

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-27770-9 - That Noble Science of Politics: A Study in Nineteenth-Century
Intellectual History

Stefan Collini, Donald Winch and John Burrow

Excerpt

[More information](#)

PROLOGUE



The governing science: things political and the intellectual historian

I take this defect among the Brobdingnagians to have risen from their Ignorance; by not having hitherto reduced *Politicks* into a *Science* as the more acute Wits of *Europe* have done. For, I remember very well, in a Discourse one Day with the King; when I happened to say, there were several thousand Books among us written upon the Art of Government; it gave him (directly contrary to my Intention) a very mean Opinion of our Understandings.

JONATHAN SWIFT, *Gulliver's Travels* (1726)

Is not the pastness of the past the profounder, the completer, the more legendary, the more immediately before the present it falls?

THOMAS MANN, *The Magic Mountain* (1924)

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-27770-9 - That Noble Science of Politics: A Study in Nineteenth-Century
Intellectual History

Stefan Collini, Donald Winch and John Burrow

Excerpt

[More information](#)

THIS book deals with some of the forms taken by the aspiration to develop a 'science of politics' in nineteenth-century Britain. By speaking of an 'aspiration' we point to a project which was in some sense perpetually falling short of its realisation; by referring to 'forms' we indicate the diversity of the endeavours which issued from this common aspiration; and by limiting ourselves to 'some' of these forms we signal that we have not attempted a comprehensive survey or continuous narrative. Instead, we have conducted our enquiry by means of a set of linked essays, organised in rough chronological sequence, which consider the fortunes of a variety of intellectual enterprises that may often seem to be united by little more than the persistent invocation of the labels 'science of politics' or 'political science'. For what brings together the figures considered in this book is certainly not best thought of either as their common articulation of a corpus of knowledge, or as their shared allegiance to a single idea whose progressively more sophisticated expression could be traced in a uniform sequence of chapters. Rather, they gain their place by virtue of their interest in pursuing the notion that 'things political' – the vagueness of the traditional phrase is convenient at this stage – could be treated in ways which were at once systematic and concrete, ways which it would be unduly restrictive to describe as 'empirical' but which certainly aspired to a form of knowledge that was objective, explanatory, and useful.

This notion is, for reasons to be explored below, only indirectly related to what the twentieth century has come to know as the discipline of political science. Indeed, during the nineteenth century it embraced much of the territory now assigned to the semi-autonomous dominions of economics and sociology, just as it was itself constituted by unspecified areas of the larger continents of history and philosophy. Moreover, we are also concerned with what might be called its external relations, with its place in the larger and scarcely less traditional category of the moral sciences. We are dealing, therefore, with a subject which no longer appears on modern maps of knowledge, at least not as the extensive though vaguely delimited empire it once was. Consequently, although some of the figures who appear in these pages have been the objects of intensive study in other contexts – this is true, in varying degrees, of Malthus, Macaulay, James and John Stuart Mill, Bagehot, Maine, Sidgwick, Marshall and Wallas – they are here seen from a distinctive point of view and set alongside other figures whose comparative obscurity has followed from the historiographical neglect of the subject-matter as a whole; the list here would include Dugald Stewart, James Mackintosh, William Stubbs, E. A.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-27770-9 - That Noble Science of Politics: A Study in Nineteenth-Century Intellectual History

Stefan Collini, Donald Winch and John Burrow

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Freeman, J. R. Seeley, T. E. Cliffe Leslie, W. J. Ashley and James Bryce. Macaulay's extravagant encomium, from which our title is taken, is sufficient indication that the aspiration with which we are dealing was in its heyday hardly a modest one, just as from this distance the enterprise it describes may now seem a curiously alien one.

In our choice of a sub-title we are also making something of a declaration of intent, and it is one which is bound up with what we have already said about our subject-matter's lack of an easily recognisable modern identity. For there is an unfortunately familiar way of simplifying the complexity of the intellectual life of the past into a conveniently unified story, one that is particularly favoured when supposedly tracing the history of a modern academic discipline, especially, perhaps, a discipline drawn from what are now regarded as the social sciences. In essence it consists in writing history backwards. The present theoretical consensus of the discipline, or possibly some polemical version of what that consensus should be, is in effect taken as definitive, and the past is then reconstituted as a teleology leading up to and fully manifested in it. Past authors are inducted into the canon of the discipline as precursors or forebears, and passed in review as though by a general distributing medals – and sometimes reprimands – at the end of a successful campaign, with the useful implied corollary that if medals can be distributed the campaign must have been brought to a satisfactory conclusion and the discipline duly established. The list of canonical precursors, arrayed in chronological order, each wearing a label conveniently summarising his 'contribution', then becomes the history of the discipline in question. As with 'official histories' in recently established republics, rival teams of great predecessors may be assembled in this way, ostensibly to proclaim and honour a tradition of surprising antiquity, but in fact to legitimate the claims of the current protagonists in the struggle for power.

The approach exhibited in these essays can be defined by its conscious rejection of this notion of the history of single disciplines – in this case, *prima facie*, of political science – as a way of writing about the past. However polemically useful or pedagogically suggestive such a practice might be within the discipline itself, possibly as a way of drawing nourishment or some other form of comfort from the past, it can have no claim to adequacy or even interest as intellectual history – our common concern here. By implicitly assuming that the discipline has in some ideal sense long existed, though in ways that were only partially disclosed and understood in the past, the teleological history of disciplines superimposes the intellectual map of the present, or some version of it, on the usually significantly differing ones employed in earlier periods, often to the point of obliterating them entirely. New lines of intellectual division are enforced on those who were quite capable of drawing their own, and connec-

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-27770-9 - That Noble Science of Politics: A Study in Nineteenth-Century Intellectual History

Stefan Collini, Donald Winch and John Burrow

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Things political and the intellectual historian*

5

tions which transgress twentieth-century distinctions are dismissed or obscured. The ‘contributions’ made by past authors are approvingly sifted from the texts in which they occur, and the residue, along with the contexts which gave these texts their contemporary point and which still give intelligibility to their underlying assumptions, are tacitly ignored. The distortions which arise in pursuing discipline history in this fashion are essentially those classically denounced by Herbert Butterfield as ‘The Whig Interpretation of History’, and in the extended sense that has since been given to that term the authors of this book would be glad to be described as ‘anti-whig’.

There are, of course, further, though less immediately pressing, forms of distortion which, in attempting to recover the past in its own terms, we also intend to repudiate; we are not, for example, indulging any of those covert forms of reductionism implicit in studies of ‘ideology’. However, even within the work of those who are committed to a genuinely historical re-creation of the past there lurks a subtler kind of distortion, one which we feel a particular wish to disown since it seems to occur most readily in the history of political thought. While we have, we trust, been properly respectful of our authors’ intentions and continually alert to their contexts, we have tried to avoid either an overly rationalistic construal of the former or a too mechanical deployment of the latter. For, in recovering the contemporary questions which past authors may have been addressing, the historian may easily lapse into portraying the complex process of thought and feeling involved in, let us say, writing a book, as little more than an automatic response to a few very selectively described outside events. In striving to reconstitute an intention which could intelligibly be embodied in the work in question, the historian may not always avoid the danger of turning its author into an implausibly single-minded and clear-sighted deliberator who unerringly arrived at what has insensibly come to seem the only rational solution to the reconstructed problem. These lapses may arise as much from a failure of art, no doubt, as from any oversimplification in the methodology which the practice claims to be following, but they are exacerbated by a tendency – again, historians of political thought may be particularly prone to this – to confine the intellectual historian’s task, with needless austerity, to that of re-assembling a set of arguments which, when bolted together at the appropriate angles, constitute the logical structure of a theory (the restriction of the interesting past to ‘theories’ is a characteristic accompanying distortion).

We take it, by contrast, to be part of the defining vocation of the intellectual historian to be alive to the several dimensions of the thought and feeling of the past. Without in any way scouting the logic of their arguments, we have certainly attempted in these essays also to attend to the

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-27770-9 - That Noble Science of Politics: A Study in Nineteenth-Century Intellectual History

Stefan Collini, Donald Winch and John Burrow

Excerpt

[More information](#)

sensibilities of our authors, to the emotional and aesthetic satisfactions they derived from their views, to the styles and genres in which they chose (and in some cases could not but choose) to express them, and to the constant tensions between, on the one hand, the unevenly experienced pressure towards coherence, and, on the other, the desire, not always articulated or even acknowledged, to hold on to certain deeply felt intuitions, a process of internal negotiation which was itself always subject to the demands of occupying a particular station or of addressing a particular audience. We have, accordingly, not confined ourselves to our authors' formal treatises and dress-suited programmatic pronouncements, but have gratefully accepted the illumination provided by occasional writings, letters, contemporary reminiscence, and similar sources. And while we have generally organised our essays around individuals and groups of individuals, we have tried to make room for the independent operation of the power, at once stimulating and constraining, of intellectual tradition, and to allow for the role of fashion, circumstance, and chance. Just how successfully we have realised these rather grand aspirations is, of course, another matter, but at least the failings of the essays which follow are not attributable to our taking a narrow or one-sided view of the intellectual historian's *métier*.

Before proceeding to a fuller description of our subject-matter, there are two final features of the approach adopted here about which it may be as well to counter possible misapprehensions in advance. The first involves what might be called a variant of the 'fat oxen fallacy', that is, the common assumption that in choosing to write about a particular, and often particularly articulate, past figure the intellectual historian is thereby endorsing this figure's views or in some other way subscribing to the 'position' which he is taken to represent. Although a scholar's choice of subject may often reveal certain affinities, and although some element of imaginative sympathy with those about whom one writes may be indispensable to good history, we wish to emphasise, what the tenor of parts of the following essays will in any case soon reveal, that in drawing attention to figures who have suffered certain kinds of scholarly neglect or misinterpretation we do not take ourselves to be recommending their views or advocating a return to their methods. Indeed, the diversity of views and methods, some of them mutually contradictory, would make this a pretty unpromising venture anyway. It is certainly true that some of our cast display qualities we find attractive – qualities of historical insight or analytical discrimination, of respect for complexity or sense of proportion, and much else besides. But these positive qualities were very unevenly distributed among the figures discussed here – James Mill is not readily associated with respect for complexity nor Freeman with a sense of proportion – and a list of their

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-27770-9 - That Noble Science of Politics: A Study in Nineteenth-Century Intellectual History

Stefan Collini, Donald Winch and John Burrow

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Things political and the intellectual historian*

7

less attractive traits could be compiled no less easily. At all events, our treatment should make clear that we are hardly offering this book as a celebration of a lost Golden Age of political wisdom.

This naturally raises the second matter about which there may be some misapprehension, namely, that we may be thought to be assessing the faltering performances of our cast against the standard of some ideal form of political science, a ghost at the feast, unseen, yet sitting in judgement on all. What we have said about our aversion to discipline-history should already have done something to dampen this expectation, and we hope it is unnecessary to labour the point that we are not conducting an inquisition in which all the victims are bound to be found wanting in a doctrine that is both exacting and esoteric. In individual cases we have certainly not refrained from remarking some of the more obvious limitations and confusions in the ideas discussed, and we have throughout observed the unresolved tension between the claims of inductive and deductive approaches to the kinds of political knowledge thought to be available and desirable. But to make such observations does not require us to be in possession of the political scientist's stone: we remain agnostic on such fundamental and ultimately epistemological problems, content, as perhaps historians should be, to leave their resolution to the philosophers.

Having rejected the retrospective teleology of discipline-history, one is, of course, left with the problem of delimiting one's subject-matter in other ways. We certainly believe that our protagonists and their concerns have something in common, something which separates them from other figures and issues in the general field of nineteenth-century social and political thought, and something which by its very nature encourages us to distance ourselves from the main historiographical dispensations that prevail in writing about this field. Put negatively, as is appropriate here, we do not consider our authors – though some, in another context, might warrant such treatment – as political philosophers, chiefly concerned to deduce from general moral ends the nature of the good life for men in society; nor, conversely, are they primarily philosophers of history for whom the category of the political is deprived of all significant autonomy by incorporation in some larger story of the unfolding and mutation of social and economic forms. It is perhaps easier to grasp the demarcation of our subject-matter from the first of these types than from the second. Although all our authors could no doubt be said to have pre-supposed certain fundamental notions about the grounds of moral obligation or the nature of a just polity, and although some of them, notably Mill and Sidgwick, dealt explicitly with such matters in other works, it is clear that our concern with their projects for a science of politics is addressed to a

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-27770-9 - *That Noble Science of Politics: A Study in Nineteenth-Century Intellectual History*

Stefan Collini, Donald Winch and John Burrow

Excerpt

[More information](#)

different type and level of enquiry. But the boundaries between such projects and what we are here calling philosophies of history may be more difficult to locate, especially where our authors tied their understanding of politics to some more general notion of progress, as in the case, to single out only the best-known examples, of Mill, Macaulay, and Maine. In part, these boundaries must be allowed to emerge in the course of our discussion of the particular figures, especially in Essays IV, VI, and VII. But it may be helpful at this stage to observe that the philosophies of history which we take to fall outside the limits of this book are characteristically distinguished by their claims to universal, even cosmic, purchase, their compression of history into a single teleology, and their specification of both the moral or social goal and the series of stages by which it is to be realised as such functional wholes that instructed political action comes to seem either impossible or irrelevant. Comte, Spencer, and the diverse followers of Hegel provide the most familiar nineteenth-century examples, though as the special case of Hegel's own theory suggests, the grounding of such comprehensive teleologies in a more general metaphysical or evolutionary scheme was not of itself sufficient to displace the political from its traditional centrality. On the other hand, in nineteenth-century Britain the extreme historicist position is represented rather, as in the case of Spencer, by the systematic deduction from a beneficent historical process of a radically individualist, even anarchist consummation. Such decidedly negative conceptions of political action fall outside anything considered here, and while philosophies of history, especially in the form of schemes of social evolutionism, exercised a growing attraction in mid-Victorian Britain, and although several of our authors were clearly responsive to them, it is on account of their engagement with a different set of enterprises that they merit inclusion here.

To have a notion, for which there can of course be numerous specific vocabularies, of 'the political' as embodying possibilities of circumscribed initiative, conditioned but not wholly determined by circumstances, was obviously to hold a balance: to believe both that there are external conditions, either perennial or at least of sufficient generality to be worth identifying in more than purely local terms, which effective political activity must respect, and also that political activity of an instructed and considered kind and of potentially far-reaching significance is possible. To press further in the voluntarist or optimistic direction would be to become the adviser to or imaginary embodiment of an all-but-omnipotent legislator, for whom, apart from goodwill, the chief desideratum is clarity of mind and purpose: Rousseau and the early Bentham offer familiar examples. At the outer limit in this direction lies utopia. Press instead in the opposite direction and there are the familiar features of the historicist as

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-27770-9 - That Noble Science of Politics: A Study in Nineteenth-Century Intellectual History

Stefan Collini, Donald Winch and John Burrow

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Things political and the intellectual historian*

9

obstetrician, or, in another idiom, the advocate of praxis, gambling that *next* time the machinery of the historical process is bound to deliver the jackpot if banged hard enough.

These extremes have an arresting emotional flamboyance which challenges the reader, demanding rejection or conversion; and with the latter, one is immediately rewarded, as converts usually are, with established procedures for finding the world less puzzling, and for becoming articulate and authoritative. This, together with the fact that their coherence and high level of abstraction make them suitable for pedagogical summary, has ensured that when the histories of social and political thought are written it is the extremes, the closed doctrines, that tend to provide the recognised moments of the story, and out of which the 'isms' and 'traditions' are constructed. What we have tried to present here is not a rival 'tradition' or parallel story of transmission and development, so much as a succession of attempts to occupy and explore the role of informed student of the conditions and possibilities of politics, and of the institutional structures through which it works. Our authors showed no close agreement on, or even identical degree of interest in, the extent to which politics was or was not merely a matter of accepting surrounding necessities. None of them held – what few in fact hold, though more proclaim – that politics is so much a matter of time and place and circumstance that all political wisdom is necessarily purely local and essentially inarticulate. But some were more attracted to the study of the historical and institutional frame, others to the possibilities of legislation and foresight – differences that may themselves be susceptible of historical explanation. It is only by contrast with the extremes that we have an identifiable middle ground, and at the margins there was inevitably a good deal of intellectual exchange and flirtation, a mingling of concepts, vocabularies, and beliefs.

There are two currently available historiographical categories to which this subject-matter might be assigned, neither of which, in our opinion, would be altogether appropriate. The first is that of the history of political theory, that familiar procession of dignitaries stretching, in England during this period, from Bentham and Burke to Mill and Green, all decked out in their most ambitious philosophical finery, all shorn of distracting involvements in current political affairs, all fixing their gaze on the distant question of the grounds of political obligation, all carrying banners inscribed with the mottoes of the larger 'isms'. An informed nineteenth-century observer, confronted with the sight of this well-drilled procession, might have some difficulty in identifying his erstwhile contemporaries: Burke, for example, looks distinctly uncomfortable in his tight-fitting philosophical collar, and even Bentham seems more at home with a neighbouring group of Law Lords than in a fitting-room dominated

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-27770-9 - That Noble Science of Politics: A Study in Nineteenth-Century Intellectual History

Stefan Collini, Donald Winch and John Burrow

Excerpt

[More information](#)

by busts of Plato and Aristotle. But our nineteenth-century observer, having more or less inferred the theme, would particularly remark the absentees: where, for instance, was Bagehot, shrewdest analyst of the realities of the constitution; where Maine, whose method dominated a whole generation's reflections on politics; where Seeley, Sidgwick, and half a dozen others? And in so remarking, our hypothetical observer would not so much be pleading for the procession to be enlarged by the inclusion of one or two underrated figures, as challenging the whole notion that the varieties of reflection on things political that were important in nineteenth-century Britain could be represented in this way at all. He might vary his complaint by explaining that two of the most prominent sources of practical political wisdom for him and his contemporaries had been, broadly speaking, history and political economy, yet neither of these seemed to figure in the procession at all.

This observation calls up that other historiographical category to which our subject-matter might, at first sight, seem to belong, the history of the social sciences. The procession here is rather more disorderly, partly organised in terms of the alumni associations of the various constituent disciplines, partly in terms of an affiliation to a central conception of the nature of the distinctively 'social'. The fact that it is usually led by such sociological nabobs as Comte, Durkheim and Weber indicates how far it is from providing congenial company for our cast, and the fact that it has often been thought difficult to assemble a respectable British contingent at all may suggest a more radical mis-match still. Indeed, the very category of 'social science' has been construed in ways which make it unreceptive and even hostile to the more traditional notions of the centrality and relative autonomy of politics entertained by our figures. Insofar as social science has been identified with the discovery of essentially self-regulating or historicist models of 'economy' and 'society', it has been taken to undercut any independent treatment of 'polity', reducing it, in fact, to something which is necessarily epiphenomenal or subservient to more powerful forces. That the procession of canonical political theorists is generally regarded as petering out at roughly the point at which the social sciences seem to be picking up strength has been interpreted as 'the erosion of the distinctively political' by the rise of the 'sociological perspective'. Interestingly, the timing of this takeover seems very uncertain, some placing it fairly precisely in the 1840s, others more loosely in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries,¹ but in

¹ The most arresting and inclusive statement of this thesis can be found in Sheldon Wolin's *Politics and Vision; Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought* (Boston, 1960), chs. 9 and 10: the case for placing the change in the 1840s, on the grounds that it required making a clear distinction between political and social relationships, is rehearsed in W. G. Runciman, *Social Science and Political Theory* (Cambridge, 1963), ch. 2.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-27770-9 - That Noble Science of Politics: A Study in Nineteenth-Century Intellectual History

Stefan Collini, Donald Winch and John Burrow

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Things political and the intellectual historian*

11

either case it is hard to accommodate the continued vitality of the idea of a science of politics in nineteenth-century Britain.

There is a good deal of irony in all this, as there usually is with teleological and anachronistic readings of history. Thus, many of the figures who appear in our early essays, far from feeling threatened with extinction when writing on politics, acted and wrote as though they were building on foundations for a science of politics that had been well and truly laid in the eighteenth century by some of the very same authors who, according to modern discipline-historians, were in the business of founding social sciences that would fatally undermine the serious study of politics. The best examples here are Montesquieu, who was to be praised, somewhat condescendingly, by Comte and Durkheim for having perceived the importance of ‘social laws’ and ‘social facts’; Adam Smith, whose concept of the ‘invisible hand’ and of the self-regulating properties of a competitive economic system could be made to seem quintessentially a-political; and those Scottish moral philosophers and historians of civil society, again including Smith, usually in the company of Adam Ferguson and John Millar, who were, without knowing it, creating the preconditions for a materialist form of historicism.²

Fortunately, as we remark below, more scholarly work has recently done something to rescue these eighteenth-century figures from the grosser forms of misrepresentation, but the nineteenth century has been less well served. Partly this is because the category of ‘the political’ is then faced with genuine challenges from other, related, and often more comprehensive intellectual projects, especially from the mid-century onwards; and there has been a tendency to extend this insight backwards and sideways to cover a longer period and a larger number of writers than is really legitimate. As we shall see in some of our later essays – most strikingly, perhaps, in that on Sidgwick – devotees of the science of politics in the second half of the nineteenth century increasingly had to come to terms with the cultural hegemony of ‘the philosophy of history’ and ‘the science of society’. To study ideas of a science of politics in the later nineteenth century, in a climate of expansive optimism about the prospects for social science generally, may appear to have some affinities with the business of tagging a species threatened with extinction. To recognise them as still retaining a discernible intellectual identity and family resemblance may often seem to require a rather finicky sense of discrimination. Nevertheless, the recognition that they do have distinctive qualities, and that important elements of nineteenth-century discourse, habits of thought

² The last of these positions is particularly associated with the work of R. L. Meek on the Scottish historical school: see, for example, his *Social Science and the Ignoble Savage* (Cambridge, 1976).