

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-71406-8 - Political Thought and History: Essays on Theory and Method

J. G. A. Pocock

Excerpt

[More information](#)

---

PART I

*Political thought as history*

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-71406-8 - Political Thought and History: Essays on Theory and Method

J. G. A. Pocock

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## CHAPTER I

*The history of political thought:  
a methodological inquiry*

In this article I shall attempt to make a theoretical statement of what it is we study when we claim to be studying the history of political thought, and to draw from this statement some inferences about how the study thus defined might be undertaken.

The history of political thought is an established and flourishing discipline, but the terms on which it is established and flourishes appear to be conventional and traditional. At the level of academic inquiry, it is often useful to submit a tradition to examination and make it yield some theoretical account of itself; and it may happen that a tradition of thought is shown to contain some vaguenesses and inconsistencies, whose removal could have been achieved in no other way. When I suggest that certain improvements could be carried out in this discipline if a more precise theoretical formulation were adopted of its subject-matter and methods, I shall not be suggesting that this, or any other, formulation is the only basis on which the discipline can be effectively carried on. But a political scientist may further be interested in the relations between the political activities, institutions and traditions of a society and the terms in which that political complex is from time to time expressed and commented on, and in the uses to which those terms are put; in short, in the functions within a political society of what may be called its language (or languages) of politics.

When I say that the history of political thought is at present a traditional form of study, I mean that it consists of the study of such thinkers about politics as have become and remained the objects of historical attention; and that our reasons for studying them, and the character of the attention we pay them, are such as have grown up in the course of our historical experience. These writers and their ideas do not form the subject-matter of a single consistent science. Simply, there is a body of thinkers to whom we have

[Published in Peter Laslett and W. G. Runciman (eds.), *Philosophy, Politics and Society*, 2nd ser. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), pp. 183–202.]

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-71406-8 - Political Thought and History: Essays on Theory and Method

J. G. A. Pocock

Excerpt

[More information](#)

grown into the habit of paying attention, and a number of viewpoints from which they appear interesting to us. These thinkers, from these viewpoints – now from one, now from another – we study; doing so is a traditional piece of behaviour, and they and their study form a tradition, or part of a tradition, which, in Oakeshott's parlance,<sup>1</sup> we get to know.

Since it can be accepted that there is no one set of assumptions from which alone it is proper to approach the history of political thought, there must consequently be an indefinite number of approaches which we may make; and what these are is determined less by ourselves, independently choosing a line of inquiry, than by the social and intellectual traditions in which we conduct our thinking. The traditionalist attitude consists in accepting (1) the indefinite variety of these possible approaches, (2) that there is no *a priori* reason for preferring any one of them to others, (3) that we can never hope to rid ourselves entirely of the simultaneous presence in our thoughts of more than one of the different sets of assumptions and interests on which they are founded. In this field as in others, the traditionalist acknowledges that the subject-matter of his study forms a tradition in which he is involved, and that his own approach to it is determined by this and other traditions; he settles down to conduct his thinking from within a pattern of inheritance over which he has not perfect control.

This situation is one in which reasonably satisfactory intellectual activity can be carried on. But to say that a historian does his thinking within a tradition is to say that he does it within an inheritance of intellectual positions which can never be reduced to a single pattern of coherence and cannot even be completely distinguished from one another. The more fully we accept this, the clearer should the necessity become to distinguish between the various positions of which our tradition consists with as great a degree of precision as can be managed – meaning by the term 'precision' that precision which knows the limits of its own preciseness. To accept that our position is a traditional one is to accept that there are and must be limits on our power to clarify our proceedings, but it obviously does not mean that we should not clarify what we are trying to do at any given moment to the limits of our ability, or seek for means of pushing those limits back. The defect of the traditionalist definition of an intellectual inquiry, however, is that it says nothing about the means by which this clarification may be attempted. If means of doing this are not found, confusions will occur which may lead,

<sup>1</sup> See Michael Oakeshott, 'Political Education', in Peter Laslett (ed.), *Philosophy, Politics and Society* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1956). [This was the first volume of the series in the second of which this essay appeared.]

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-71406-8 - Political Thought and History: Essays on Theory and Method

J. G. A. Pocock

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The history of political thought*

5

paradoxically enough, as easily in the direction of intellectual vagueness and pretension as in that of the conservative and empirical caution which it is generally the design of the traditionalist definition to produce.

This is peculiarly the case with the tradition of thought we call the history of political ideas, because that tradition is a tradition of intellectualizing; and there is a two-way relationship between confusions of thought about how others did their thinking and confusions of thought about why and how we are thinking about them. To define what I mean by 'a tradition of intellectualizing', I shall adopt the Burkean-Oakeshottian characterization of political theorizing as an activity of 'abstraction, or abridgment, from a tradition'. In this usage 'tradition' now refers to a 'tradition of behaviour', meaning the whole complex of ways of behaving, talking and thinking in politics which we inherit from a social past. From this 'tradition of behaviour' political thought forms a series of 'abstractions' or 'abridgments'; the sense in which it is desirable to define this series as itself a 'tradition' has been given earlier and does not for the present concern us. From a 'tradition of behaviour', then, theorists perform acts of abstraction; the study of political thought is the study of what takes place when they do this.

There are at least two approaches to this study. Political thought may be regarded as an aspect of social behaviour, of the ways in which humans behave towards each other and towards the institutions of their society; or it may be regarded as an aspect of intellectuality, of their attempts to gain understanding of their experience and environment. Abstractions are made for a medley of purposes, varying between the rhetorical and the scientific. Indeed, in political as in other forms of social thought, it is never possible to isolate one of the two functions of abstraction decisively from the other. To solve a theoretical problem may have practical implications and, conversely, to state and solve a practical problem may raise new problems of wider generality. However much the conservative may deplore the fact, the human mind does pursue implications from the theoretical to the practical and from the practical to the theoretical; and no one knows where the process of abstraction may lead, which one is beginning (perhaps) with a clear and limited purpose in view.

Abstractions point to further abstractions and the level of thought shifts constantly between the theoretical and the practical. The same piece of thought may be viewed, simultaneously, as an act of political persuasion and as an incident in the pursuit of understanding; the arguments and concepts are repeated, after very short intervals, for purposes more theoretical, or more practical, than those for which they were just now employed. A

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-71406-8 - Political Thought and History: Essays on Theory and Method

J. G. A. Pocock

Excerpt

[More information](#)

philosophy reappears as an ideology; a party slogan as a heuristic device of high scientific value. It becomes important, then, that we do not make *a priori* assumptions about the character of political thought – as we do when we dismiss a piece of theoretical writing by representing it as a piece of persuasion on behalf of a group – and that we possess means of distinguishing between the different functions which political thought may be performing, and of following the history of concepts and abstractions as they move from one employment to another.

It may therefore be expected that the political thought appearing in a given society over a period – and the same may well be true of the political thought of a given individual – will prove on inspection to exist on a number of different levels of abstraction, varying with the character of the problems which it is intended to solve. This will confront the historian with no insoluble conundrum. It is perfectly possible, by the ordinary methods of historical reconstruction, to determine the level of abstraction on which a particular piece of thinking took place. But it does mean that the only assumptions we can make *in advance* about that level will be selective ones. We can choose to concern ourselves only with political thought at a certain level of abstraction; we cannot assume in advance that political thought in actual fact took place only on that level. The strictly historical task before us is plainly that of determining by investigation on what levels of abstraction thought did take place.

But the historian of political thought is all too often diverted from carrying out this task, and what diverts him may be termed the indefinite rationality of his subject. The act of disengagement, of ‘abstraction from a tradition’, is simultaneously an act of intellectual reorganization, and the writers whose thought he studies had all, in varying degrees, a tendency to become philosophers – that is, to organize their thought towards higher states of rational coherence. To this process, once embarked upon, there is no known end, and our effort to understand the philosopher’s thought must be an effort not only to follow it, but actually to assist it, in its indefinite progress towards higher states of organization. Consequently, the historian of political thought is commonly engaged both in strictly historical reconstruction and in a kind of philosophical reconstruction – one seeks to understand past political thought by raising it to ever higher levels of generality and abstraction.

As a result, the history of political thought has a constant tendency to become philosophy. The historian has a further professional motive pressing in this direction: the need to find a narrative theme around which to organize the piece of history which one is studying. One may be writing

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-71406-8 - Political Thought and History: Essays on Theory and Method

J. G. A. Pocock

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The history of political thought*

7

a history of political thought in a certain period, embracing a number of thinkers who developed their political ideas in the attempt to deal with a number of problems at a number of different levels of abstraction; and one desires to make a single coherent story out of it all. One has already, as we have seen, a tendency to study each thinker at a high level of abstraction; and by interpreting all their thought at a high common level, one discovers certain general assumptions which all adopted, or by their attitude towards which each can be interpreted.

The history of political thought in this period now becomes the history of these assumptions: of the various consequences that were deduced from them, of the various attitudes that were adopted towards them, and of the various modifications that were introduced into them, so that perhaps by the end of the period they are shown to have become significantly unlike what they were at its beginning. The history of political thought – in this no doubt resembling that of other forms of organized thought – has in this way a tendency to become the history of mutations in the cardinal assumptions (perhaps unconscious ones) on which it can be shown to have been based. If the term ‘philosophy’ may be used for thought which leads to the establishment or modification of cardinal assumptions, the history being written will be philosophical history; and if the set of assumptions whose history is being traced can be shown to have been cardinal not only to the political thought of an age, but to all or several of its modes of organized thought, they may properly be termed its *Weltanschauung* and the history being written will be *Weltanschauungsgeschichte*.

In this way, the tradition which is the object of study has been condensed into a single narrative, taking place at a high level of abstraction. It must next be asked whether the process described furnishes valid historical explanations. The answer must depend on the criteria we adopt; but a good test of the value of a piece of history expressed in highly abstract terms is to ask whether its abstractions correspond to realities actually experienced, to things which some identifiable Alcibiades really did or suffered. If the assumptions on which changes in thought are supposed to rest are represented as such that nobody was aware of making them, it will be difficult to submit the model to verification. But if it can independently be shown that these assumptions were consciously formulated from time to time, then what was an explanatory model will begin to appear a history of events which actually occurred. We may write the history of thought in terms of abstractions at any level of generality, no matter how high, so long as we can provide independent verification that the abstractions we employ were employed in the relevant field, at the relevant time, by thinkers included

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-71406-8 - Political Thought and History: Essays on Theory and Method

J. G. A. Pocock

Excerpt

[More information](#)

in our story. We may write in terms of mutations occurring in the *Weltanschauung*, of a continuing dialogue between more or less stable systems of philosophy, or cardinal ideas in the stable vocabulary of political theory; and whenever the explanations we construct are found to be historically valid, historical understanding will be enriched.

Yet it is impossible to be wholly satisfied with the process of thought so far described. If political thought is 'abstraction from a tradition', that abstraction may be carried to many different levels of theoretical generality; and we have so far depicted a historian capable of verifying whether political thought did in fact take place at the level of abstraction at which one has chosen to explain it, but not of starting one's inquiries by empirically ascertaining the level at which it was taking place. The choice of a level of abstraction is determined by the need to give as completely rational an explanation as possible of the piece of thought with which one is concerned; the level one chooses will therefore tend to be high, and to rise. One selects the assumptions on the basis of which the piece of thought can be explained with maximum rational coherence, and then seeks to show that they were in use at the relevant period and were employed by the thinker or thinkers one is studying.

If this is the only method we are capable of adopting, we may be at a loss when confronted with the possibility that the piece of thought in question may be as well or better explained on assumptions which do not endow it with maximum rational coherence. There are passages in the writings of Burke (let us suppose) which can be explained by assuming them to be based on presumptions which are to be found explicit in the writings of Hume. Our historian embraces this mode of explanation, with the consequence that one presents Burke's thought in these passages as being systematic political philosophy of the same order as the relevant passages from Hume. This method predisposes us to accept the idea that Burke's political thought can best be explained as political philosophy. But now let it be suggested that the same passages in Burke can be no less plausibly explained as grounded on assumptions of a different order of generality – assumptions made by lawyers about institutions and practice, for example, rather than assumptions made by philosophers about thought and action; and let it be further suggested that though this explanation does not provide Burke's thought with maximum rational coherence, it is capable of a higher degree of historical verification than the explanation which does.

The historian we have hitherto imagined is poorly placed for taking part in this discussion, because not yet capable of adopting a method which

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-71406-8 - Political Thought and History: Essays on Theory and Method

J. G. A. Pocock

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The history of political thought*

9

recognizes that there are different levels of abstraction at which thought takes place and different degrees of rational coherence with which it can be explained; still less one which permits us to discriminate between these levels as a matter of historical inquiry. One is as yet the prisoner of a method which condemns one to explain political thought only in so far as it can be presented as systematic political theory or philosophy. When one writes of political thinking as a series of events taking place in history, one will treat them as taking place in, and explicable only by reference to, a context of events consisting of the thinking of theorists or philosophers. In the case we have been supposing,<sup>2</sup> one will present Burke's thinking as he did as the effect, or in some other way the historical consequence, of Hume's thinking as *he* did; and the political thought of a society over a given period will appear historically intelligible only as a sequence of thought-patterns exchanged among its political theorists or philosophers.

There seems to be general agreement that political thought, at whatever level of abstraction or systematization, is a mode of discussing certain aspects of social experience. If this is so, it becomes important to distinguish between the approaches made to this subject by the philosopher and the historian. The philosopher is interested in the thought produced in so far as it can be explained in strict rationality, and in establishing the limits within which this can be done. The historian is interested in men thinking about politics just as in them fighting or farming or doing anything else, namely as individuals behaving in a society, whose recorded behaviour can be studied by the method of historical reconstruction, in order to show what manner of world they lived in and why they behaved in it as they did. He or she is concerned with the relation between experience and thought, between the tradition of behaviour in a society and the abstraction from it of concepts which are used in attempts to understand and influence it; but may easily fail to pursue the historian's proper function by confusing it with that of the philosopher.

A historian who attempts to explain thought only by endowing it with the highest attainable rational coherence is condemned to study it only at the highest attainable level of abstraction from the traditions, or transmitted experience, of the society in which it went on; he is not well placed to study the actual process of abstraction which produced it. In short, if thought be defined as a series of abstractions from experience, or from a

<sup>2</sup> Which may be located in empirical reality; see F. Meinecke, *Die Entstehung des Historismus*, 2nd edn, (Munich, 1946), Part 1, ch. 6; and G. H. Sabine, *A History of Political Theory* (New York, 1945), ch. 29.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-71406-8 - Political Thought and History: Essays on Theory and Method

J. G. A. Pocock

Excerpt

[More information](#)

tradition, thinking may be defined as the activity of producing and using those abstractions, and it is this activity of thinking which the historian who confuses himself with the philosopher is disqualifying himself from studying properly. To put it another way, he is disqualifying himself from studying the relations between thinking and experience.

We may now see why he is vulnerable to the attacks of those who deny that there is any significant relation between political activity and political theory – between the tradition of behaviour and the concepts abstracted from it. This kind of attack, though frequently launched, is not always easy to understand precisely. In many cases, of course, what is intended is a piece of conservative polemic. The launcher of the attack presupposes that he is in the presence of an opponent who takes a more sanguine – and therefore more dangerous – view than he does of the extent to which political concepts can be used to criticize and modify the tradition of behaviour from which they have been abstracted; he therefore sets out to emphasize the limitations on the extent to which they can be so used.

The situation becomes more complex, however, when the attack is launched in the course of a debate between historians. Here the argument appears, at least initially, to be concerned with motivation and causation. One historian will accuse another of exaggerating the extent to which men's actions in a political context are motivated by the theories which they have formed from that context and the extent to which these theories, even supposing that they motivate men's actions, in fact determine the course which they take. Such a critic will ask whether the individual's actions must not be understood 'more' by reference to the determining influence of the historical situation in which they were carried out than by reference to the theoretical principles on which they were said to be founded.

Now many arguments between historians, as to whether one historical factor or cause was 'more important' than another, are undeniably meaningless. If  $5 \times 3 = 15$ , it is vain to contend that 5 is 'more important' than 3 in making 15 on the grounds that 5 is greater than 3. The only question worth discussing is whether it is possible to construct a satisfactory explanation of the process without taking the factor in question into account. It is unlikely that this will be impossible. If one constructs an explanation of a political action in such a way as to lay all the emphasis on the situational factors determining it, one can easily explain it in such a way as to make no reference necessary to any theoretical principles which may have been expressed during its course. One may even succeed in refuting in this way any explanation which supposes that they either motivated its inception or determined its outcome.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-71406-8 - Political Thought and History: Essays on Theory and Method

J. G. A. Pocock

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The history of political thought*

II

It is still perfectly possible that expressions of principle were frequently put forward in the course of the action, and absorbed much of the time and energy of those engaged in bringing it to completion. At this point we shall find them spoken of as ‘propaganda’, ‘rationalizations’, ‘myths’ and so forth – vaguely dismissive language designed to indicate that, whatever part they played in the story, it is not worth considering. But from what standpoint is it not worth considering? One or more explanations of the action may be constructed without taking it into account, and a historian may legitimately say that he is interested only in those aspects of the action which can be explained in this way. But the expressions of principle happened; they form part of the action and modify by their presence its total character. They must have borne some relation to its course, and though a historian may not wish to explore that relation and may be satisfied with an explanation of the action that omits it, one is not entitled to say that there was no such relation or that this explanation may not be modified by the construction of an explanation which includes it.<sup>3</sup>

What historiography requires at this point is the ability to explore the different possible relations which theorizing may bear to experience and action. But the anti-ideological interpreter tends to suppose that when he has refuted the suggestion that theory stands in a certain relation to action, he has refuted the suggestion that there is any relation between the two at all. As a historian he can be convicted of methodological naivety. Employing, in none too sophisticated a manner, the concepts of motive and cause, he refutes the suggestion that theory was, by itself, a sufficient motive to explain the inception of an action or a sufficient cause to explain its outcome, and supposes that he has deprived it of any place in the story whatever. Men in politics, he asserts, learn from experience ‘and not’ from theory – as if their theoretical formulations of experience could be pronounced in advance to play no part whatever in the way they learn from it. As a political theorist, he is oversimplifying the thesis of conservative empiricism, which is designed to refute, and does refute, any theory of politics contending that the concepts abstracted from a tradition suffice either to justify men in seeking to annul and replace that tradition or to explain the actions which they take within it. To deny that concepts may be isolated and shown to play a determining role in politics is not to deny that

<sup>3</sup> It can be contended that the word ‘explanation’ should be used only when an account of the action is constructed in purely causal terms. If this is so, and if all mention of the role of ideas is omitted, then an account of the action which included ideas only in some other capacity – e.g. that of bringing out the subjective significance of the action to those taking part in it – would have to be called by some name other than ‘explanation’.