

Historical Interpretation

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Historical interpretation of political thought is, most generally, the setting of the authors and works of the field into their contexts in order to determine their meaning. It is almost unavoidable, since one must minimally describe an author such as Plato by such contexts as that he was an ancient Greek living in the times of the city-states. Nevertheless, how to go on from the very basics of historical context, and how much more is required, has been the subject of much methodological debate. Thucydides (ca. 460/455?–ca. 400 BCE) was arguably the first political theorist to employ historical interpretation, explaining political ideas and developments in his *The Peloponnesian War* in terms of the historical context. In recent decades, some of the most important schools of historical interpretation have been labeled the Cambridge School, the Straussians, the Marxists, German *Begriffsgeschichte* or conceptual history, historical hermeneutics, and, the most recent movement, comparative political thought. The *Journal of the History of Ideas* (1940–), *History and Theory* (1960–), and *History of Political Thought* (1980–) have been especially influential in promoting historical interpretations of political thought.

Responding to the end of widespread belief in the grand narratives of church and state, the Cambridge School emerged in the 1950s and 1960s when J. G. A. Pocock, Quentin Skinner, and John Dunn began writing contextualized histories of early modern political thought. Central among the Cambridge School's commitments, which Pocock and Skinner outlined in influential essays during the 1960s and 1970s, was the idea that all perspectives are historically conditioned. If one lacks awareness of the historical context of an author, one risks

unconsciously imposing one's own anachronistic perspective on a text or, alternatively, overlooking unexpected messages. Attention to historical context may guard the reader against fashioning a false conceptual coherence of disparate ideas, whether of an author's oeuvre or of political theories in general, since historical nuance so often disrupts the interpreter's pretensions to conceptual coherence.

The Cambridge School often writes in terms of the "languages" or discourses of political thought which may be available at any one time or place, conceived in terms of vocabularies, strategies, rhetorics, and packages of ideas that make for understanding of the political world. These may limit what authors can think because they can only theorize political problems and solutions in terms of the available languages. Others learn to manipulate them. Pocock's *The Machiavellian Moment* (2003 [1975]) traces a very long-lasting political language, republicanism, arguing that Machiavelli was crucial in transforming republicanism from an Aristotelian language of timelessness and universality to a modern political language capable of conceptualizing political temporality and dissolution. Pocock's approach emphasizes the importance of historical context in uncovering the transformations of meaning concealed by the uniformity of enduring political vocabularies.

Leo Strauss and the Chicago School are profoundly critical of some approaches to historical interpretation, labeling them historicism, which they argue privilege historical context to the point where no perspective can lay claim to superiority and all truths are reduced to interpretation. "Great" texts, Strauss argued, ought not to be read primarily for insight into their historical contexts, but in order to discern their historically transcendent truth, which is available to careful readers at all times and places. Moreover, to read texts as if they were historically bound is itself an anachronistic

practice since “great” authors intended their messages to transcend history. Yet Strauss was profoundly historical himself. He famously argued that many political thinkers wrote in an esoteric manner so as to make their true philosophical messages accessible to only the most elite readers, concealing their socially and politically dangerous ideas from the censors (and the masses) in order to avoid persecution. Esoteric reading is not the work of reason alone: close attention to the author’s historical context aids the intelligent scholar to reconstruct the author’s philosophical intentions and excavate a text’s hidden meaning. Thus while the Chicago School does not view political theory as a historical discipline, uncovering authors’ esoteric messages is in fact a very historical process.

G. W. F. Hegel approached historical interpretation as the tracing of the dialectical progress of the consciousness of reason. Though influenced by Hegel’s dialectical interpretation of history, Karl Marx’s historical materialism departed from Hegel by identifying a material basis for the superstructure of culture and ideas and explaining the dialectic of history as propelled by class conflict. C. L. R. James applied this method of interpretation to the Haitian Revolution (1938), C. B. Macpherson applied it to the interpretation of the political theories of Hobbes, Locke, and others (1962), and Christopher Hill applied it to the English Revolution (1965). Georg Lukács (1968 [1923]) argued that the proletariat is the only class with the potential to objectively apprehend the totality of this historical process. The bourgeois perspective, he wrote, having internalized the alienating psychology of commodification, reifies history as an autonomous object, never realizing its own place in history. However, the same events reified by the bourgeoisie serve to awaken the proletariat to its historical character. Historical interpretation, in Lukács’s view, is achieved when the proletariat becomes conscious of its historical conditions and realizes its creative potential as an historical actor.

Major theorists of hermeneutics or the art of interpretation such as Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur, both profoundly influenced by the events and impact of World War II, have provided phenomenological theories of interpretation. Gadamer’s *Truth and Method* (1989 [1975]) argues that all perspectives are historically situated, and that understanding is an event in which one’s own historically situated “horizon” of understanding fuses with another’s. Like the Cambridge School, Gadamer’s hermeneutical approach emphasizes the fundamentally historical character of understanding. However, where the Cambridge School tends to emphasize the variation or incommensurability between current concepts and those of the past, Gadamer thought of history as grounding even temporally distant concepts in a shared tradition that makes understanding possible. Ricoeur argued for the inevitability of conflicts of interpretations, and an inevitable surplus of meaning in any text beyond the intentions of its author.

Also under the influence of the dramatic political changes in twentieth-century Germany, Reinhart Koselleck and a team of authors prepared the monumental *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe (Basic Concepts of History)* (1972–98), an eight-volume study of the changes in many social and political concepts over the years from 1750 to 1850 in several European languages. The focus on single concepts, one at a time, contrasts with the attention of the Cambridge School to whole political languages taken together. Many of the chapters of this German-language project have been published in English in journals or collections. Koselleck’s methodological work emphasized the role of notions of time in political concepts, and argued for a “saddle time” or period of exceptional conceptual change in the late eighteenth century.

Building on the German project has been the also monumental Iberian/Latin American project, *Diccionario político y social del mundo iberoamericano (Social and Political Dictionary of the Iberoamerican World)* (Fernández Sebastián 2009–), which traces the development of social and political concepts on the Iberian

peninsula and in seven Latin American countries between 1750 and 1850. The authors of these chapters canvass periodicals and other ephemeral literature to provide a linguistic context for understanding the more sophisticated political thinkers. A journal grew out of these conceptual history projects, beginning in 2005 and entitled *Contributions to the History of Concepts*.

A political activist for gay rights and prison reform, Michel Foucault's investigations of the origins of sexuality, power, freedom of expression, and knowledge are concerned with the history of discursive formations, and have sometimes been labeled postmodern. His form of historical approach, which he called "archeology," was informed by Nietzsche's genealogical investigations. Foucault's archeological method sought to investigate precisely matters that are usually left out of history, questioning what such omissions reveal about the necessary conditions of the categories of our thought.

Much of the previously mentioned work concentrated on Euro-American political thought, with some attention to the European empires. Dissatisfaction with Eurocentrism has generated an interest in comparative political theory or philosophy, which is theoretical and historical work that attempts to bring the history of western and nonwestern political thought into dialogue and mutual understanding. Early comparative theorists include Fred Dallmayr and Bhikhu Parekh, and a recent effort to theorize optimal historical interpretations across major cultural boundaries is Farah Godrej's *Cosmopolitan Political Thought* (2011). Comparative political theorists often emphasize the historically conditioned character of different traditions of theory, though they argue that bringing diverse traditions into conversation need not require that they exhibit a conceptual equivalence or similarity. Thus, comparative political thought sets less of a premium on the need to reconstruct the historical context and intentions of an author or text, and emphasizes that texts from diverse traditions might be valuable for generating questions, critiques, and

solutions that may have not occurred without a crosscultural theoretical interaction.

Some critics of historical interpretation have insisted that too much attention to the historical context may overwhelm the importance of truth and contemporary relevance. As the editors of *Political Philosophy versus History?* (Floyd & Stears 2011) point out, privileging the historical character of texts may emphasize the importance of context to such a degree that it neutralizes their value for current theoretical questions. For some political theorists, historical accuracy is less important than the theoretical fruits that an engagement with a historical text yields. One could take this to the extreme of eschewing historical interpretation altogether, which perhaps some analytical philosophers have tried to do. From the other side, Isaiah Berlin, writing at the intersection of historical and analytical approaches, argued that because values do not exist apart from language, theorizing across time and cultures without much historical awareness is likely to yield rhetorical conflation of incompatible concepts. But there is no reason in principle why careful attention to historical interpretation cannot be held in balance with a concern for truth and the implications for contemporary politics.

SEE ALSO: Cambridge School; Comparative Political Thought; Foucault, Michel (1926–84); Gadamer, Hans-Georg (1900–2002); Historical Materialism; Historicism; Pocock, J. G. A. (1924–); Skinner, Quentin (1940–); Strauss, Leo (1899–1973)

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Relevant scholarly journals

- Contributions to the History of Concepts*
History and Theory
History of Political Thought
Journal of the History of Ideas