

State of the Field: The History of Political Thought

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Abstract

This article surveys the state of the field of the history of political thought. The premise of the discipline is that political arguments and ideas have developed historically and thus have theoretical histories that can be located and traced. But, as our survey of the field shows, what counts as ‘context’ is up for debate, and contextual methods have become more sensitive to present-day concerns. The border between the history of political thought and political theory is increasingly porous. We begin with some of the main claims and criticisms of the ‘Cambridge’ method of political thought, chiefly associated with Quentin Skinner, John Dunn and J. G. A. Pocock. We then consider newer developments, such as the ‘global turn’, which have steered the discipline beyond its traditionally European or male subject matter. While this shift in direction is welcome, we caution against a history that abstracts away from local sites of political contestation. Finally, we stress that (Western) historians moving beyond the West have even more reason to stay conscious of their own linguistic and cultural limitations.

The premise of the history of political thought is that political arguments and ideas have developed historically and thus have theoretical histories that scholars can locate and trace. This approach has the dual benefit of enhancing the understanding of the past as well as the present, which is why the history of political thought is practised and taught in both history and politics departments (as well as in philosophy, law, international relations and literature). Since there are countless political ideas and concepts, the remit of the history of political thought is potentially vast, but it has often taken the form of investigating the thought of particular thinkers. Of the seven articles in the winter 2019 issue of *History of Political Thought*, for example, five centred on one well-known figure (Machiavelli, Thomas Hobbes, George Berkeley, Jeremy Bentham and Hannah Arendt). But this thinker-based

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model is by no means the only route available. For some years, the field has moved into studies of feminism and gender,¹ empire and international thought,² political economy,³ reconsiderations of representation and parliamentarism,⁴ and, most recently, the environment.⁵ Although there is no consensus, many of today's scholars argue that we should not pursue historical research with the aim of vouchsafing specific normative commitments. Still, this caveat is compatible with the positive view that historians of political thought can draw valuable conclusions that bear on present-day debates.

The history of political thought is sometimes equated with intellectual history, although there are reasons to treat these subjects as distinct.⁶ Intellectual history has many different strands and approaches, including *Begriffsgeschichte* (conceptual history), Foucauldian post-structuralism, the history of science and scholarship, the social history of ideas, and the history of the book and reading.⁷ Some of these are closely associated with other subfields and disciplines: *Begriffsgeschichte* with social history,

¹ Anna Becker, *Gendering the Renaissance Commonwealth* (Cambridge, 2019); Hannah Dawson, 'Fighting for my mind: feminist logic at the edge of Enlightenment', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 118/3 (2018), pp. 275–306; Karen Green, *A History of Women's Political Thought in Europe, 1700–1800* (Cambridge, 2014); Jacqueline Broad and Karen Green, *A History of Women's Political Thought in Europe, 1400–1700* (Cambridge, 2009); Linda Zerilli, 'Machiavelli's sisters: women and "the conversation" of political theory', *Political Theory*, 19/2 (1991), pp. 252–76; Arlene Saxonhouse, *Women in the History of Political Thought: Ancient Greece to Machiavelli* (New York, 1985); Susan Moller Okin, *Women in Western Political Thought* (Princeton, 1978). See also Patricia Owens and Katharina Rietzler (eds), *Women's International Thought: A New History* (Cambridge, forthcoming in 2021).

² See below for discussion of empire and the 'global turn'.

³ Istvan Hont, *Jealousy of Trade: International Competition and the Nation-state in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge, MA, 2005); Gareth Stedman Jones, *An End to Poverty?* (London, 2004); Michael Sonenscher, *Before the Deluge: Public Debt, Inequality, and the Intellectual Origins of the French Revolution* (Princeton, 2007); Isaac Nakhimovsky, *The Closed Commercial State: Perpetual Peace and Commercial Society from Rousseau to Fichte* (Princeton, 2011); Richard Whatmore, *Republicanism and the French Revolution: An Intellectual History of Jean-Baptiste Say's Political Economy* (Oxford, 2000). See also the work of Donald Winch and the 'Sussex School', discussed below.

⁴ Richard Tuck, *The Sleeping Sovereign: The Invention of Modern Democracy* (Cambridge, 2016); Nadia Urbinati, *Representative Democracy: Principles and Genealogy* (Chicago, 2006); William Selinger, *Parliamentarism: Burke to Weber* (Cambridge, 2019); Gregory Conti, *Parliament the Mirror of the Nation: Representation, Deliberation, and Democracy in Victorian Britain* (Cambridge, 2019); Lucia Rubinelli, *Constituent Power: A History* (Cambridge, 2020).

⁵ Katrina Forrester and Sophie Smith (eds), *Nature, Action and the Future: Political Thought and the Environment* (Cambridge, 2018); Duncan Kelly, *Politics and the Anthropocene* (Cambridge, 2019).

⁶ For instance, in Richard Whatmore, *What is Intellectual History?* (Cambridge, 2016). On the frequent fusion of intellectual history and the history of political thought in higher education, see Stefan Collini, 'Disciplines, canons, and publics: the history of "the history of political thought" in comparative perspective', in Dario Castiglione and Iain Hampsher-Monk (eds), *The History of Political Thought in National Context* (Cambridge, 2001), pp. 280–302.

⁷ See e.g. Reinhart Koselleck, *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts* (Stanford, 2002); Melvin Richter, *The History of Political and Social Concepts: A Critical Introduction* (Oxford, 1995); Michel Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge* (Paris, 1969); Herbert Butterfield, *The Origins of Modern Science 1300–1800* (London, 1949); Robert Darnton, 'The social history of ideas' and other essays in *Kiss of Lamourette: Reflections in Cultural History* (New York, 1990); Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin, *L'apparition du livre* (Paris 1958); François Furet and Jacques Ozouf, *Lire et écrire* (2 vols; Paris, 1977); Roger Chartier, *L'Ordre des livres* (Aix-en-Provence, 1992);

Foucault with critical studies and literature and the social history of ideas with cultural history.

Even among scholars who specialise in canonical political figures, some have resisted calling what they do the ‘history of political thought’. Leo Strauss presented himself as a student of political *philosophy*. He insisted that ‘political philosophy is not a historical discipline’ and decried modern ‘historicism’ for undermining our appreciation of the ‘nature of political things’.⁸ Michael Oakeshott, in contrast, objected that what passed for the history of political thought in the 1950s and 1960s was not historical *enough*. As Professor of Political Science at the London School of Economics (LSE), Oakeshott declared, ‘I cannot detect anything which could properly correspond to the expression *the* history of political thought.’⁹ By this, Oakeshott meant that politics never culminates in one grand historical narrative. Against those who would treat political thought as a matter of ‘changeless conceptual self-identities’, Oakeshott argued that politics does not occur independently of specific human beings in specific historical eras.¹⁰

Today’s historians of political thought are less inclined to repeat the changeless narratives Oakeshott criticised. But scholars have also loosened their commitment to the strict historical contextualism advanced by ‘Cambridge School’ scholars in the late 1960s. Let us begin with a brief history of the Cambridge moment before discussing more recent directions in the discipline. The ‘Cambridge School’, a problematic but ubiquitous term, has been traced as far back as the late nineteenth century, with J. R. Seeley’s decision to join history and politics as part of the university’s Historical Tripos curriculum.¹¹ Its more recent lineage,

David Allan, *Making British Culture: English Readers and the Scottish Enlightenment, 1740–1830* (Abingdon, 2008); Mark Towsey, *Reading History in Britain and America, c.1750–c.1840* (Cambridge, 2019). For a helpful overview of the many possibilities in intellectual history, see the entries in Richard Whatmore and Brian Young (eds), *A Companion to Intellectual History* (Malden, MA, 2016). For a recent book combining the history of the book with the history of political thought, see Filipe Carreira da Silva and Mónica Brito Vieira, *The Politics of the Book: A Study on the Materiality of Ideas* (University Park, PA, 2019).

⁸ Leo Strauss, ‘Political philosophy and history’, in *What is Political Philosophy? And Other Studies* (Chicago, 1959), pp. 56–77, at p. 56–7. Adrian Blau, however, argues that historical and textual context actually ‘commits one to thinking philosophically’, in ‘Textual context in the history of political thought and intellectual history’, *History of European Ideas*, 45/8 (2019), pp. 1191–1210, at p. 1192. For Strauss’s role in American political theory, alongside other prominent German émigrés such as Hannah Arendt and Eric Voeglin, see John Gunnell, *The Descent of Political Theory: The Genealogy of an American Vocation* (Chicago, 1993), ch. 8. See also Steven B. Smith (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Leo Strauss* (Cambridge, 2009).

⁹ Michael Oakeshott, *Lectures in the History of Political Thought*, ed. Terry Nardin and Luke O’Sullivan (Exeter, 2006), p. 2.

¹⁰ Michael Oakeshott, ‘Political thought as a subject of historical enquiry’, in Luke O’Sullivan (ed.), *What is History? And Other Essays* (Exeter, 2004), pp. 403–21, at p. 419. See also Martyn P. Thompson, *Michael Oakeshott and the Cambridge School on the History of Political Thought* (London, 2019).

¹¹ Stefan Collini, ‘A place in the syllabus: political science at Cambridge’ in Stefan Collini, Donald Winch and John Burrow (eds), *That Noble Science of Politics: A Study in Nineteenth-Century Intellectual History* (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 341–63; James Alexander, ‘The Cambridge School, c. 1875–1975’, *The History of Political Thought*, 37/2 (2016), pp. 360–86.

however, dates to several methodological articles by J. G. A. Pocock, John Dunn and Quentin Skinner, who wrote with the ambition to turn the history of political thought into a historical subject in its own right.¹² Pocock, Dunn and Skinner have important differences, yet their disagreements are arguably overshadowed by a similar agenda. All three set out their stall in opposition to traditional history of ideas, associated with the likes of Arthur Lovejoy, George Sabine and Isaiah Berlin. Skinner, Pocock and Dunn took inspiration from a prior generation of Cambridge historians, such as Herbert Butterfield and Peter Laslett. The latter's ground-breaking introduction to John Locke's *Two Treatises of Government* demonstrated that Locke composed the *Two Treatises* nearly a decade before publication, meaning the *Two Treatises* were the fruit of the Exclusion Crisis rather than the Glorious Revolution.¹³ The shift in context demanded a shift in interpretation. This Cambridge-styled emphasis on locating texts in their precise historical contexts has since been exported to London, St Andrews, Cambridge in Massachusetts, Shanghai and elsewhere.

The classic methodological statement on behalf of contextualism is Skinner's 1969 essay 'Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas'. Using J. L. Austin's philosophy of language, Skinner contended that arguments and ideas should be regarded as 'speech acts'.¹⁴ In other words, the historian can treat texts as interventions made in specific contexts, and an understanding of the historical context can help us to pinpoint an author's intentions. The key question becomes what an author was *doing* in the *act* of writing; that is to say, what linguistic act the writer was *performing*. Identifying these intentions and innovations behind authors' actions requires the historian to acquire extensive knowledge of the period in which the text appeared. Simply put, to spot when political thinkers are subverting conventions, we first need to be familiar with the conventions. The goal is not so much to enter the mind of historical actors,

¹² John Dunn, 'The identity of the history of ideas', *Philosophy*, 43/164 (1968), pp. 85–104; Quentin Skinner, 'Meaning and understanding in the history of ideas' (1969) and other essays collected in *Visions of Politics*, I: *Regarding Method* (Cambridge, 2002); and J. G. A. Pocock's essays in *Politics, Language, and Time: Essays on Political Thought and History*, 2nd edn (Chicago, 1989 [1971]). Much historicising of the Cambridge moment has come from the participants themselves, particularly Pocock. See his *Political Thought and History: Essays on Theory on Method* (Cambridge, 2008). Cf. Samuel James, 'J. G. A. Pocock and the idea of the "Cambridge School" in the history of political thought', *History of European Ideas*, 45/1 (2019), pp. 83–98; Richard Bourke, 'Revising the Cambridge School: republicanism revisited', *Political Theory*, 46/3 (2017), pp. 467–77; Skinner has written most extensively about methodology, generating much discussion in James Tully (ed.), *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and his Critics* (Princeton, 1989); Annabel Brett and James Tully (eds), *Rethinking the Foundations of Modern Political Thought* (Cambridge, 2006); Kari Palonen, *Quentin Skinner: History, Politics, Rhetoric* (Cambridge, 2003).

¹³ Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History* (London, 1931); idem, *George III and the Historians* (London, 1957); John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett (Cambridge, 1960). See also Pocock, 'Present at the creation: with Laslett to the lost worlds', *International Journal of Public Affairs*, 2 (2006), pp. 7–17.

¹⁴ J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford, 1962).

which pertains to ‘motives’ in Skinnerian idiom, but, rather, to identify intentions as embodied in linguistic acts.¹⁵ Words are deeds.

Skinner’s original essay had three targets: (1) Lovejoyan study of ‘unit ideas’;¹⁶ (2) Straussian focus on esoteric meaning; (3) Marxist reductionism. Against Lovejoy, Skinner argued that political ideas are not stable entities floating freely across time but must be understood in their specific milieu. Skinner’s critique of Strauss boils down to the difficulty of identifying authors’ hidden messages, and the need for wider historical knowledge beyond the ostensible ‘great texts’.¹⁷ Against Marxian historians, Skinner refused to regard political thought as epiphenomenal, as determined by societal and economic forces.¹⁸ Skinner would later describe his approach as inspired by R. G. Collingwood, in the sense that Skinner strove ‘to recover the precise questions to which the philosophical texts we study were designed to answer’.¹⁹ In revisions to his methodological essays, Skinner has formulated his approach in opposition to Jacques Derrida and post-modernists, who had questioned the possibility of recovering meaning independent of the reader.

The Skinnerian method is thus a theory of exegesis, and it has helped transform our understanding of political thinkers. It has attracted criticism on several fronts, however. The first main objection is that this sort of contextualism reduces the author to his or her local, historical setting and ignores perennial truths and useful insights. In this vein, Pierre Rosanvallon argues that the nature of Skinner’s original critique of the traditional history of ideas prevented him from undertaking a more broad-based philosophical history of the political.²⁰ Others point out that Skinner’s work, and that of some of his followers, tended to

¹⁵ Skinner distinguishes between intentions and motives in ‘Motives, intentions and interpretations’, in *Visions of Politics*, I, pp. 90–102.

¹⁶ Arthur Lovejoy’s most famous book is *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea* (Cambridge, MA, 1936). In 1940, he founded the *Journal of the History of Ideas*.

¹⁷ Samuel Moyn, however, counters that Skinner was not as different from Lovejoy and Strauss as we might suppose. All three treated the text as supreme; Skinner just thought scholars ought to read more texts. Samuel Moyn, ‘History and theory: a difficult reunion: a difficult reunion’, *Theory & Event*, 19/1 (2016). For other similarities between these traditions, see Ian Ward, ‘Helping the dead speak: Leo Strauss, Quentin Skinner, and the arts of interpretation in political thought’, *Polity*, 41/2 (2009), pp. 235–55. Some scholars associated with the ‘Cambridge method’ have engaged respectfully with Strauss’s work; see e.g. Richard Tuck, *Political Thought and the International Order from Grotius to Kant* (Oxford, 1999), pp. 4–5; idem, *Hobbes: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2002), p. 115; Michael Sonenscher, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: The Division of Labour, The Politics of the Imagination, and the Concept of Federal Government* (Leiden, 2020), pp. viii–ix, 16–17.

¹⁸ Cambridge scholars chiefly objected to the Marxist historians of ideas C. B. Macpherson and Isaac Kramnick, who had interpreted John Locke in terms of the development of ‘bourgeois liberalism’ in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. See e.g. Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce, and History* (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 59–71, 259–62.

¹⁹ Quentin Skinner, ‘The rise of, challenge to and prospect for a Collingwoodian approach to the history of political thought’, in *The History of Political Thought in National Context*, pp. 175–88, at p. 177. For R. G. Collingwood (1889–1943), see especially his *Autobiography* (Oxford, 1939).

²⁰ Pierre Rosanvallon, ‘Towards a philosophical history of the political’, in *The History of Political Thought in National Context*, pp. 189–203, at pp. 202–3.

neglect the importance of religious contexts.²¹ A third strand of criticism notes that what counts as context among ‘Cambridge historians’ has remained largely limited to linguistics. Richard Bourke – the incumbent of the Chair in the History of Political Thought at Cambridge – contends that the ‘Cambridge School’ has focused narrowly on intellectual and philosophical contexts, echoing the critique that Skinner and his disciples have been too restricted in their understanding of context, in practice if not in theory.²²

Partly in response to the first strand of criticism, key figures associated with late 1960s contextualism now engage more explicitly with political theory. Even Skinner has moved in this direction. In his inaugural lecture for the Regius Chair of History at Cambridge in 1997, Skinner identified what he took to be a third concept of liberty, or what he claimed was a recovery of ‘neo-Roman’ liberty, distinguishable from both positive and negative liberty in Isaiah Berlin’s famous formulation.²³ One goal of the lecture was to counter the charge that Skinner’s method robbed history of political relevance.²⁴ Skinner was not alone. Dunn moved decisively towards political theory after his first book, *The Political Thought of John Locke* (1969). Pocock, for his part, reports that he ‘was once a political theorist as well as a historian’, yet more recently prefers the descriptor historian of political theory, or, alternatively, a historian of discourse and a historian of historiography.²⁵ Istvan Hont, perhaps the most influential Cambridge historian after Skinner, styled himself as a political theorist first and foremost, especially in later works.²⁶ But even as the border between history and political theory becomes more porous, we should not suppose that the history of political thought is synonymous with either affiliates of Cambridge or their broader method.

Other approaches to the study of politics and history include ‘the Sussex School’, with its emphasis on interdisciplinarity and political economy.²⁷ Rachel Hammersley, for instance, aligns her latest research on James Harrington with the ‘Sussex School’. She calls on historians

²¹ Alister Chapman, John Coffey and Brad S. Gregory (eds), *Seeing Things Their Way: Intellectual History and the Return of Religion* (Notre Dame, IN, 2009).

²² Richard Bourke, ‘Reflections on the political thought of Irish revolution’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 27 (2017), pp. 175–91, at pp. 184–5. See also Max Skjönsberg, ‘The history of political thought and parliamentary history in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries’, *Historical Journal* (Online first 2020).

²³ Quentin Skinner, *Liberty before Liberalism* (Cambridge, 1998). Berlin’s ‘Two Concepts of Liberty’ (1958) essay was his inaugural lecture as Oxford’s Chichele Professor of Social and Political Theory.

²⁴ Iain Hampsher Monk, ‘The history of political thought and the political history of thought’, in *The History of Political Thought in National Context*, pp. 159–74, at p. 172.

²⁵ J. G. A. Pocock, ‘The politics of historiography’, *Historical Research*, 78/199 (2005), pp. 1–14, at p. 2; idem, *Virtue, Commerce, and History*, pp. 1–34; idem, ‘Present at the creation’, pp. 7–17.

²⁶ Istvan Hont, *Politics in Commercial Society: Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Adam Smith* (Cambridge, 2015), p. xviii. See also Paul Sagar and Christopher Brooke (eds), Special Issue: István Hont as political theorist, *European Journal of Political Theory*, 17/4 (2018), pp. 387–511.

²⁷ See Stefan Collini’s ‘General introduction’ in Stefan Collini, Richard Whatmore and Brian Young (eds), *Economy, Polity, Society: British Intellectual History 1750–1950* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 1–21. For the ‘Sussex School’ in practice, see also Collini Winch and Burrow, *That Noble Science of Politics*.

of political thought to adopt ‘a broad, interdisciplinary approach’ with a focus not only on economic, religious and scientific contexts, but also on ‘the form, style, and presentation of past works’.²⁸ In political theory circles, the eclectic ‘Harvard School’ of the post-war era focused on the ‘realist’ genealogy of liberal institutions.²⁹ Political theorists also sometimes speak of a ‘Berkeley School’ to describe the work of Sheldon Wolin, Hannah Arendt, Hanna Pitkin and their acolytes, known for their opposition to 1950s and 1960s behaviourism and their emphasis on the autonomy of political questions.³⁰

Across these varied approaches and centres, the history of political thought shows signs of becoming more inclusive. Although the contributions of female historians of ideas, such as Judith Shklar, Gertrude Himmelfarb and Caroline Robbins, have been somewhat neglected, the discipline is thankfully not as male-dominated as in the past.³¹ For many decades, Mary Wollstonecraft was the only woman on political thought reading lists, but she is now often accompanied by Germaine de Staël, Simone de Beauvoir and Hannah Arendt. Mahatma Gandhi and Franz Fanon appear on history of political thought syllabi, as do Ibn Khaldun, C. L. R. James and Malcolm X. The University of London’s School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) has initiated a debate about what it would mean to ‘decolonise’ the canon entirely.³² Such a conversation might have made inroads at SOAS, but, as a glance at the latest issues of *The History of Political Thought* and other journals in the field indicates, interest in Machiavelli or Hobbes, or Arendt for that matter, is by no means on the wane.³³

²⁸ Rachel Hammersley, *James Harrington: An Intellectual Biography* (Oxford, 2019), pp. 271–2.

²⁹ As defined in Andrew Sabl, ‘History and reality: idealist pathologies and “Harvard School” remedies’, in Jonathan Floyd and Marc Stears (eds), *Political Philosophy versus History? Contextualism and Real Politics in Contemporary Political Thought* (Cambridge, 2011), pp. 151–76.

³⁰ See the symposium, ‘The “Berkeley School” of political theory: a discussion of its beginnings, its development, and the disagreements over calling it a “School”’, in *P.S.: Political Science and Politics*, 51/3 (2017), pp. 789–810; Emily Hauptmann, ‘A local history of “the political”’, *Political Theory*, 32/1 (2004), pp. 34–60.

³¹ Shklar’s thinking is receiving a well-deserved revival: see Samantha Ashenden and Andreas Hess (eds), *Between Utopia and Realism: The Political Thought of Judith N. Shklar* (Philadelphia, 2019). Robbins, unfortunately, is less remembered. Her *Eighteenth-Century Commonwealthman* (Cambridge, MA, 1959) proved vital to Pocock’s *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton, 1975), as Pocock has acknowledged; see *Political Thought and History*, p. ix.

³² Kenan Malik, ‘Are Soas students right to “decolonise” their minds from western philosophers?’, *The Guardian*, 19 Feb. 2017, <<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2017/feb/19/soas-philosophy-decolonise-our-minds-enlightenment-white-european-kenan-malik>> [accessed 4 May 2020].

³³ Additional history journals that regularly publish research in the history of political thought include *Journal of the History of Ideas*, *History of European Ideas*, *Modern Intellectual History*, *Global Intellectual History*, *Intellectual History Review* and, at least occasionally, the *Historical Journal*. Political theory journals include *The Review of Politics*, *Political Theory*, *European Journal of Political Theory*, *American Political Thought*, and, occasionally, the *American Political Science Review* and *Political Studies*.

Even as the history of political thought diversifies, many still focus on ‘first-rate’ philosophers.³⁴ Annabel Brett correctly observes that there is little about the ‘Skinnerian’ and ‘Pocockean’ approaches to the study of the past – essentially the tracing of changes in discourse – which should recommend them exclusively for the study of so-called ‘great texts’.³⁵ Still, Brett suggests that the focus on ‘great texts’ is by and large the right one, since intellectual history is primarily ‘interested in those ways of speaking as ways in which people *made sense* of their world: and therefore it must concern itself with the internal coherence and logic of the structures of mental reference of the languages it studies’. Brett argues that ‘the “great texts” will ‘always have a certain pride of place ... as the most complex explorations of the limits of language or conceptual frame at a given time’.³⁶ John Robertson similarly contends that what historians of political thought have in common with philosophers and political theorists is that they not only study arguments, but ‘do justice to the persistence and depth of the human effort, using what seem to be the best-developed intellectual resources at the time’.³⁷ One might conclude from these suggestions that historians of political thought should concentrate their efforts on *good* arguments. Yet this raises the thorny question of who has the privilege of identifying the ‘great texts’ and the best arguments.

What is the standard by which scholars make these judgements? And should we seek arguments that appeal to us, or those which seemed best to the subjects we are studying? There are surely such things as better and worse arguments; we do not think it is anathema for scholars to sympathise with some political thinkers and certain strands of thought. The problem here is that most if not all arguments in the past must have been viewed as at least moderately good or true by the people who made them, or at least the people who believed and repeated them. What constitutes ‘the best-developed intellectual resources’ at any time will be contentious. Historians, however, are well placed to participate in debates about the content of the canon. One challenge for historians of political thought is to recover past contexts and try to understand why an argument, which may strike twenty-first-century readers as preposterous, seemed persuasive in a different setting. Rosanvallon refers to this work of historical recovery as an act of ‘controlled empathy’.³⁸ The rediscovery of forgotten thought is not about retelling victors’ stories. Rather, it trains us to resist teleology and presentism. What we discover might, at the same time, prove useful for political philosophy and theory. Skinner’s

³⁴ This expression is from Paul Sagar, *The Opinion of Mankind: Sociability and the Theory of the State from Hobbes to Smith* (Princeton, 2018), p. 23.

³⁵ Annabel Brett, ‘What is intellectual history now?’, in David Cannadine (ed.), *What Is History Now?* (Basingstoke, 2002), pp. 113–31, at p. 118.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 127.

³⁷ John Robertson, ‘Sacred history and political thought: Neapolitan responses to the problem of sociability after Hobbes’, *Historical Journal*, 56/1 (2013), pp. 1–29, at p. 29.

³⁸ Rosanvallon, ‘Towards a philosophical history of the political’, p. 195.

rediscovery of neo-Roman thought is controversial, but it has certainly stimulated new research in political theory.³⁹

While syllabi should not stay static, Brett is correct that texts which have historically been considered ‘great’ – *The Prince*, *Leviathan*, *The Social Contract*, and so on – should retain their pride of place in university curricula. Because of their prominent historical position, some works, whether they be Fredrich Nietzsche’s *Genealogy of Morals* or Adam Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations*, are prone to misunderstanding or manipulation. One task of the historian of political thought is to bear witness.⁴⁰ A fairly stable evidence base, moreover, can offer a strength for the history of political thought as a study group, allowing for more detailed discussion because of the shared material. We do not think it a coincidence that universities that have maintained rigorous history of political thought curricula also boast leading research in the discipline, much of which now stretches well beyond any stereotypical canon. At the undergraduate level, examples include the Classics of Social and Political Thought Core at the University of Chicago, the History Tripos at Cambridge and the Committee on Degrees in Social Studies at Harvard, not to mention the Master’s degrees in the History of Political Thought and Intellectual History at Cambridge, Queen Mary University of London, St Andrews, and the University of Exeter.

Another challenge for the discipline occurs at the institutional level. The most rigorous case for contextualism came, not surprisingly, from those working in history departments. Yet many historians of political thought are housed in political science or government programmes, as part of the political theory sub-field. This is especially true in the United States, but also in some UK institutions, including Cambridge, Exeter, York and King’s College London.⁴¹ While Pocock could declare that historians ‘may follow the logic of their discourse even at the cost of their loyalties to society’, political theorists who refuse to connect their work to present concerns risk the charge of antiquarianism.⁴² Michael Frazer observes that Pocock’s historians are akin to Max Weber’s scientists and politicians; they ‘cannot justify their vocation, they can only explain it’.⁴³

On the one hand, such historicist explanations matched the apolitical aims of mid-century social science.⁴⁴ Historians of political thought could say they did not pursue their research to vindicate any political ideology. Some political scientists, sceptical that theory deserves a place in the social

³⁹ See e.g. Philip Pettit, *On the People’s Terms: A Republican Theory and Model of Democracy* (Cambridge, 2012). For criticism of Skinner’s third concept of liberty, see Matthew Kramer, *The Quality of Freedom* (Oxford, 2003), ch. 2.

⁴⁰ Tim Stanton, ‘John Locke and the fable of liberalism’, *Historical Journal*, 61 (2018), pp. 597–622, at p. 598; Quentin Skinner, ‘The place of history in public life’, *History & Policy*, 35 (2005).

⁴¹ On political theory as an American innovation, see Gunnell, *The Descent of Political Theory*.

⁴² Pocock, ‘The politics of historiography’, p. 12.

⁴³ Michael Frazer, Review of *Political Thought and History* by Pocock, *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews* (6 Nov. 2009).

⁴⁴ John Gunnell, ‘History of political philosophy as a discipline’, in George Klosko (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Political Philosophy* (Oxford, 2011), pp. 60–72, at p. 69.

sciences, have expressed a greater willingness to tolerate the history of political thought over other modes political theory, insofar as the history of political thought manages to demonstrate ‘real causal influence’ and ‘proceeds in a manner consistent with the assumptions of science’.⁴⁵ On the other hand, historians of political thought have argued that their methods, far from cordoning off politics as an empirical topic, recover the messy business of political debate.⁴⁶ By treating texts as political *interventions*, historians of political thought read the past as a history of political contestation.

From a political theory perspective, Jack Turner writes that the ‘Cambridge School’ has been most successful in instilling a certain scholarly humility; respect for historical contexts brings with it the recognition that all ideological configurations are contingent. Still, Turner cautions that an overemphasis on historical discontinuities may render our present moment too innocent. For African American writers like W. E. B. Du Bois, Turner notes, ‘the past and present are politically confounded’. Efforts to appreciate a wider historical discourse can have the welcome effect of expanding our political canon. However, the historically sensitive methods that allow for this expansion of voices must not become an excuse to deny current inequalities, as if Du Bois’s description of ‘the problem of the color line’ depicted only early twentieth-century America.⁴⁷ Peter Gordon likewise argues against treating an idea’s original context as a wholly ‘self-contained system’, as if ideas are incapable of temporal and geographical movement. When carried to this extreme, contextualist methods divorce the present from the past and may, as an unintended consequence, reify modern ideologies.⁴⁸ But as the intensity of the methodological debates subsides, many historians and political theorists have settled on a more moderate form of contextualism.⁴⁹ The field seems to be shifting away from meta-reflections on method and towards an acknowledgement of disciplinary (or cross-disciplinary) *practice*. It is striking how much recent commentary encourages a kind of ‘practice’,⁵⁰

⁴⁵ Andrew Rehfield, ‘Offensive political theory’, *Perspectives on Politics*, 8/2 (2010), pp. 465–86, at p. 477.

⁴⁶ Richard Tuck, ‘The contribution of history’, in Robert Goodin and Philip Pettit (eds), *A Companion to Contemporary Political Philosophy* (Oxford, 1993), pp. 72–89, at pp. 72–3.

⁴⁷ Jack Turner, ‘Thinking historically’, *Theory & Event*, 19/1 (2016).

⁴⁸ Peter Gordon, ‘Contextualism and criticism in the history of ideas’, in Darrin M. McMahon and Samuel Moyn (eds), *Rethinking Modern European Intellectual History* (Oxford, 2014), pp. 32–55, at pp. 40, 43–6.

⁴⁹ Mark Bevir, ‘The contextual approach’, in George Klosko (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Political Philosophy* (Oxford, 2011), pp. 11–23; Richard Bourke, forum on ‘History of political thought’, *German History*, 30/1 (2012), p. 75–95, at p. 97 (for other forum responses on the ‘use’ of the history of political thought, see pp. 94–9).

⁵⁰ Jeffrey Edward Green, ‘Political theory as both philosophy and history: a defense against methodological militancy’, *Annual Review of Political Science*, 18 (2015), pp. 425–51, at p. 426; Gordon, ‘Contextualism’, pp. 37, 52.

‘conduct’⁵¹ or ‘vocation’⁵² in which scholars resist a strict ‘ethics of specialisation’⁵³ or ‘division of labour’ between history and political theory.⁵⁴

Building on the work of Sheldon Wolin, Patchen Markell urges overcoming the ‘Procrustean professional rubrics’ that treat the history of political thought and deliberation about modern life as separate endeavours.⁵⁵ We need not go as far as Wolin’s entreaty that political theory has become an ‘epic’ vocation to acknowledge that the history of political thought is, after all, a meditation on the business of politics and thus never wholly insulated from public concerns. For Rosanvallon, the history of the political serves as a bridge ‘between intellectual labour and political involvement’.⁵⁶ More historians of political thought now admit that academic history has a role to play in the broader civic process.

John Dunn has taken this route. Emphasising ‘the *professional* need for a global history of political thinking’, Dunn argues that, in the wake of Brexit and the 2016 US election – and one could now add the 2020 coronavirus pandemic – such global history will be ‘immediately political’. Globalisation has upended ‘parochial’ methods, and historians of political thought cannot afford to ignore the ‘global context’ in which they work.⁵⁷ Dunn’s essay is in keeping with the field’s increasingly global outlook. This ‘global turn’ marks both a major trend and methodological inflection point for the history of political thought, challenging what sort of context deserves historians’ attention.⁵⁸ More provocatively, the global turn asks whether the field’s traditional spatial or temporal contexts, for example, the state, the nation or the *ancien régime*, have evaded international questions.

Compared to their colleagues in anthropology and postcolonial studies, historians of political thought have been latecomers to this

⁵¹ Iain Hampsher-Monk, ‘Politics, political theory, and its history’, in *Political Philosophy versus History?*, pp. 105–27, at pp. 111–12.

⁵² Michael Frazer, ‘Ethics of interpretation in political theory and intellectual history’, *Review of Politics*, 81/1 (2019), pp. 77–99.

⁵³ Jeffrey Edward Green, ‘On the difference between a pupil and a historian of ideas’, *Journal of the Philosophy of History*, 6 (2012), pp. 84–110.

⁵⁴ Paul Kelly, ‘Rescuing political theory from the tyranny of history’, in *Political Philosophy versus History?* pp. 13–37, at p. 37; Turner, ‘Thinking historically’.

⁵⁵ Patchen Markell, ‘Unexpected paths: on political theory and history’, *Theory & Event*, 19/1 (2016). See Sheldon Wolin, ‘Political theory as a vocation’, *The American Political Science Review*, 63/4 (1969), pp. 1062–82.

⁵⁶ Rosanvallon, ‘Towards a philosophical history of the political’, p. 198.

⁵⁷ John Dunn, ‘Why we need a global history of political thought’, in Béla Kapossy, Isaac Nakhimovsky, Sophus A. Reinert and Richard Whatmore (eds), *Markets, Morals, Politics: Jealousy of Trade and the History of Political Thought* (Cambridge, MA, 2018), pp. 285–307, at pp. 288–9, 299. For criticism that global history is too inflected by concerns of contemporary globalisation, see Emma Rothschild, ‘Arc of ideas: international history and intellectual history’, in Gunilla Budde, Sebastian Conrad and Oliver Janz (eds), *Transnationale Geschichte: Themen, Tendenzen und Theorien* (Göttingen, 2006), pp. 217–26.

⁵⁸ Samuel Moyn and Andrew Sartori (eds), *Global Intellectual History* (New York, 2013); David Armitage, ‘The international turn in intellectual history’, in *Rethinking Modern European Intellectual History*, pp. 232–52.

international perspective.⁵⁹ Perhaps this is because the history of political thought has often been intellectually invested in ideas of the sovereign state.⁶⁰ Beyond a conceptual interest in the modern state, historians and political scientists, as a matter of practice and profession, must delimit their research, and the boundary of the state remains a useful heuristic.⁶¹ Nevertheless, work over the past fifteen years has highlighted issues of empire,⁶² global commerce and exchange,⁶³ international law and human rights,⁶⁴ and the politics of territoriality and space.⁶⁵ Scholars may find that the history of political thought is well suited to this shift of scope. The rise of modern empire, after all, was bound up with debates over sovereignty, property, human sociability, rights and justice – all major questions for the discipline.⁶⁶

Take the concept of liberalism. Many historians date the emergence of liberalism to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, meaning that liberal thought developed concurrently with modern European empires.⁶⁷ And yet different voices in the ‘liberal’ canon held conflicting views on whether empire was justifiable. J. S. Mill notoriously worked as an officer with the British East India Company, while others, such as Adam Smith in the eighteenth century and Herbert Spencer in the nineteenth century, fiercely criticised empire.⁶⁸ A philosophical investigation into any supposed tenets of liberalism cannot solve this contradiction. Instead, as Jennifer Pitts puts it, we ‘must investigate the pressures and anxieties of certain historical moments to understand how

⁵⁹ Jennifer Pitts, ‘Political theory of empire and imperialism’, *Annual Review of Political Science*, 13 (2010), pp. 211–35, at pp. 211–12.

⁶⁰ David Armitage, *Foundations of Modern International Thought* (Cambridge, 2013), pp. 3–4; Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought, II: The Age of Reformation* (Cambridge, 1978). Skinner concludes that, by the start of the seventeenth century, ‘the concept of the State’ represented ‘the most important object of analysis in European political thought’ (p. 349).

⁶¹ See e.g. *The History of Political Thought in National Context*; J. G. A. Pocock, ‘On the unglobality of contexts: Cambridge methods and the history of political thought’, *Global Intellectual History*, 4/1 (2019), pp. 1–14, at p. 12.

⁶² See e.g. Uday Singh Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire* (Chicago, 1996); David Armitage, *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire* (Cambridge, 2000); Sankar Muthu, *Enlightenment Against Empire* (Princeton, 2003); Jennifer Pitts, *A Turn to Empire* (Princeton, 2005); Duncan Bell, *The Idea of Greater Britain: Empire and the Future of World Order, 1860–1900* (Princeton, 2007).

⁶³ See e.g. Hont, *Jealousy of Trade*; Sophus Reinert, *Translating Empire: Emulation and the Origins of Political Economy* (Cambridge, MA, 2011); Béla Kapossy, Isaac Nakhimovskiy, and Richard Whatmore (eds), *Commerce and Peace in the Enlightenment* (Cambridge, 2017).

⁶⁴ See e.g. Martii Koskeniemi, *The Gentle Civilizer of Nations: The Rise and Fall of International Law 1870–1960* (Cambridge, 2002); Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge, MA, 2010); Jennifer Pitts, *Boundaries of the International: Law and Empire* (Cambridge, MA, 2018).

⁶⁵ See e.g. Daniel S. Allemann, Anton Jäger and Valentina Mann (eds), ‘Approaching space in intellectual history’, Special issue: *Global Intellectual History*, 3/2 (2018).

⁶⁶ Sankar Muthu (ed.), *Empire and Modern Political Thought* (Cambridge, 2012), p. 4.

⁶⁷ Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire*; Cf. Muthu, *Enlightenment against Empire*; Pitts, *Turn to Empire*; Karuna Mantena, *Alibis of Empire: Henry Maine and the Ends of Liberal Imperialism* (Princeton, 2010); Duncan Bell, *Reordering the World: Essays on Liberalism and Empire* (Princeton, 2016).

⁶⁸ On Mill, see Pitts, *Turn to Empire*, ch. 5, and Pratap Bhanu Mehta, ‘Liberalism, nation and empire: the case of J. S. Mill’, in *Empire and Modern Political Thought*, pp. 242–60; on Smith, see Pitts, *Turn to Empire*, ch. 2; on Spencer and Cobden, see Bell, *Reordering the World*, ch. 10.

thinkers whom we understand to exist within a broad but identifiable tradition could have disagreed so thoroughly'.⁶⁹ In other words, political theory needs the history of political thought.

Global research in the history of political thought has tended to situate classic political works within more international debates, while still limiting investigations to a specific era or network of authors, for instance, nineteenth-century British liberals. By contrast, critics of the global turn worry that a truly 'global' history entails a paradox; the scale of enquiry is so unbounded that it erodes the layers of regional, national, religious or ethnic knowledge necessary for sound historical research.⁷⁰ Sceptics ask whether, in attempting to overcome 'methodological nationalism', historians may instead be in danger of projecting current preoccupations with economic globalisation onto their study of the past.⁷¹ To set more workable parameters, Duncan Bell proposes limiting global history to what he calls 'practices in worldmaking'. Importantly, a study of such practices would be limited to moments when historical agents themselves spoke in terms of universals, or, in Bell's words, when they showed 'articulations of 'globability''.⁷² Bell's solution might prove especially salutary for historians of political thought. For it places the emphasis back on actual agents' arguments and asks how, at specific moments in time, people theorised their political borders. In short, it encourages us to ask what the historical questions were to which 'the global' served as an answer.⁷³ Adom Getachew's *Worldmaking after Empire* accords with Bell's suggestion. Getachew points to anti-colonial black intellectuals in the anglophone Atlantic who conceived of anti-imperialist projects, such as the New International Economic Order, as an explicitly *global* response to racial hierarchy.⁷⁴ This mode of global history continues to take politics and the struggle for political agency as its object.

Still, we should heed Pocock's warning that some, perhaps most, contexts retain an 'unglobability'. Even those who do not share Pocock's worry that the global turn imperils the 'Cambridge method' might consider his concern that a history that takes worldwide networks and markets as its object may end up 'empty[ing] the political'.⁷⁵ Historians and political theorists must be cautious of a method that abstracts away from local sites of political contestation, at the risk of eclipsing political thought. Pocock's own work demonstrates the extent to which political discourse transcends physical and temporal

⁶⁹ Pitts, *Turn to Empire*, p. 4.

⁷⁰ Frederick Cooper, 'How global do we want our intellectual history to be?', in Moyn and Sartori (eds), *Global Intellectual History*, pp. 283–94, at p. 286.

⁷¹ Bell, 'Making and taking worlds', in Moyn and Sartori (eds), *Global Intellectual History*, pp. 254–79, at pp. 254–55; Cooper, 'How global?', p. 292; Rothschild, 'Arc of ideas', pp. 217–21.

⁷² Bell, 'Making and taking worlds', p. 257.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 254.

⁷⁴ Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* (Princeton, 2019).

⁷⁵ Pocock, 'On the unglobality of contexts', pp. 2–4, 10–12.

frontiers.⁷⁶ Yet as (Western) historians move beyond the West, they have even more reason to stay conscious of their own limits, cultural and linguistic, when posing questions to the past.

⁷⁶ This is especially true of *The Machiavellian Moment*.