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978-0-521-88657-4 - Political Thought and History: Essays on Theory and Method

J. G. A. Pocock

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POLITICAL THOUGHT AND HISTORY

John Pocock is arguably the most original and imaginative historian of ideas of modern times. Over the past half-century he has created an audience for his work which is truly global, and he has marked the way in which the history of political thought is studied as deeply and personally as any historian of the period. The essays in this major new collection are selected from a lifetime of thinking about political thought, and how we should study it in history. What in fact does it mean to write the history of a political society, and what kind of political thought is this? Professor Pocock emphasizes both the theory and practice of political thought considered as action in history, and the political theory of historiography considered as a form of political thought. Together these essays constitute a collection that any serious student of politics and intellectual history needs to possess.

PROFESSOR JOHN POCOCK, Honorary Fellow of St John's College, Cambridge, is the Harry C. Black Professor of History Emeritus at the Johns Hopkins University. His many seminal works on intellectual history include *The Ancient Constitution and the Feudal Law* (1957, second edition 1987), *Politics, Language and Time* (1971), *The Machiavellian Moment* (1975), *Virtue, Commerce and History* (1985), *Barbarism and Religion* (1999) and *The Discovery of Islands* (2005). He has edited *The Political Works of James Harrington* (1977) and Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1987), as well as the collaborative study *The Varieties of British Political Thought* (1995).

Professor Pocock is a Corresponding Fellow of the British Academy and of the Royal Historical Society, and a member of both the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the American Philosophical Society.

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Preface

(1)

I present this selection from essays written during the past half-century as a possibly useful contribution, first to reflection on method and second to recent intellectual history. A certain method, or procedure, for defining political thought and studying its history – alternatively, for studying it in history – has been formed and practised during that period, at Cambridge and other universities, and is so far associated with the first of these that it is often known by its name (perhaps with increasing confidence as one moves away from Cambridge itself). A time has come when several of its best-known practitioners are beginning to retire from active teaching, and while it will certainly continue to be practised in intellectual history, its location and purposes may be expected to change. Since my involvement in the genesis of this method (and my own retirement from teaching, though not from intellectual productivity) somewhat antedate those of others, I would like to make use of this moment to present some essays which indicate what I have taken (and still take) this method and its intimations to be, and further indicate how these intimations have changed my work and given it a direction of its own. Some aspects of this presentation are necessarily autobiographical and support the ego of the author; but I have tried to present the ego as acting in a historical context that is still operating but has changed during its own history. What I recover of my past work, and say of it in a more recent present, is intended as a contribution to the method I have mentioned.

As I have recalled in other essays,¹ and in chapters 2 and 8 below, I date the genesis of the ‘Cambridge method’ from 1949–50, when, as a research

¹ ‘Present at the Creation: With Laslett to the Lost Worlds’, *International Journal of Public Affairs* (Chiba University, Japan), 2 (2006), pp. 7–17; ‘Foundations and Moments’, in Annabel Brett and James Tully (eds.), *Rethinking the Foundations of Modern Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 37–49.

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student supervised by Herbert Butterfield, I became aware of the work of Peter Laslett. As is hardly necessary to repeat, he separated the context in which Filmer wrote *Patriarcha* from that in which it was published with his other works many years later, and the context in which Locke wrote the *Treatises of Government* some years before the revolution of 1688–9 from that in which he published them after it. There is no need to retrace the steps, taken by Laslett and others, by which these researches became the foundation of an understanding of ‘political thought’ as a multiplicity of language acts performed by language users in historical contexts. I first attempted to theorize this approach in an essay of 1962, republished here as chapter 1, but originally published in circumstances which locate it in the contexts of Laslett’s extraordinary trajectory and Cambridge intellectual history during the 1950s. As early as 1949–50, however, research I undertook in pursuit of suggestions made by Butterfield in *The Englishman and His History*² had shown that the publication of Filmer’s works in 1679–80 had led to controversy in two kinds: the philosophical debate over the origins of society and government, of which Locke’s *Two Treatises* were part; and the historical debate over the origins of English common law and parliament,³ in which the adversaries of Filmer were counter-attacked by Robert Brady. The study of the latter debate led to my doctoral dissertation in 1952 and its enlargement into *The Ancient Constitution and the Feudal Law* five years later.

What I had begun to see was, first, that political argument – part of what is loosely termed ‘political thought’ – had been conducted in a plurality of languages, and had consisted in a plurality of language acts, all coming together to constitute the ‘history of political thought’; second, that one at least of these ‘languages’ had been a language of historical argument, joining with others to constitute a discourse of history, or ‘historiography’. I therefore opened up a gap between ‘political thought’ and ‘political theory’ or ‘philosophy’,⁴ and at the same time began to think of history/historiography as a form of ‘political thought’ and a constituent of its history. I consider that my role as a practitioner of the ‘Cambridge method’ has been to pursue its intimations in the latter direction. In historical research and synthesis,

² Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1944. I have never found difficulty in reconciling this work with his *The Whig Interpretation of History*, since the word ‘Whig’ is differently used and bears different meanings in the two essays.

³ This arose from the inclusion among Filmer’s essays of *The Freeholder’s Grand Inquest*, which has since been ascribed to another author. It was assumed to be Filmer’s at the time of which I write.

⁴ I contributed a chapter on ‘Theory in History’ to the *Oxford Handbook of Political Theory* (2006). When I was asked to contribute a similar chapter to the *Oxford Handbook of Political Philosophy*, I did not know how to reply.

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I have sometimes suggested,⁵ where Quentin Skinner and Richard Tuck have remained concerned with the state and political philosophy in the seventeenth century, I have chosen – from *The Machiavellian Moment* in 1975 to the continuing series *Barbarism and Religion*, begun in 1999 – to pursue the themes of civil society and historiography into the eighteenth. It was American scholars – Caroline Robbins and Bernard Bailyn – who first showed me the way through the impact of commerce on political thought before and after 1700 and 1776, and recently in Cambridge I have found Istvan Hont and Michael Sonenscher⁶ travelling far ahead of me on roads I once thought I knew.

The volume to which this is a preface is concerned with relations between history and political theory. The first part, ‘Political thought as history’, begins (chapter 1) with my first attempt to provide a method for studying the one as the other, and proceeds (3 and 4) to formulate theories of how language is organized in history in terms intended to produce, first, an experimental politics of language, and second, as uncontentious a relationship between philosopher and historian as could be hoped for when one had to share the academy with the followers of the late Leo Strauss. (Among my intentions in selecting these essays has been to recall incidents in recent intellectual history, especially in the United States, where I have practised the history of political thought.) My career as political theorist belonged chiefly to the 1970s; in the 1980s I find myself (chapters 5–7) developing a method for studying political thought as history, and determining what kind of history it was.

In Part II, ‘History as political thought’, the essays pursue a road on which I have found fewer companions: the attempt to consider history – not philosophy of history, but historiography; Oakeshott’s practical history, capable of discovering the limits beyond which it ceases to be practical – as a form of political thought: first, a way in which the political society furnishes one more way in which it can be thought about, second, a way of thinking about a society by narrating it in the multiple contexts of historical circumstance and change. My interest in the history of historiography seems to have begun (1962) as early as that in the historiography of political

⁵ See, e.g., the essays cited in note 1 above, and chapter 8 in this volume.

⁶ Istvan Hont and Michael Ignatieff (eds.), *Wealth and Virtue: The Shaping of Political Economy in the Scottish Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Hont, *Jealousy of Trade; international competition and the nation-state in historical perspective* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005); Michael Sonenscher, *Before the Deluge: Public Debt, Inequality, and the Intellectual Origins of the French Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

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thought, and the first two essays in this section were written at the University of Canterbury, where I taught before leaving New Zealand for the United States in 1966. Both reflect my deep if limited involvement with the thought of Michael Oakeshott, which I used for my own purposes in ways of which neither he nor his committed followers would have approved, and both make mention of a project in which I have had no Western followers at all:⁷ that of including an elementary account of ancient Chinese political philosophy in undergraduate courses in the history of political thought.

Nearly twenty years separate them from those that follow, in which I take up the subject of historiography as political thought, in the terms used to describe it a few sentences earlier than this. These, the last three in the volume (chapters 9–13), inquire in what sense the historian of a society may be its citizen, participant in it through recounting and re-narrating its history, which she or he shares with those who do not recount and need not think of it. They suggest ways in which the society may generate narratives of its history, commonly originating as myths but later entailing ways in which they may be queried, verified and re-narrated, as the society discovers its past to be contested, contestable, and above all multidimensional: a history which has gone on in contexts which there may be no end of discovering. I take it to be an exercise of the sovereignty, autonomy or self-command of a civil society that it can narrate, re-narrate and interpret its history, with the consequence that it recognizes sovereignty even in this sense to be contestable, conditional and in short historical; and I oppose my argument to the impulse, inherent in the ideology of globalized post-modernity, to assert that because the autonomous society, and the autonomous self, exist in more relationships than they can define or control, they do not and should not have the ability to relate their pasts and enact their futures. I incline to see having a history as more important than having an identity, the ability to criticize and re-narrate one's history as a means of navigating Oakeshott's bottomless and boundless sea.⁸ But this presupposes citizenship; one must feel oneself in some sense participant in the history one takes part in relating. There are those who have good cause to

⁷ See 'Ritual, Language, Power: an essay on the apparent political meanings of ancient Chinese philosophy', originally published in *Political Science* (Victoria University of Wellington), 16.1 (1964); republished in J. G. A. Pocock, *Politics, Language and Time: essays on political thought and history* (New York: Atheneum, 1971; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), pp. 42–79. Translated into Japanese by Takahiro Nakajima, in *Todai Journal of Chinese Philosophy* (University of Tokyo), 7 (1993), pp. 1–45.

⁸ These arguments are developed in several chapters of J. G. A. Pocock, *The Discovery of Islands: essays in British history* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

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see themselves as merely subject and ‘subaltern’ to history, and I endeavour in chapter 12 to imagine what history could be written of, for or by them. It may be that the societies that can have histories in my sense are few in number, and that many others see the histories we have as oppressing them in the history they have been denied. How then do we retain ours while doing justice to them? By waiting until they write histories as we do, and ours and theirs can be read in the contexts all create for one another? They may not desire to exist in the condition of multi-contextuality – so much a product of our history and our historiography – and we appear meanwhile to be going through a second Enlightenment, in which not the sacred but the self is targeted for deconstruction, and the particular society and its history are denied autonomy. This tendency is strong enough to be resisted in these essays. They are concerned with the contested attainment of autonomous histories, which must now be seen as passing into the histories of others, deflecting and even denying their growth; but we shall not assist them in attaining their own autonomy by denying it to ourselves.

(II)

A number of essays that form part of this enterprise have been omitted from the present volume, partly in order to set limits to its bulk, but more importantly because they are available in collections still in print. They may indeed be better known to readers than many of the essays republished here; but for that very reason it may be worth noting and describing them, so that it may be seen what place they have in the history of this inquiry. *Politics, Language and Time*,⁹ published in 1971, contains an introductory and a valedictory essay: ‘Languages and their implications: the transformation of the study of political thought’ (pp. 3–41), and ‘On the non-revolutionary character of paradigms: a self-criticism and afterpiece’ (pp. 273–91). The keyword ‘paradigms’, appearing in the second title, indicates the theme of the initial essay. I was at that time greatly intrigued by Thomas S. Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*,¹⁰ and in particular by his concept of the paradigm: a mental and linguistic construct, capable of appearing with dramatic suddenness, which not only supplied the answers to questions, but determined what questions and kinds of questions should be asked – to the exclusion and occlusion of others – and so dictated the course of

⁹ See note 7 above.¹⁰ Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

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scientific inquiry, and even the structure and character of communities of scientific inquirers, until such time as the 'paradigm' should disintegrate and be replaced by another, in a process dramatic enough to deserve the name of 'revolution'.

Kuhn's scenario was obviously a highly political one, and I was encouraged to believe that the notion of the 'paradigm' would prove applicable to the inquiry I was conducting into the rise, transformation and disappearance of political 'languages'. A new 'language', it seemed plausible, might dictate a new concept of politics and of the political community itself. I continue to find this believable, and the word 'paradigm' valuable, in certain cases: above all, of course, the transformation of English political thought that came about in the decades following 1688, when it became accepted that politics could be understood only as the politics of a commercial society. It can be no surprise to readers that I have come to see this as a profound change in the history of political thought, and in my own pursuit of that history. On this occasion at least, a 'paradigm revolution' may be said to have occurred, and in *The Machiavellian Moment* (1975) and *Virtue, Commerce and History* (1985), I pursued its consequences into the eighteenth century. An association between my methodological writings and Kuhn's work is therefore proper;¹¹ but as early as 1971 I was doubtful about carrying it too far, and knew that these doubts were shared by Kuhn himself.¹² They arose from an awareness that his chief concern, the scientific community, though it has its own politics and interacts with the politics of others, differs radically from what may be termed the political community and interacts differently with the controlling language structures, or 'paradigms', both communities generate in pursuing their purposes. The political community is not essentially, though it is incidentally, a community of inquiry, and the 'paradigms' it from time to time generates to define it as a community dealing with certain problems, and having a certain structure, operate within a multiplicity of problem-situations so great that no one 'paradigm' can long succeed in excluding or occluding its alternatives. It follows that many 'paradigms' must co-exist, and need not though they often will compete, in defining the community, its problems and its methods. They will be linguistically and culturally diverse, like those of

¹¹ John Burrow, *A History of Histories: epics, chronicles, romances and inquiries from Herodotus and Thucydides to the twentieth century* (London: Allen Lane, 2007), pp. 498–9.

¹² I may be permitted to recall that I sent him a presentation copy of *Politics, Language and Time*, inscribed 'in acknowledgment of a debt he probably does not wish acknowledged'. At the time of his death years later, I heard that he agreed with me in maintaining a distance, though one not unbridgeable, between his concerns and mine.

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which I became aware as outcomes of the Filmerian controversy, and for this reason among others, the Kuhnian concept of a community so closely controlled by its paradigms that their replacement must have the character of a revolution will be needed only in specific circumstances. The word 'paradigm' thus loses force as a noun, though it may continue to be useful in adjectival or adverbial form. There will be so many competitors for the role of paradigm that we are interested in each only within the limits to which it is successful. It is easier to write the discursive history of a political community if we assume that it is always exposed to new linguistic possibilities. For this reason the Kuhnian paradigm is a starting point in these methodological exercises, not a continuing tool; still less a 'paradigm' in its own right. At the date of *Politics, Language and Time* I was, however confusedly, as much indebted to Oakeshott as to him; as much and no more.

How far a given political community is open to the alternatives its paradigms seek to occlude is, of course, a matter for investigation; but the historian's assumption that alternatives will always be present has, no less 'of course', politically normative implications. The essay on 'the non-revolutionary character of paradigms' was less the direct challenge to Kuhn it may have appeared than a product of the 1960s: a period during which a great deal of revolutionary sentiment, if little enough revolutionary action, had led to demands for transparency, that is for language which could demonstrate its freedom from imposed preconditions. Like others who held posts on American campuses during that decade, I had had my troubles with self-appointed Red Guards and their very small-scale cultural revolutions, and there was ready to hand the massive literature of Cold War post-historicist and anti-revolutionary argument: Popper, Polanyi, Talmon, Berlin and in his own way Oakeshott. In this essay I fell back on what still seems to me the fact rather than the argument that historical inquiry is anti-paradigmatic, in the sense that it multiplies without theoretical limitation the problem-situations, contingencies and contexts in which any historical occurrence may have been situated, and therefore performs the liberal-conservative function of warning the ruler on the one hand, and the revolutionary on the other, that there is always more going on than either can understand or control.

Virtue, Commerce and History (1985)¹³ was less concerned with presenting specimens of the new historiography than its predecessor; its purpose

¹³ J. G. A. Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce and History: essays on political thought and history, chiefly in the eighteenth century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

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was to pursue a history of anglophone political thought through the eighteenth century. I prefaced it with a methodological ‘Introduction: the state of the art’ (pp. 1–34) because I wished to show how far method and theory had progressed, and what might be the agenda for their further development. In particular, I wished to press beyond the establishment of ‘what an author was doing’, in Quentin Skinner’s famous phrase of 1978¹⁴ – in other words, how the author’s ‘intentions’ shaped and were shaped by the language context in which they were expressed – to the question of ‘what he/she turned out to have done’; from illocution to allocution, to borrow language once again from Skinner. What this was, and how it came to be, involved not only the shaping of *parole* by *langue*; one must also inquire how authors were understood by readers, and how the response of the latter both shaped and was shaped by the original author’s speech act. Here there yawned before me a series of caverns signposted ‘*Rezeptionsgeschichte*’ and ‘reader response theory’, at the end of which there was said to lurk a minotaur ingeminating ‘the death of the author’. I did not find it necessary to explore them; ‘the state of the art’ was limited to the pursuit of two enterprises. One – here foreshadowed in chapters 3 and 4 – was the elaboration of the relations between speech act performer, respondent and language context into a simple but necessary politics of speech, intended to illuminate what might happen when speech was performed at familiar levels of literacy, probably those of an early-modern print culture. Out of this grew the second enterprise. Author, respondent and language context were visibly engaged in processes of innovation and interpretation, in which actions had consequences other than those intended, and *parole* and *langue* underwent change intended and unintended; new language-worlds might appear, either gradually or suddenly, and even Kuhn’s paradigmatic revolution was a possibility not to be dismissed. The community or competition of political speech I had tried to outline was involved in making history by its intended actions, but in history some actions had not been intended. I was formulating a theoretical historiography of political discourse over consecutive periods of time (necessarily confined to occurring in specific political cultures), which I went on to elaborate in what are now chapters 6 and 7, as well as in various works of history.

A further group of essays not included because currently available has as its centre ‘The treaty between histories’ (2001 and 2006),¹⁵ to which could

¹⁴ Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, 1: *The Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), p. xi.

¹⁵ In Andrew Sharp and Paul McHugh (eds.), *Histories, Power and Loss: uses of the past – a New Zealand commentary* (Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 2001), pp. 75–96; and in Julia Rudolph (ed.), *History and Nation* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2006), pp. 137–65.

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be added several chapters from *The Discovery of Islands*.¹⁶ These pursue in various directions themes raised in Part II of this volume, culminating in chapter 13. I argue that a political community with any degree of autonomy will generate narratives of its past, modifying them as it performs new actions and suffers new experiences in the present. There is consequently a close relation between its historiography and its sovereignty: the capacity to declare what its past has been is important to the latter, as is that to declare what its future shall be. It is obvious that these narratives may be no more than myths of continuity; but it is also probable that they will be contested and criticized, first by alternative and conflicting narratives arising in the political process that generates the historiography, second by discovered interactions and commonalities between the community's history and those of others close to it, and third (chapter 12) by voices arising from those within it who have been excluded from its politics and are now asserting narratives of their own. If the community desires to remain an actor in the management of these contests, it must learn to narrate them with conflicting voices, thus declaring its sovereignty as the history of a sovereignty – and an identity – contested, challenged and open-endedly problematic. A problematic sovereignty (and historiography) does not cease to be a sovereignty; the problem is the sovereignty because peculiar to the community; but in our present ideological climate, radical criticism and economic globalization seize upon every modification of a community's history as a means of denying its autonomy. Like *The Discovery of Islands*, this volume is intended to argue against this tendency.

In 'The treaty between histories', I extrapolated from the recent history of New Zealand (where 'the Treaty' has a specific meaning) to imagine the case of a single polity where sovereignty is shared between two peoples, one narrating of itself a history of the familiar Anglo-European kind, the other giving mythical expression to an animist world-view, such as a modern Maori scholar has declared to be rather a way of ordering a world than of narrating a history.¹⁷ I argued that the sharing of sovereignty between two such peoples must be very carefully negotiated between others who might comprehend each other's world-view but could not be expected to share it. I also argued, however, that the latter people must find themselves affirming their unhistorical world-view in a universe made inescapably historical by the sheer fact of contact with the former, and therefore negotiating less with

¹⁶ Pocock, *The Discovery of Islands*, chs. 13, 14, 16, 17.

¹⁷ Te Maire Tau, 'Matauranga Maori as an Epistemology', in Sharp and McHugh, *Histories, Power and Loss*, pp. 61–74; 'The Death of Knowledge: ghosts on the plains', *New Zealand Journal of History*, 35.2 (2001), pp. 131–52.

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the other's history than with history itself. I have considerable confidence in Maori capacity to do this. *Political Thought and History* therefore ends with two adjurations: one, that we cannot learn others' histories unless the others (and we) write both for others and for themselves, which will not be easy; second, that we should attend to the possibility that the concept 'history' itself has lexical and contextual limits. The Second Enlightenment will probably try to abolish all these distinctions, but will probably fail.

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These essays have been lightly edited, in one or two cases to sharpen the argument; but none has been rewritten and the originals are accessible. I have also experimented, in editing them, with ways of dealing with the gender bias of English pronouns, though no solution is altogether satisfactory. For this I ask the reader's understanding. A few additions to the footnotes are enclosed in square brackets.

My thanks to Katherine Moran for her very careful and helpful preparation of the typescript, and to the following publishers for permission to reprint: Blackwell Publishers (chapters 1 and 12); Random House Ltd (chapter 3); Princeton University Press (chapter 4); Johns Hopkins University Press (chapter 5); the University of California Press (chapter 7); Duke University Press (chapter 8); the Publication Office of the University of the South Pacific (chapter 11); the editors of *Historical Research*, University of London (chapter 13). Chapters 6, 9 and 10 were originally published by Cambridge University Press.