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Richard Tuck

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A particular feature of this study is its examination of the relations between English and Continental political thought, and its siting of political theory in the context of the history of moral philosophy. It will be welcomed by all historians of political thought and those interested in the development of the idea of the state.

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IDEAS IN CONTEXT

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For William

**Meam aetatem aliquid ei serium, cuius aetatula mille millenis
ioculis me exhilaravit.**

*(From the dedication to his son in Nicholas Hill's *Philosophia
Epicurea, Democritiana, Theophrastica* ... (Paris 1601) sig. aiii)*

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Preface

This book began as an attempt by James Tully and myself to write a complete and up-to-date history of political thought in seventeenth-century Europe. I agreed to cover the first half of the century, with Hobbes's mature work (and in particular of course *Leviathan*, published conveniently for our purposes in 1651) as the climax of my story; Tully's volume was to take the narrative down to the formation of the developed European state system at the Treaty of Utrecht. Once we had agreed the division of responsibility, we also agreed that we would work on the two volumes largely independently from one another, so that the books would not be in the usual sense a product of joint authorship. Since then, the two volumes have developed very separate lives, and they must be judged accordingly by the reader when they have both appeared.

But whatever their differences, there will also be a fundamental similarity between the approach in the two books. Tully and I have discussed our work together ever since we were graduate students in Cambridge, and despite our many differences of opinion and emphasis, we share two beliefs about how the history of political thought should be written. One of them is that to understand the political theories of any period we need to be historians, and we have each been very keen to depict as far as possible the character of the actual life which these theorists were leading, and the specific political questions which engaged their attention. But the other is that a study of the reactions to these questions should not be *purely* a piece of historical writing. It should also be a contribution to our understanding of how people might cope with broadly similar issues in our own time. The point of studying the seventeenth century, for both of us, is that many of the conflicts which marked its politics are also to be found in some form in the late twentieth century; and,

indeed, the better our historical sense of what those conflicts were, the more often they seem to resemble modern ones.

As I started to write my volume, I realised that a simple narrative of the ideas of the principal theorists from 1600 to 1651 would not be a satisfying or illuminating project. The reason for this lies in what will be the major theme of this volume: the attack on constitutionalism and its replacement by a modern, instrumental and often unscrupulous politics. The great struggle in the middle of the sixteenth century had been over the constitutional structures which the major European states ought to take as their norms; this was at the heart of the conflict between Catholic and Protestant in the French wars of religion and the Dutch Revolt, and it is the central theme of Quentin Skinner's account of the period in the second volume of his *Foundations of Modern Political Thought*. Many of the constitutionalist positions which the rival groups took up in those years were of course perpetuated by their successors well into the seventeenth century, and a full account of them and their origins could add very little to Skinner's account; some idea of these late constitutionalist writers is also still given by Gierke's *Natural Law and the Theory of Society 1500–1800*. On the other hand, much of the most important political theory of the seventeenth century was either hostile to or simply uninterested in these themes. Instead, as we shall see in great detail later, it took its primary inspiration from the arguments about *raison d'état* in the late sixteenth century – the explicitly anti-constitutional (and often anti-ethical) literature which burgeoned so astonishingly in Europe from 1580 to 1620.

I therefore decided that my volume would in a sense be a very unfair project: it would take for granted (to an extent) Skinner's work on the character of sixteenth-century constitutionalism, and would pay less attention to the heirs of that movement than to their modern rivals. In particular, a proper understanding of *raison d'état* theory became the first priority, and the search for that led me into a reconsideration of the earlier Renaissance. Before the constitutional struggles of the mid-sixteenth century, there had of course been the great literature of the high Renaissance, which often resembled (in the eyes of subsequent historians) some of the literature of the late sixteenth century – Machiavelli, for example, was obviously in some sense a precursor of the *raison d'état* writers. And yet there were important differences; a simple one, which was nevertheless of profound importance, was the fact that the later writers took Tacitus

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as their ancient exemplar, while the earlier ones took Cicero as their model and abhorred what Tacitus represented. A more subtle difference, though again of great importance, was the role of money, and economic issues generally, in the later literature: the early Renaissance had nothing to match the ‘mercantilist’ arguments which became a staple feature of the *raison d’état* writers.

So I found myself investigating the difference between these two broadly humanist literatures, and this investigation is the subject-matter of Chapter 1. (Some of this material has already appeared in Tuck 1990a.) In the process, I came to believe that the most important difference of all was the much greater role accorded to *scepticism* in the late sixteenth century: that behind *raison d’état* lies scepticism, and that this should not surprise us – for after all, a scepticism about the validity of moral principles is almost a necessary condition for a thoroughgoing confidence in the need to override the ethical and legal norms of a society. So Chapters 2 and 3 narrate the appearance and development of a common culture across Western Europe at the end of the sixteenth century in which scepticism, Stoicism and *raison d’état* went together. The connexion between scepticism and Stoicism (especially marked in the writings of the most famous figure in this culture, Michel de Montaigne) was important, and has often been neglected by historians (who have, for example, tried to interpret Montaigne’s work in terms of implausible chronological divisions between his ‘sceptical’ and his ‘Stoic’ periods).

The connexion arose because Renaissance scepticism, like its ancient precursor, was not fundamentally an *epistemological* position, but rather a *psychological* one: the sceptic was searching for ‘wisdom’ as much as any of the other philosophers, and he believed that he had found it in the complete elimination from his mind of the beliefs which cause harm – namely all beliefs which, if acted upon or expressed, would bring him into some kind of conflict with other men or with the world itself. The Stoic had the same kind of ambition, though he believed that the same self-protective wisdom was to be found in the elimination of *passion* and desire rather than in belief. The close kinship between the two attitudes is clear enough, particularly as it is reasonable to suppose that there is a cognitive element in most emotions, and that passion can in the end only be controlled or eliminated by the control of belief. It was this theme of self-control (equally marked, in Tully’s view, in the later century)

which led us to call our work *Philosophy and Government*, since the government not just of a state but also of a self is one of our principal subjects. The political analogue of this kind of self-discipline was naturally going to be a kind of *raison d'état* theory, in which a population had to be disciplined and manipulated in the interests of its security.

This new culture met with resistance, however, just as the 'old' humanism of the Ciceronians had done a century before, and this resistance is the theme of Chapter 4. This is the chapter in which I pay most attention to the elements of constitutionalism which were still powerful in the early seventeenth century. It is interesting that Germany plays a more central role in this chapter than in any of the others, since a striking fact about the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries is the reluctance of German intellectuals fully to endorse either Tacitism or its successor, the 'modern' school of natural law represented by Grotius. Not until the time of Pufendorf was any major German writer centrally involved in these cultures; and even then, Pufendorf was much more critical of them than is often recognised. This was no doubt connected with a fundamental feature of the new humanism – its role in what we have come to term 'state-building'. The ideas both of the sceptics and of the 'post-sceptics', such as Grotius or Hobbes, played a vital role in the construction of the effective modern states which had begun to occupy Europe, and lay siege to an entire world, by 1650. But Germany was, of course, outside this process: a bloody war was fought (in part) to stop such a thing from happening in the lands of the Holy Roman Empire, and German political theory expressed this opposition to the ideology of the modern states.

The remainder of the volume deals not with the resistance to the culture of *raison d'état*, but rather with its remarkable transformation into the great natural law theories of the mid-century. The idea that there was such a transformation is, perhaps, the principal historical claim which I am making, and I am aware that it is an unusual view of the material. Writers such as Grotius, Hobbes and Locke did not on the face of it use the language of *raison d'état* and scepticism; instead, they use the language of natural law and natural rights, and in general resemble on the surface more the scholastic writers from the thirteenth century onwards – the antithesis of the Tacitist authors of the late sixteenth century. The use by the seventeenth-century writers of this vocabulary led many people during the last

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hundred years to suppose that it was a great mistake to posit some great divide in European history between the Middle Ages and modernity; the medieval roots of this language was indeed one of the themes of a book I published thirteen years ago (Tuck 1979). And yet, as I recognised even then (pp. 174–5), the cleverest and most perceptive contemporaries of these writers were very clear that their work represented a profound break with the scholastics. From the time of Samuel Pufendorf down to that of Immanuel Kant, the composers of ‘histories of morality’ (as the genre came to be termed) had a common theme: that a truly modern and ‘scientific’ way of thinking about ethics and politics had come into being in the seventeenth century, and that the novelty of its approach consisted in its new response to the problem of sceptical relativism (for a fuller account of this, see Tuck 1987). The biographies of the seventeenth-century writers might also have alerted us to this gap between them and the scholastics: the wide humanist interests of Grotius and Hobbes, and even the way in which they earned their living, were poles apart from the lives of men like Molina or Suarez (let alone earlier figures such as Vitoria or Almain).

The principal heroes of this new movement, these ‘historians of morality’ agreed, were Hugo Grotius (who first ‘broke the ice’, according to the most important of the historians, Jean Barbeyrac), John Selden (the English politician and theorist), Thomas Hobbes and Samuel Pufendorf. John Locke, too, figures in at least some accounts. The importance they accorded to Grotius is striking, and surprising to many modern scholars: the surprise is due to the fact that this whole tradition of historiography was effectively destroyed by Kant, who despised the answer to relativism found in Grotius and his successors, and who wished to rewrite the history of ethics in such a way as to make his own innovations the climax of the story. Since Kant, the conventional histories of philosophy in our culture have followed his lead in denigrating the novelty of these writers; but the closer one looks at what they wrote, and the questions to which they were responding, the more one is impressed by the broad accuracy of the late seventeenth-century historiographers. Among modern historians, only Anna Maria Battista in her little-known work of 1966 (little known, at least, in English-speaking countries) has put forward a similar argument.

In particular, I came to agree with this pre-Kantian view that Grotius was the most creative figure in this tradition. Essentially, as

I argue in Chapter 5, Grotius perceived what the moral implications might be of the psychological assumptions of scepticism. The sceptics, as I said earlier, were concerned with the route to wisdom, and took the life of the wise man to consist in preserving himself by eliminating both passion and belief. But their theory thereby accorded a central and apparently universal role to the principle of *self-preservation* (just as that of the Stoics also did), and the universality of that principle could be used to undermine the relativism of the sceptics. Grotius and his followers treated self-preservation as the fundamental natural right, and on its basis sought to erect the elaborate structures of what was later christened 'natural jurisprudence'. Alongside the natural right, they put an equally minimalist natural 'law', which in most cases was little more than the bare obligation not to harm other people *unnecessarily* (i.e. unless it was in the interests of one's preservation in some way).

In Chapter 6 I try and place the ideas of the English Revolution in the same context. Again, this may be somewhat surprising to many readers, who have been used to stressing the backward-looking and constitutionalist side of the revolution and of the remarkable political literature which it spawned; it would also (it should be said) have been surprising to the historians of morality, who would have been amazed to see the ideas of the Levellers being studied alongside those of Grotius or Hobbes. But the events in England between 1642 and 1650 were, ideologically speaking, the most remarkable political crisis in seventeenth-century Europe, and they deeply affected the Dutch and English theorists who were so important in the development of modern political theory. Moreover, as we shall see, they were notable for the extent to which the ideas and the vocabulary of the new humanism of Tacitism and *raison d'état* were allowed a free reign in the fundamental politics of a major European state; the difference between the revolution and the wars of religion rests (I believe) on this fact, which gave the agents in the English case a wider field of action than their French predecessors had enjoyed and led them to their extraordinary attack on the old constitution and the monarch who personified it in January 1649. The Enlightenment politics of the late seventeenth century enshrined in the history of morality may have been as much a result of the actions of these agents as of the great theorists.

Chapter 7 then turns to Hobbes (using some material which has already appeared in Tuck 1988 and 1990b). This whole volume

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could indeed be read as an extended explanation of Hobbes's ideas, for most of the themes of political theory during the previous half century surface somewhere in his writings. He represents in a sense the most convincing transformation of *raison d'état* theory into natural jurisprudence: his epistemology was sceptical, his ethics were relativist, and yet he sought to base a 'science' of human conduct on the principle of self-preservation. Montaigne had urged that in order to protect ourselves we should purge ourselves of our own beliefs, and live quietly in accordance with the laws and customs of our country; Hobbes concluded likewise that to enjoy security we must renounce our own judgement and live in accordance with the laws of our sovereign. His theory (properly understood) is as much a theory of self-government as it is of civil government. He remains the most fascinating and acute of any of the writers of this period, though (I hope) he no longer appears original in quite the way in which historians of philosophy once thought him to be. Grotius, as I have said, was probably more original; but Hobbes saw deeper into the issues of relativism than any philosopher of his time, and perhaps even than any philosopher since. For that reason he must remain the foundational philosopher of our political institutions: the state structures which came into being in his time persist down to our time, and his summation of the political arguments about their emergence is still a textbook for us.

Many people have helped with the composition of this book. David Wootton was one of the inspirers of the enterprise, and was originally to have taken part in it; Quentin Skinner and John Dunn have read it at intervals and given their usual perceptive advice, while Jeremy Mynott of Cambridge University Press has been a great encouragement. Anthony Pagden and Pasquale Pasquino have also read and commented on drafts, while some of the fundamental ideas were argued out in discussions with John Pocock, Istvan Hont, Peter Burke, Tim Hochstrasser, Howard Moss, Peter Miller, Dean Kernan, Walter Johnson, Peter Borschberg and innumerable undergraduates of Cambridge University over the last decade. Iris Hunter edited the text for the Press with exemplary care and helpfulness. Shortly before the book went to press, Maurizio Viroli allowed me to read a manuscript of his remarkable new work on *ragion di stato*, and I was able to correct some of what I had said about its origins, though I was not able to take full account of his

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PREFACE

insights. I do not know whether it is proper to thank a prospective co-author, but my greatest debt (as always) is to Jim Tully, who time after time has made me see why what we are working on is worthwhile.

All translations in the text are by myself, unless there is a specific reference to an edition of the work in translation. In most cases I have also chosen to give the vernacular rather than the Latin version of a scholar's surname, though there are some obvious exceptions to this (e.g. Grotius, and not De Groot).