension is neither the only nor necessarily the main dimension through which to define the context of the history of political thought. It is intriguing, for instance, to notice how a number of authors (for example, Arendt)appear in different national contexts both bringing in new meanings and at the same time being re-interpreted within the new context.

None of the chapters in this collection seems to assume the 'national' dimension of political thought should be taken as a cipher for the 'national character' of a political culture, but they do see it as something more directly cultural and/or political. Indeed, some of the chapters

suggest that deep-down the relevant histories often *reflect* current political debates and preoccupations. In France, as Jennings and Rosanvallon notice, the question of structure/agency with its ideological overtones has taken centre stage; in Germany, as indicated by Mommsen, the 'ever present' past of the Nazi experience has cast a long shadow on the post-war generations; in the United States, according to Ball, the positivist culture of the 1950s, the Vietnam crisis in the 1960s and the issues of identity recognition more recently have all contributed to the changing focuses of the discipline; while in Britain, finally, and as differently argued by Robert Wokler and Iain Hampsher-Monk, public concern has remained, perhaps more silently and even against the grain of scholarly intellectual postures, a reflex in the profession.

In so far as this book, as a whole, shows that substantive and methodological developments in the history of political thought reflect a 'national' and more directly 'political' dimension of the historical enterprise – though in the qualified forms just discussed – it is fair to assume that its study cannot be completely separated from its being a constitutive part of the national political culture. In this respect this collection achieves the twofold objective of putting national traditions within the context of their own political culture and discussing the more general relationship between history of political thought and political discourse at large.

But as already noted, and as Collini aptly reminds us in his postscript, there is a whole cluster of issues that pertain to the history of political thought as an academic discipline and in which the 'national' dimension plays as important a role as the one we have briefly suggested in relation to political discourse. Collini himself explores most of these issues by taking a sharply and rightly sceptical view of discipline-history. He may also be right in suggesting that the 'internalist' approach often adopted by the 'historians' of political thought to their own subject misses the culturally embedded nature of the discipline, and that one may have therefore to turn to intellectual historians and historians of higher education for an adequate historical account.[5] But, as the great majority of the chapters of this collection also show, there is a stubborn resistance about the self-conscious representation that the historians of political thought have of their own discipline, which makes it difficult to keep it within the strict walls of the citadel of higher education – if not in fact, at least in aspiration. This is surely for the reason indicated above: the intricate, partly parasitic, relationship that the subject has with political

[5] S. Collini, 'General Introduction', in S. Collini, R. Whatmore and B. Young (eds.), *British Intellectual History 1750–1950* [published in both companion volumes: *Economy, Polity, and Society* and *History, Religion, and Culture*] (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 14–15.

culture and political discourse at large; but also because of the ambiguity – as for other histories – of being in between the reality and the representation, the fact and the account, the linguistic utterance and its interpretation. The process of identifying, collecting and converting the sequence of political ideas, or articulations, of a culture into a written sequence and endowing them with significant (or even canonical) status must – as a number of our contributors emphasise – be recognised as just that: a process, contingent, diverse and invariably culturally particularised. But this particularisation is done at different levels, none of which is entirely insulated, so that the internalisation of the political culture may well pass through academic and institutional channels, but not without escaping the peculiar filter offered to the historians of political thought by the possibility of reflecting on the more directly political material which they handle professionally.

Arguably, it is this residual *political* dimension that complicates matters for the historian of the discipline. This is true in relation to both its identity, its corpus and its approach. Many of the chapters of this volume, and in particular those by D'Orsi, Wokler and Collini, which offer a longer view of the formation of the discipline itself, stress the borderline nature of the history of political thought - an academic subject that occupies a, perhaps imaginary, terrain in between history, politics, law and (moral) philosophy. As illustrated by those same chapters, the reasons for this – and the location of the terrain – are contingent and mainly dependent on developments in national systems of higher education. Its borderline character has, however, created a series of elective affinities that – at a time of increasing specialisation, and in spite of much talk about the virtues of interdisciplinarity – make its academic and intellectual location an intractable problem. None the less, with politics' progressive gain of academic respectability, the history of political thought seems to have found its more natural place within it.[6] As remarked by Collini, this has been no easy cohabitation, but it has partly, and perhaps paradoxically, secured the more theoretical and philosophical character of the discipline. This is firstly because, within the more general discipline of politics and government, the history of political thought has appropriated to itself (or, depending on the point of view, it has been relegated to) the role of 'political theory' – a place, however, never fully assured. Secondly, this arises because this cohabitation creates, from the body of texts selected as the proper object for the study of the history of political thought, an elected form of

[6] Such a process is not solely circumscribed to the anglophone world, although there are differences in the motivating reasons and the ways in which it has been taking shape.

discourse through which a society asks itself philosophical questions about politics.

Moreover, it is the inextricably 'political' character of the subject that keeps alive the tension between 'history' and 'theory' within the discipline. This was the main theme of the conference that we organised at Exeter in 1994 and from which the project of the present volume started and, in some ways, departed. As illustrated by the contributions of Richter, D'Orsi, Skinner, Rosanvallon and Hampsher-Monk, that persistent tension, and the methodological and interpretative issues that come with it, are not immune to the national dimension. The predominance within a national culture of a particular academic approach may, for instance, direct the historical research to the identification of a particular theoretical construction as its proper object, this being variously conceived as either an author, an ideology, a politico-philosophical text, a language, ordinary usage, *mentalités*, or *Begriffen*.

The very tension between theory and history plays no less important a part in supporting the 'canonical' structure of the discipline, in spite of the contextualist strictures that can be directed against this. It is perhaps part of the practice of most disciplines whose subject matter consists of rather abstract and theoretically inclined modes of thinking for its practitioners to be fixed in answering questions set by their predecessors, while they are more immediately addressing a contextualised and contextualisable set of intellectual problems. This 'vertical' dimension of the history of political thought, as opposed to the more 'horizontal' preoccupations of cultural and intellectual history, is the cardinal sin of the discipline – as it is perhaps of other discipline-histories – but it is also part of its genetic code. Some of the chapters of this volume illustrate how this vertical dimension is often conditioned by strong 'national' preoccupations, which partly determine who, in different contexts, are the authors that make it to the canon. More in-depth and comparative studies on the university curricula and on temporal variation of both it and the interpretations given to the 'canonical' authors would be needed to further illuminate this fascinating story. Here, as in other respects, the volume points in a direction rather than offering a complete treatment of the subject.

But there is something else that should be noted about the vertical dimension of the history of political thought, tempered as it is by the contextualist revolution. The continuous temptation of constructing its canon on the basis of the supposed influence of certain authors on political society is partly to be explained by the implicit, and slightly idealistic, faith in the strongly discoursive nature of politics as a human activity – in the face of and often in reaction to the occasional denial that

comes from history. By tracking political history, however, the history of political thought offers a particular reading of it. The political experience or problems in national contexts may establish a distinctive agenda for political theory. This may then bequeath a particular history of political thought as a result of a series of thinkers meditating on the identity or significance of a particular national event – the French Revolution, for example, in relation to which even thinkers preceding the event (famously, Rousseau) need to be situated. The experiences of Nazism and Fascism before the war, and of Communism in Eastern Europe, have also dominated the way in which the history of political thought contributes to a more general self-reflection going on in political society.

Yet, for all that we have said on the 'political' dimension of the history of political thought as a discipline, one of the effects of the subject entering the academy is, paradoxically, that of being deprived of its political character. This is part of a process – visible in modern liberal democracies with institutionalised higher education – of at least seeming to detach such histories from the politics of the society which gave rise to them, a process which is intensified by the professionalisation of the academic world which produces such histories. Such processes can be contested and resisted, as some of the chapters in this collection intimate, and the process of doing so is one of reasserting the political character of the history of political thought and perhaps even its intimate link to the development of modern society which supports it.[7] Or it can be seen as part and parcel of the development of modern society. The resistance to it would only serve to satisfy the slightly nostalgic need to reassert the supposedly 'universal' role of the intellectual, as historian of political thought, in a world perceived as growing progressively indifferent, while it may only be more differentiated and segmented, and where, as Collini suggests, we are no longer dealing, if we ever were, with 'the public', but more prosaically with overlapping publics.

As suggested earlier, the introduction to the interplay of national – or in some cases cosmopolitan – and academic traditions, of universalist aspirations and particularist preoccupations, of highly or lightly politicised histories, presented in this book is intended as a beginning and not in any sense as a final product. The process of recreating mutual awareness of various national academic traditions is one that has begun in earnest only in the authors' academic lifetimes. The results are often intriguing. A recent European Science Foundation network on the

[7] For a fairly recent statement of this position, cf. Bernard Crick, 'The Decline of political Thinking in British Public Life', *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, 1, 1 (1998), pp. 102–20.

'Origins of the Modern State in Europe' revealed there were distinct national connotations of every term in that title! The creation of a common academic forum within which the history of political thought is pursued and debated seems to promise not a simple return to the universalist Enlightenment ideal, but the creation of a more differentiated – though perhaps fractal – field of investigation. Although the *paroles* may be different and bear each their own distinct patois, the *langue*, with all its resources, is a recognisably shared one.

2 The voice of the 'Greeks' in the conversation of mankind

Janet Coleman

Canonical difficulties

Having recently completed two volumes treating those political theorists who are most frequently discussed in university courses dealing with the history of Western political thought from the ancient Greeks to the sixteenth-century Renaissance, I have been aware, from the beginning, of being faced with a number of problems that required resolution.[1] During the past thirty years we have witnessed methodological debates concerning the proper way to study the history of political thought. Questions have been raised as to the very nature of a discipline that seeks to study political theorising as an activity that depends on its being engaged at discrete and contingent historical moments. In effect, this raises a very old question: is political theorising a cognitive activity of agents who, as a consequence of their socio-historical contexts, must engage a prudential form of reasoning in what are always taken to be changing circumstances? Or is political theorising some timeless activity of minds engaged in clarifying a necessary and unchanging truth about politics that is judged to be somehow independent of the particularities of agents' lived lives and the conventional languages they use to reveal their thoughts about it? In what follows, I propose some of my own conclusions in response to questions concerning what we should take the history of political thought to be for us today, why political theorising is thought to have a history, and of what it is a history. In consequence, I propose what appear to me to be the most satisfactory methods of studying old texts that are held to be important, not least because they reveal a variety of paths taken on the winding road to 'state' formation in the Western European tradition.

Perhaps the most prominent issue has had to do with those thinkers who have been included, unproblematically, as constitutive of the canon

[1] J. Coleman, *A History of Political Thought*: vol. I, *From Ancient Greece to Early Christianity*; vol. II, *From the Middle Ages to the Renaissance* (Oxford, 2000). What follows is based on the introduction to vol. I, here modified and expanded.