

REVIEW

Michael Oakeshott and the Cambridge School on the History of Political Thought

by Martyn P. Thompson

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This book is unlikely to become famous. It offers nothing to the Harvard school of political thought strung out between Rawls, Nozick, Nagel, Walzer and others which is staggering on in the late writings of Michael Sandel and which will remain to influence at least one line of concern in *Political Theory*. It offers nothing to the Verso school of political thought which for a long time has perpetuated, along with Polity Press, a provocative licensed subversion of the pieties of the Harvard School, by publishing everything that men like Alain Badiou and Slavoj Zizek have ventured to write. These are the two great streams of published political theory of our time: Liberal and Marxist, concerned with those two idols of the political thinking of our age, 'normativity' and 'praxis'. They mostly ignore each other. Neither of them should be taken fully seriously, though, of course, both should be read to see what they say. The most serious tradition for the understanding of politics in English, at least, has come not from Oxford, or Harvard, or even Chicago, or from the pages of *New Left Review* or *The Journal of Political Philosophy* or *The American Political Science Review*. It has come from Cambridge—not Cambridge, Massachusetts, but Cambridge, England. And, so far, and though many interesting things have been written about the 'Cambridge School', this is by some way the best book on the subject. Since it is almost the only book on the subject, I should perhaps say it is a good book on the subject.

In the classification of political theory, 'Michael Oakeshott' is an established subject, a fairly small one, but one with a phalanx of committed scholars, with their own Association. 'The Cambridge School' is far less focused an endeavour. It has a university, so lacks an association: indeed, it has sometimes aspired to be more like a *universitas* than a *societas*. There is little overlap between them, though Oakeshott taught at Cambridge for a long time. He left Cambridge long before Quentin Skinner and John Dunn arrived there as undergraduates; and, in historical terms, Oakeshott represents the hostility of a certain sort of 1920s mind to the slackness which preceded the First World War, whereas Skinner and Dunn represent the hostility of a certain sort of 1960s mind to the slackness of what came after the Second World War. There is of course J.G.A. Pocock, who, slightly older than Skinner and Dunn, fell more under Oakeshott's influence than they did. But between Oakeshott and the Cambridge School there is a great tacet. Perhaps the only writer who offered some sort of response to both was Maurice Cowling, whose *Religion and Public Doctrine* included reflections on both Oakeshott and Skinner. (See Cowling, Vol. I, pp. 251-82 and Vol. III, 619-21). I was one of the last to be taught by Cowling, and acquired from

him an interest in Oakeshott and also a sense that, despite what everyone seemed to be saying in Cambridge in the 1990s, Skinner's way of doing history was not the only way it could be done. So there may not be many in the 'Cambridge School' who will engage with *Michael Oakeshott and the Cambridge School on the History of Political Thought*. Oakeshott was Cambridge, though not of the School. He to some extent lay behind the School, he reviewed its work, he wrote alongside it on similar themes, but he had no direct influence on its most famous writers. Partly this was to do with his doctrine of history, and his pure concept of philosophy: naturally, it was also to do with his politics, which were not those of the Cambridge School. But this book is very important because it locates a complicated crux, which is important if we are to understand what has happened to academic political thinking since the late nineteenth century.

I want to use this article to say some things which Thompson does not say in his book, to broaden the frame of reference, and also use my slightly privileged position as a student who encountered the School in the late twentieth century to offer some fairly informal reflections on it. The School is now diffuse, or diffused, and there are lines of thought it inaugurated which are continuing to stimulate writing. Some young and formidable writers are perpetuating themes which obviously began with the School. But most of the reflection on the subject has remained caught up in its academic commitment and has not really cut loose to try to say something general about what has gone on. And, speaking for myself, I find much of the academic reflection a bit shackled by indebtedness or introversion. No one, for instance, has really ever noticed how shallow and involved and contorted some of the Cambridge School writing is when compared to the writing of, say, Collingwood and Oakeshott.

It is hard to recover an intellectual culture, especially when one is trying to make sense of the confusion of one's own educational experience, but it seems to me now that no one else has exercised such intellectual influence as Skinner over Cambridge History since the age of J.R. Seeley and Lord Acton a century before, except perhaps Herbert Butterfield. Skinner has exercised his influence through his own writings, whereas Butterfield exercised most of his influence through the hints taken up in the next generation by Peter Laslett and Duncan Forbes, as well as Pocock and Cowling, and also—what was the same thing—through the argument of *The Whig Interpretation of History* (1931). Skinner, appointed lecturer in the 1960s, Professor of Political Science in 1978, Regius Professor of Modern History in 1997, was already a towering figure in Cambridge when I arrived in 1991, as towering in reputation as Annan said Oakeshott was in 1946. 'The History of Political Thought' was, in Cambridge, the only really good way to make history seem as if it had a point, and was not just 'history for history's sake'. I had found history appealing as a subject when it was limited by the definition given it by a sixth form teacher (and by the maps of old imperial Europe on the wall). But when the books were opened and the lectures began at university, the subject suddenly came to lack all structure: there was an endless set of problems, authorities, books, archives, literatures, cultures and fashions (imagined communities, invented traditions etc): each library sprawled far more than it should. Only the history of political thought—not 'intellectual history', a relatively much weaker subject (despite what everyone is now coming to say)—seemed to offer something like intellectual rigour, and a *genuine subject*: those great texts, from Plato's *Republic* and Aristotle's *Politics*, through Machiavelli's *Prince*, to Locke's *Two Treatises*, Hobbes's *Leviathan*, Rousseau's *Social Contract* and beyond—and of course the most complicated subject in the world, *politics*. Just as Pocock did fifty years before, I read G.H. Sabine's *History of Political Theory*—not 'a history', as Pocock now tells us (in 2019). And I wrote about these books textually—no matter what I thought I was doing—certainly not contextually. The point of the history of political thought was to escape from the endless reading lists, to achieve clarity, some rising above the fray, to settle on one book for a moment. I was an innocent. I read Sabine; I also read Russell's *History of Western Philosophy* and some other dubious books. If they had existed, then, God forbid, I might have read some of A. C. Grayling's books.

I found out later—when attempting to make some sense of my own education in around 2002—that there had been two schools in Cambridge, one of which was more or less dominant until about 1960, and the other of which has come to be dominant since 1960. The first had its ancestor in Seeley's idea that history and politics should be studied together (though it had no ancestry in Seeley's own conception of the subject,

which ignored the history of political thought together for the sake of a classificatory science built out of the ordering of historical facts). The idea here was that history, which meant the history of political thought, was a good subject for allowing undergraduates to exercise some sort of intelligence on an intelligible and indeed intelligent subject matter. Cowling was still arguing like this in the 1970s, though by that time fewer and fewer historians could agree with him. For, by then, the tide had turned. The second position, which had its ancestor in F.W. Maitland's and J.N. Figgis's idea that anything historical should be studied historically, had been given an important statement by Butterfield in *The Whig Interpretation of History*—still, despite E.H. Carr and Richard Evans (about whom the verdicts of Norman Stone apply) the most important single work of historical thought in the twentieth century. Butterfield's conception cast a great shadow over *everyone* who came up afterwards: and that means not only the generation of Pocock, Forbes, Laslett and Cowling, but also the generation of Skinner, Dunn and the rest. Unlike Oakeshott, whose influence faded in Cambridge in the 1950s and disappeared with a death knell when he declared himself emphatically on 'the wrong side' in 1962 with the publication of *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*—as Dunn explained it to me in 2002—Butterfield still casts a shadow, over even those who have never heard of him. And the shadow cast was not just over the history of political thought, but over history itself. No one in Cambridge—and I believe this is still the case, despite subaltern studies, resurgent radicalism and 'postmodernism'—is allowed to write Whig history. It is forbidden. Skinner did it once, contradicting his own methodological instruction that he should not do so: later, of course, he recanted, recanting *not* the instruction but the error of having broken it. In his later reflections on *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought* he admits that his greatest error was to write a Whig history of the state. This is, he assures us, no longer his practice. (For this see Skinner 2006, p. 237.) He has, in effect, reverted to the position of Butterfield in 1931.

The doctrine amongst Cambridge historians, by the 1960s, was therefore overtly against my own practice as an undergraduate—against reading Sabine, Russell, *texts* etc—and for contextualisation, which was the requirement that everything be as historical as possible, referred back to the appropriate context: Skinner's 1513, Laslett's 1689, Pocock's 1790. No one was willing to admit, as F.R. Leavis had suggested a long time ago—for which see 1968, Vol. II, p. 293—that the context is not the context of history but the context of the historian. (Consider many recent 'Cambridge School' books in which the context is at least half the 'contexts of the historians', that is to say, the writings of Pocock, Hont, Sonenscher, Dunn etc, in addition to the more predictably required 'context of the history'.) One of the oddities of Pocock's six volumes of *Barbarism and Religion* is that, despite his endless exploration of the 'contexts' of Edward Gibbon, he never seems to reflect on the fact that much of the work seems to emerge out of the 'contexts' of J.G.A. Pocock. This emphasis on context could be why I was so alienated when I studied for the first ever M.Phil in Political Thought and Intellectual History in 1994-95: though there were other reasons for alienation, foremost among which was the fact that John Dunn and Raymond Geuss conducted political discussion at a level which failed to convey anything to my mind, a mind in search of simplicities rather than sophistication. Dunn and Geuss were clearly not 'the Cambridge School' in the sense of 'practising historians' though they were important in continuing to suggest the editorial benefit of knowing practising historians and reading their writings. What they were doing in 1994 was editorialising against what we might call normative or analytical political theory with the benefit of a historical knowledge that normative and analytical philosophers were likely to lack. This did not make much sense to me, since I had had at that stage only the smallest exposure to any sort of abstract thought about politics. I considered myself to be a historian, but since I had fallen into the 'history of political thought' I was also disengaging myself from history without yet engaging with anything else.

History is a vexed subject. There have been three major views taken of history in the last three hundred years. Each says something about the utility of history for the present. The first is Bolingbroke's, which is that history supplies us with examples for our theories. We should read history to become better statesmen. So history is a practical subject. The second is James Mill's and also John Stuart Mill's (and Smith's, and Condorcet's, and Comte's, and Hegel's), which is that history is the record of the rise of humanity from one stage of civilisation to the next, and is therefore the record of progress. The third is Coleridge's or Car-

lyle's, which is that history is an exercise in imagination and sympathy, a matter of recreating what has almost been lost, 'history for history's sake', the study of 'the past for its own sake', therefore not relevant, or, at most, complicatedly relevant. Most historians share the third view, but it must be evident to anyone who thinks about this that the emergence of this originally idealist but now academic history stripped history of its practical point in the present. It was about 'the world we have lost', to use Laslett's phrase, and not the present world. This third view is much more negative, or merely historical, than the first two views. So ever since the nineteenth century, and increasingly in the professionalised twentieth century, historians have worried about what the *point* of history is, including the history of thought. The great Victorians Acton, Seeley and Maitland, worked with habits of mind which were destroyed by the First World War. After the war what was wanted was exactitude. We could define modernity as the era in which we sought exactitude. (The entire history of 'political science', 'political theory' and 'political philosophy' is the history of the conflicting exactitudes which replaced the old Victorian vague generalities.) Oakeshott and Butterfield offered grand suggestions or hints, which were taken up by the next generation of historians in Cambridge. Cambridge was important because Seeley had legislated, in a law which was never repealed, that history and politics should be studied together. This is the context out of which the distinctive 'Cambridge School' emerged.

What is the 'Cambridge School'?

First of all, 'It is not a school'. The term has been disparaged by almost all of the names associated with it. The name was coined, we are told, by Caroline Robbins in 1973. It probably had more purchase in America than in England. But now everyone knows to what it refers. So, 'It is a school'.

We have to proceed stepwise if we are to understand it.

There are circles within the Cambridge School.

Firstly, at its core, there is Quentin Skinner, who could well claim, like Leavis, that 'I was Cambridge—the essential Cambridge', though certainly not 'in spite of Cambridge'.⁵⁸ He is the author of the famous methodological article of 1969, 'Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas' (which was followed by many other fascinatingly elaborated, arcane and technical articles developing the argument), and the author of the famous two-volume book *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought* (1978), which was about Renaissance and Reformation political thought. He made much of 'intention', became associated with 'context' rather than 'text', elaborately adapted some ideas of J.L. Austin to suggest the history of political thought might have its own method, worked practically to extend the canon of texts so it became a bit historically richer, and in his writings on Hobbes and Machiavelli offered clear and ingenious insights which were supposed to be consequences of his approach—rather than of his own ingenuity. Skinner is a remarkable figure: with the mind of an eagle, or a hawk, a great gift of lucid lecturing (as well as a great knowledge of the rhetorical arts), and, at his best, a crystalline style of writing: his greatest writings are unique in having something of the atmosphere of a classic game of chess. They always issue in victory.

Secondly, there is the triumvirate Skinner formed with John Dunn and John Pocock.

It is worth comparing the three famous 'methodological' pieces of the 1960s, Pocock's 'The History of Political Thought: A Methodological Enquiry' (1962), Dunn's 'The Identity of the History of Ideas' (1968) and Skinner's 'Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas' (1969). There are stark divergences between them which have never seemed to receive adequate attention. Skinner banished philosophers from the history of ideas and insisted that it should only be studied historically by historians. Or, at least, he mostly did this, while also managing to suggest that if the history of ideas were studied historically by historians then this might throw up something of philosophical significance—a suggestion which he was to expand in his later writings. Pocock was much more tolerant and reasonable than Skinner. His point was that though the history of ideas could be studied in different ways, it was usually studied at a high level of abstraction: though he, for one, was more interested, historically, in a lower level of abstraction where 'theory' was 'thought' and so blurred into practice. Here he sketched some of the ideas he was to develop later about the 'traditions' or 'languages' out of which theories emerged. Dunn, however, asked for more than did Skinner and Pocock. He was not content with excluding philosophy, as Skinner did early on (or in

bringing a philosophical rabbit out of the historical hat, as Skinner did later on), or merely disentangling historical and philosophical approaches, as Pocock did, because he wanted history and philosophy to be fused at a higher level where they would, in effect, become the same thing. These three articles had much in common—let there be no doubt of that—but their fundamental doctrines were completely different. Skinner was intolerant and exclusive, Pocock tolerant and inclusive, Dunn intolerant and inclusive. It should come as no surprise that, as compared to Skinner, Pocock has always been much more of a straight historian of ideas, while Dunn has always been more of a critic of not only the history of political thought but also of political theory.

Dunn, after making his contribution to methodology—and also, by Skinner's own account (1988, p. 327 n. 14), suggesting to Skinner the rigmarole of *How To Do Things With Words*—and after making one contribution to the historical study of political thought in the form of a book on Locke, shifted tack entirely to contemplate (in what was in effect, though not in intention, a far more Oakeshottian manner) the editorial significance of all this for political theory: which eventuated in books on contemporary themes but with a continual historical inflection: books such as *Modern Revolutions* (1971), *Western Political Theory in the Face of the Future* (1979), *The Politics of Socialism* (1984), *The Cunning of Unreason* (2000), etc. When I say 'the editorial significance of this' I mean that Dunn has done something which Ernest Barker and Michael Oakeshott had done before him, and which perhaps only Raymond Geuss and David Runciman have done since, which is to read researches but write thoughts—that is, to avoid reading theory but inevitably to write theoretically, while basing that theoretical writing on some sort of amassed sense of the historical nature of the subject. One of the great weaknesses of most modern academic writing is that it has lost the old Victorian crop rotation which made the older writings on history, philosophy, politics, society and law writing so broad and sonorous. Consider the learning of Fitzjames Stephen or Maine, or of Leslie Stephen or Maitland. Historians now read history and write history. Philosophers, or perhaps I should write 'philosophers' (those who teach in departments of philosophy), read philosophy and write philosophy. It seems to me that the signal merit of the Cambridge School was that there was not supposed to be any one-to-one correlation between the subjects of reading and writing. Maurice Cowling continually lectured on and supervised in the history of political thought and not the subject he very conspicuously wrote three great books about between 1967 and 1975, British political history. Dunn, though always associated with the Cambridge School, has in large part in his writings embodied a protest against the narrowing involved in the professionalisation of academic subjects, including the professionalisation which made the emergence of the School possible. Where the complication in Skinner has come from ingenuity, the complication in Dunn has come from not only his range and his perennial sense of political urgency but also from a highly worked syntax in which the irony is not always as obvious as perhaps it ought to be.

Pocock, older by fifteen or so years than Dunn and Skinner, is a part of the triumvirate by pure allegiance and some sort of inheritance rather than by institutional continuity. Skinner has kept his own flame, with some help from his students and colleagues—like David Armitage, Annabel Brett, James Tully, Kari Palonen and Mark Goldie. Pocock has kept his own flame, and, though as mighty a scholar, has done so with not so much a theoretical anxiety—he is even more assured than Skinner—but with more anxiety about status (an eagerness not to be forgotten, but to state his proximity but also distance from Skinner). Dunn has kept his own flame, or set of flames, or even holocaust, too, though, as I say, this is only relevant in so far as his own work acts as a satire of the pretence of the Cambridge School to be saying anything at all. Pocock is a magisterial figure, perhaps the most erudite historian of our age—certainly since the death of Trevor-Roper—and also interestingly one of the greatest collaborative historians of his time. By this, I mean that he has not only acknowledged the work of other authors, but has used them, assimilated them. So Pocock, in his autobiographical reflections, offers more than a merely defensive account: he actually knows what his contemporaries have been up to, and his own work is an attempt to extend his own frame so it can include those of, say, Momigliano, Baron, Arendt, Skinner, Robbins, Hont and even Burrow. What separates Pocock from Skinner and obviously from Dunn is that Pocock has always worked exclusively as a historian. He writes with a self-denying ordinance which states that he shall not directly point to the sig-

nificance of his history except that it shall extend our historical understanding. Skinner has not had such an ordinance. He has always looked for the present relevance of the history purified by proper historical seriousness. As regards Dunn, I would say he has mostly played truant from the School, though he has maintained his relations with those who have continued to write the history and those who have tried to find some specific in the history to offer to the present. Dunn has found no specific, and so has always written as a generalist who is critical of specifics. In fact, he has done more than anyone else in the Cambridge School to attempt to reconstruct the old system which existed before 1960 or even 1900 of approaching the subject of politics from all angles. He has always been resolutely opposed to the narrowing and splitting apart of the academic study of politics.

Thirdly, to return to the circles of the Cambridge School, there is the community of those from whom something was inherited—importantly Laslett (it should be noted that Pocock (for instance in 2006, p. 37) has always preferred to find the origin of the Cambridge School in Laslett's 1949 than in Skinner's 1969)—and those with whom there was some sort of affinity—Forbes—but also those who themselves inherited the doctrines and added their own twists—Richard Tuck, Istvan Hont, Michael Sonenscher, and also those who came before, including the famous Oxford name of R.G. Collingwood, and also those who came before and remained sceptical or committed to their own variants of similar or sometimes contradictory themes—Butterfield and Oakeshott. This is as yet understudied. Collingwood is often mentioned by the Cambridge School, though it is only the Collingwood of *The Autobiography* and *The Idea of History*, and not the Collingwood of *Speculum Mentis*, *The Essay on Philosophical Method* or *The New Leviathan*. Oakeshott is hardly ever mentioned, though, as Thompson reminds us, Collingwood thought Oakeshott was—apart from himself, no doubt—the 'high-water mark of English thought upon history' (p. 7). 'If Collingwood, then Oakeshott' is a powerful argument. But Collingwood's politics fit better with those of the Cambridge School than Oakeshott's—'We are engaged in a war of ideas' rather than 'I don't find it necessary to have opinions on such matters'—(to take lines from Collingwood 1989, p. 233 and Oakeshott as quoted in Annan 1991, p. 540). I have already said that Oakeshott and Butterfield were behind everything, perhaps especially and actively Butterfield, who remained in Cambridge until his death in 1979. Oakeshott certainly imposed himself on the minds of Laslett, Forbes, Pocock and Cowling: sometimes positively and sometimes negatively. I would say that in Pocock the influence was subtle and pervasive, since Pocock adapted and made more historically sensitive Oakeshott's emphasis on traditions and languages. And on Cowling the influence was significant—because Cowling was on the 'wrong side' politically too, and more defiantly—though Cowling eventually took the Oakeshottian doctrine that history is 'what the evidence obliges us to believe', took out the 'us', replaced it with 'me', and decided to write in what he considered was a Macaulayan or Gibbonian free manner, in a style of open war on behalf of Christianity against all manner of Whiggisms, from Gibbon's through Macaulay's to Marx's. Cowling, too, had at first been more influenced by Butterfield. It should always be remembered that Butterfield was most important as the author of *The Whig Interpretation of History*. His advice was that for the sake of one's historical sense one should *never* study Whigs. He led Laslett to the reactionary Filmer, Pocock to the reactionary Brady, and he probably was at least partly responsible for Cowling's writing of Tory histories of situation in his three strenuous books on British political history.

Finally, there is the absolute historical context of the Cambridge Historical Tripos, and its exponents, running back to Seeley, Acton, Maitland, Figgis, as well as Henry Sidgwick and William Cunningham, and that other important Oxford figure, Ernest Barker—who sometimes struck me, though I could be wrong, as the only completely clear writer in the whole of this canon, perhaps because he came to Cambridge from outside—though this may be, alas, because Barker sometimes suggests to readers that though he was first class in worth and work he may have been less than first class in insight. Perhaps this is Cambridge tortuous disdain for easy Oxford. Everyone I know seems to think less of Barker than I do. Barker was as receptive as Pocock, but had a greater range and some of the writing in his collection of ancient texts on politics, *From Alexander to Constantine* (1959) is remarkable and, as far as I can see, still unmatched—since more recent scholars of classical politics simply do not know enough about everything that came afterwards.

If I am forced to say what the ‘Cambridge School’ is, I would first stand by the claim I made in an article some years ago (2016) that the School makes two assumptions: the first is that politics should be studied in relation to history (this dates from Seeley, however interpreted), and the second is the more particular one that political theory should be studied historically (this dates from Laslett, Pocock and Skinner though it has ancestry in Figgis and others—and was established institutionally by Barker). The first of these was rather relaxed about the present relevance of the past, since there was no single doctrine of history: journalism, scholarship, theory all co-existed for half a century while men like Lowes Dickinson and Barker were dominant. But with historical intensification in the 1950s, an anxiety arose. If, as Butterfield had suggested, history should be done properly, historically, then did this not relegate the entire canon of history of political thought to the archive? Ever since then, it seems to me, the School therefore has made two suggestions, which are strictly contradictory:

The first is that works of political theory should be studied historically—that is, explicitly, not in contemporary terms.

The second is that the historical study of works of political theory is not simply of historical significance, but turns out to be of significance for contemporary political theory.

Let me restate this so it is a blunt contradiction. The claim is that history should be less relevant to the present so it can be more relevant. The reason that Skinner is so famous is because he embraced the contradiction with the most vigour.

I studied at Cambridge. I was confused by the writings of Skinner. I am not sure I saw through them at the time. His writings legitimate much, especially for historians of a certain sort—most of them Cambridge historians, but also some historians who come from elsewhere and settle in Cambridge, and also some who find that what is said in Cambridge accords with their own work in Hull, Exeter, Sussex or elsewhere. But I have to say, here, that Skinner’s work is, in effect, the projection of a contradiction. Some of the next generation may have explicitly abandoned it, or abandoned parts of it. Some may have—I suspect (having looked at works by Richard Bourke, Christopher Brooke and Paul Sagar)—implicitly abandoned some of it while implicitly retaining some of it. But most of them are gilded by the gold of Cambridge, or shrouded in its smoke. It suits historians to have had it claimed with full trumpeting force that *history is relevant*, and not only that, but relevant in certain ways that make it indispensable. This has been a good marketing strategy. It has enabled things to be sold. But it also suits historians, when they are justifying themselves as historians, to say that *history should be done historically*. It should be ‘serious history’ and not too obviously relevant.

As I have said, the relevance of history was not a problem for either Bolingbroke or J.S. Mill. But it has become a problem for us. And while Oakeshott had a complicated and some would say conservative or dismissive view about the relation of past to present—as a consequence of his distinction of ‘practical past’ and ‘historical past’—Skinner and those who have come after him have had a far less coherent view, in fact, a confused and confusing view, about it. The imperatives do not point steadily in any one direction. Strictly, history should at most contribute to the present by showing us how our standard stories are mistaken. But this is a negative, only scholarly, insight, and at other times some more positive insight has been sought.

To be sure, Skinner has in the last twenty or so years wanted the history of political thought to offer us positive alternatives to our own received ideas. This is how he has written about the state, in what is perhaps his most admired contribution to the history of political thought—the only work of his that I see cited by his contemporaries, Dunn and Geuss, over and over again. The classic essay—and rightly considered his masterpiece—‘The State’ (1989) has been, if such a thing is possible, exceeded in quality by ‘The Sovereign State: A Genealogy’ (2010). And this is, even more emphatically, how he has written about liberty in *Liberty before Liberalism* (1998), where he has found an ally among political theorists in Philip Pettit in urging some sort of republican theory which Skinner has extracted from historic writers. Tuck has done something similar in *The Sleeping Sovereign* (2016) to what Skinner did in *Liberty before Liberalism*—found a positive alternative to some received idea in history—in relation to sovereignty. Hont wanted to do something similar in form, though he disagreed with both about the content. And recently Paul Sagar in *The*

Opinion of Mankind (2018) has done something similar in form, that is, he has extracted an argument from a discernible historical past, in his case, Hont's favourite subjects of Smith and Hume, though not using them in a way that Hont could exactly sanction, since, for Hont, the point was always about economics. But if this is the apex of the achievement of the Cambridge School in terms of relevance, what we have to observe is that not only Pocock but many others have expressed doubts about it. For Pocock, it is not obvious that the history of political thought should eventuate in theories at all: he has remained a practising historian. For Dunn, who has not remained a practising historian, it is certainly not obvious that the history of political thought should throw up theories as simple and therefore as objectionable as the current theories he thinks we should use history to be complicated about. Others have followed Pocock in choosing to study 'commercial society' rather than 'the state', or, rather, have made much of the need—conjured up from the study of political thought in the eighteenth century—to study 'the state' in relation to 'commercial society'. This was the purpose of Pocock's *Virtue, Commerce and Society* (1985), though he was following Hont and Ignatieff's *Wealth and Virtue* (1982): though the manifesto for this line of thought was only finally published in Hont's *Jealousy of Trade* (2005). Hont, mostly in conversation, was always withering about Skinner's way of trying to show the 'relevance' of political theory: though, alas, and despite Sagar's enterprising recent attempt to join the dots, Hont gave no indication of how his own historical writing—though it had joined the dots between Hobbes and Hume and Smith—could continue to join the dots even as far as Pocock's Burke or Burrow's Bagehot or beyond. Skinner got as far as Hobbes. Pocock got as far as Burke. But for all of these historians—all of the major Cambridge School historians (and I cannot think of an exception)—the French Revolution has been the terminus or even *telos*. There are some associated historians now like J.C.D. Clark, Richard Whatmore and Michael Sonenscher who are now troubling with the boundary between the *ancien régime* and the *novo ordo saeculorum* of our revolutionary, ideological, liberal modernity. But despite them, and despite the 'intellectual history' of Donald Winch, John Burrow and Stefan Collini who drew a controversial wandering essayistic line between the Scottish Enlightenment and the origins of the Cambridge Historical Tripos via Bagehot in *That Noble Science of Politics* (1983), there is still a vast hiatus or caesura between what came before and what came after the French Revolution. Only the out-and-out non-historians like Dunn and Geuss, or pre-Skinnerian historians like Oakeshott and Cowling, have tried to grasp modernity without some sort of strange historical inversion or contortion. I think that what I shall call the 'ingenious' works of the 'Cambridge School' would repay study: by which I specifically mean Skinner's *Liberty Before Liberalism*, Tuck's *The Sleeping Sovereign* and Sagar's *The Opinion of Mankind*. Hont's *Jealousy of Trade* does not count, for though it had the aspiration, it lacked the achievement. It is hard to be ingenious with a sledgehammer or with erudition. Hont remained as committed to the eighteenth century, despite his urgent sense he should not be, as Pocock, who has been far more relaxed about it, has been. Pocock's vast Gibbonian volumes of *Barbarism and Religion* (1999-2015) are in effect a satire against ingenuity, choosing erudition instead. But neither of these ways, the ingenious or the erudite, was Oakeshott's way.

Thompson's book attractively simplifies all of this by narrowing the 'Cambridge School' down to Pocock and Skinner. As he no doubt knows, Dunn would confound the encounter between Oakeshott and the Cambridge School too much; while mention of Butterfield or Cowling—or the estimable Charles Smyth or even F.E. Simpson—would tangle it up in actual history and also religion. Thompson's concern is with those who have devoted themselves to the history of political thought. The argument of the book is simple. It is, in effect, though I put the point historically rather than argumentatively, that it was a disaster that the Cambridge School as it came to be after 1960 failed to understand Oakeshott. The reason this was a disaster is that apart from in a few corners most Cambridge historians have written as if Oakeshott did not exist. This would not matter if it were not the case that Oakeshott was by some way the most thoughtful of writers about politics in the twentieth century. I say 'thoughtful' in order to suggest 'subtle', but I also want to make it clear that he was nothing as poor as *only* being 'subtle'. He was an extremely bold, indeed, coercive thinker: able to coerce vast tranches of historical researches into schemes which he sketched, explored, re-considered. His unpublished writings—as I recently suggested in a chapter in a recent Oakeshott book (see Alexander 2019)—from 1950 onwards indicate how he worked over the same ideas again and again in order

to get them right in *On Human Conduct* in 1975. By that time, the Cambridge School had long lost interest. Oakeshott was on the ‘wrong side’ politically. (Only Cowling read *On Human Conduct* with any care. But as a frankly conservative historian he also was on the ‘wrong side’.) Stephen Turner has recently written about Oakeshott’s use of ‘antinomies’ in *Cosmos and Taxia*. (See Turner 2018.) The observation is correct, though I fear that Turner has not stated the case strongly enough. Oakeshott’s mature thought was almost entirely antinomial. Oakeshott was a fully Sagittarian thinker: a painter of the skies in black and white. Consider *Experience and Its Modes*. There is no book like it. And in his later more ‘political’ writings he attempted to make sense of a much *harder* subject than mere ‘history’, ‘philosophy’ or ‘science’—the harder subject being the mixed one of ‘politics’—by attempting to *divide* it. I use ‘divide’ here in the Platonic sense. There was no point collecting meanings of politics, in, to use Dunn’s phrase, a ‘weakly nominalist’ manner (Dunn 1994, p. 207). But division should not be crude. So, for Oakeshott, division involved the recognition that politics was best understood as being on a scale, dominated by poles, a binary of two inclinations, which were strictly contradictory. He found different names for them at different times: nomocracy, telocracy, *societas*, *universitas*. We may disagree with Oakeshott’s argument here. But there is no point failing to recognising how *simple* it was: bold, brutal, bloody and coercive. The thinker *thought*, and was not dismayed by the *researches*. (‘Research will never take the place of thought’, said Oakeshott in the 1930s. This thought, neglected by the modern research university, can be found in Oakeshott 2007, p. 118.) Oakeshott’s manner of presenting his arguments is sometimes sinuous or sly. Consider his theory of conservatism, a marvellous and insolent act of minimisation, or his theory of ‘poetry’ which, he says, offers nothing to the poet or the critic because, as he does not say, it is not a theory of what we would usually call poetry at all. That is one side of Oakeshott. But he is often simple: contrasting ‘ideology’ with ‘tradition’, or ‘vocational’ with ‘academic’ education, or (perhaps most insolently) ‘the individual’ with ‘the individual *manqué*’.

Skinner, though also Sagittarian, tends to avoid binary oppositions. A man of his time, he has tended to favour limited complication, compromise and ‘third ways’. His theory of liberty was at first a ‘third way’ between Isaiah Berlin’s negative and positive concepts of liberty. His theory of the state was a ‘third way’ between the monarchical and the republican theories of the state. He has exercised much ingenuity in abstracting from history arguments to be counterposed to contemporary arguments. Skinner is not a *coercive* thinker, but a compromising, ingenious thinker—a high wire act—the simplicities of whose thought are not systematic but occasional vertiginousnesses, issuing in suggestions rather than in schemes, but always complicated by historical presentation and reference. One would struggle to find a ‘history of political thought’ in Skinner—though, it should be said, that one would struggle to find a ‘history of political thought’, a *genuine* one, in *anyone*: for reasons which Oakeshott gave in a very late essay on the subject. There is simply no such thing as a ‘history of political thought’: there is a ‘scrapyard’ on the one hand and some sort of more determinate history on the other. Oakeshott left to one side histories of political thought which took the form of a philosophy of history. And a few people have written those: Carl Schmitt furnished one in his *Nomos of the Earth*, Ernest Barker sketched one in his introduction to Aristotle’s *Politics*, and Francis Oakley—another interesting commentator on both Skinner and Oakeshott (as well as Lovejoy, Ullmann and McIlwain)—has developed one in his books on the history and theory of kingship.

Thompson’s argument in the end (pp. 156-8) is that the Cambridge School has tended to mistake the nature of its own subject because it has failed to understand two very comprehensible things that Oakeshott has said. Let me begin with these two things. They are:

1. The past which concerns the historian (‘the historical past’) should be distinguished from the past which concerns most of us at other times (‘the practical past’): and, strictly speaking, the past which concerns the historian, ‘the historical past’, is the creation or construction of the past by the historian—not a *recreation* or a *reconstruction*—in terms of evidence that has survived from the past into the present.

2. 'Political thought' can take place at many levels: it ranges from a 'practical' extreme in which the purpose of thinking is to achieve some particular thing to a 'philosophical' extreme in which the purpose of thinking is to understanding something as well as it can be understood.

I would add a third, which Thompson does not mention.

3. Politics is a matter of language, and history suggests that Western or European political language is ambiguous: that is to say, not only are our words difficult to parse or define simply but are fundamentally shaped by contestation about them by rival traditions of thought. The non-historian but Professor of Political Science, W.R. Gallie famously—the only famous thing he did—coined the phrase 'essentially contested concepts'. This, as I am sure Oakeshott would have argued, is an abstraction into a timeless world of a phenomenon which only makes sense in time. And the word 'essence' is entirely out of place. It is not that the concepts *are* contested, but that that they *have been* contested, and not necessarily, but contingently. So, for Oakeshott, the study of the history of political thought is, in effect, the study of an ambiguous vocabulary. It is an unstable subject, of uncertain consequence. Nothing very certain is likely to come of its study, except greater understanding.

The Cambridge School has rather missed the force of the third insight, or turned it into weak nominalism. But Thompson is certainly right in seeing that it is in missing the force of the first two that something has been lost. For, against what Oakeshott would have them suppose, the Cambridge School historians, in general, have appeared to support, or at times have spoken as if they support, the following views:

1. The past is not only the creation or construction of the historian in terms of what the evidence obliges him to believe: it is something to be recovered or restored. It is something *there*. (History is not about coherence, as Oakeshott would have supposed; but is about correspondence.)
2. Political thought is *always* concerned with practice: that is to say, there is no such thing as a philosophical concern with politics. Even the great writers have something on their mind, something they want to achieve, or change.

So the Cambridge School *appears*—I have to be careful here, as when these views are stated clearly they seem to be obviously flawed in such a way that I doubt anyone would explicitly advocate them (though I suspect many would unconsciously or implicitly sanction them)—to support two simplifications. One is that the past is something recoverable: the reason they believe this is to encourage the writing of *better*, that is, more *complicated*, more *contextual*, more *historical* history. The second is that everyone was writing at the same level of intensity. Everyone was a man in a hurry, had some business on their mind, sought an intervention, subscribed to Marx's eleventh thesis on Feuerbach. Now, I think that these two claims are incredible, as incredible as Thompson thinks them. He says, and I agree, that anyone who *thinks* about these views, instead of presupposing them, will have to abandon them.

Just for sake of completion, there is perhaps a third:

3. Political language *has been* ambiguous but is perhaps—if we study history correctly—capable of being brought to some situation where a singularity of meaning can be imposed and we can thus be delivered from our current political predicament.

This, also, I think is absurd—though, of course, there are always better and worse understandings, relative to a particular argument, and perhaps absolutely.

Thompson argues his case with great clarity. It is stated well by way of anticipation on pp. 3-7. He has handled Skinner and Pocock—he deals only with them—carefully. The case, in short, is that Oakeshott was concerned with the ‘logic’ of writing history whereas Skinner and Pocock were concerned with offering ‘methods’—pretentiously called ‘methodologies’—for the writing of history. This is decisive. Thompson correctly notices that Pocock has expressed a debt to Oakeshott, while Skinner has not only mostly ignored Oakeshott, but has been dismissive whenever he has noticed him. About Pocock, it is necessary to be careful, and Thompson mostly succeeds. Reading Pocock is generally more enjoyable than reading Skinner, Dunn or even Oakeshott: he is pompous and anxious, and also magnificent, indeed, magniloquent: he shares with us his erudition rather than his ingenuity, urgency or artfulness. Nothing can compare to the pomposity of his habit of using ‘We’ rather than ‘I’, as if we are all following him in a Bellini or Carpaccio procession. Pocock has always wanted to be accompanied, to have collaborators: and he has been better at scholarly recognition and generosity than almost anyone else. He is always rather anxious about his status within the ‘Cambridge School’—one sees this in his response to Samuel James’s analysis of his role (admittedly, partly because James is simplifying him as if he is already dead)—where Pocock reiterates points he has made many times, about Sabine, about Laslett, about Skinner, about languages and paradigms. (For all this see James 2019 and Pocock 2019). One thing I would add to this, since Thompson has made it an issue, is that Pocock should always be separated from Skinner, not only for Brian Young’s reason (to be found in Young 2006) that Pocock has made an issue of religion⁵⁹—which has even allied him with J.C.D. Clark at times—but for the reason that Pocock has worried more than once (but see for instance 2006, p. 38) about the ‘question’ of ‘whether “political thought”, “political theory” and “political philosophy” can be studied in ways which reduce to a single narrative the history in which they have interacted’. About this question, Oakeshott would say ‘No’. But Pocock is a worrier, and prefers not to answer, but to ask.

Thompson quotes the bitterest and most complete of Skinner’s reflections on Oakeshott on p. 96, though not in full. This quotation is taken from Skinner 2006, p. 244:

Michael Oakeshott was only the most distinguished of several hostile critics who berated me for failing to understand that ‘genuine’ political theory occupies an autonomous philosophical realm. (Nor was he the only critic to make things easier for himself by inserting his preferred conclusion into his premisses.) Since then, however, times have changed; and very much for the better I think. None of the contributors to the present volume seem to find any difficulty with my cardinal assumption that, because in political argument there is nothing but the battle, the idea of being above the battle makes little sense.

About this all one can say is, alas, Skinner exhibits no willingness to trouble himself about a critical position which not only Oakeshott but his followers of the London School—including Bhikhu Parekh and R.N. Berki, David Boucher, Thompson himself, and perhaps also some of the Exeter School, Iain Hampsher-Monk and Robert Lamb—have established. His attempt to not so much refute Oakeshott as simply rebut him by saying that he has been left behind by time is to evade the point rather than to meet it. One wonders what Skinner would say if it became clear to him—as I began to suspect at a conference at Queen Mary a few years ago at which Skinner was present—that his own successors may simply think that he himself has been left behind by time.

There are three chapters on Oakeshott’s theory of history, chapters 2, 3, and 7. I found these hard to read, but only because I find exposition of Oakeshott always hard to read—something I regret whenever I imagine anyone reading what I have written about Oakeshott. Thompson is an admirably civil and judicious writer: wholly disinclined to polemic. I think I would have written these chapters more bluntly: I would also have begun with *Experience and Its Modes*, because I think it is fundamental that for Oakeshott ‘history’ is one ‘mode’ of understanding: that is, a way of seeing the world which is separate from other rival ways of seeing it, and, by and large, a coherent way of seeing it—though not, of course, fully coherent. This is such an important postulate that I would not leave it until p. 45 to mention it in passing. There

is also a chapter on Oakeshott's lectures on the history of political thought, in which Thompson ably observes—something I had not seen for myself—that Oakeshott did not believe that there was such a thing as 'the history of political thought' but 'as many different histories as there are historical answers to historical questions that historians of political thinking pose for themselves'. That is worth thinking about. Against Sabine's study of an already established canon, against Skinner's and Pocock's select lineages of language or argument—there is something always very particular about them, deliberately limited, not totalising—Oakeshott saw that one can impose patterns, not only historically, but also in that hinterland between philosophy, history and practice in which most good academic political reflection seems to lie. Skinner always writes as a sort of Vesalius, stripping nerves and vessels out of the body of political thought, Pocock writes as a sort of Lyell or Sedgwick, speculating about particular sediments and rock formations, while Oakeshott writes as an artist or poet—his word—a fluid creator of sense. For him the history of political thought is not a body or the earth but a set of images arranged by the author for the sake of others who seek such an authoritative imaginative arrangement.

In a footnote to the first chapter Thompson mentions Oakeshott's important reviews of Skinner's *Foundations* for the *Historical Journal* in 1980 and his notice of one of Pocock's methodological essays in *Philosophical Quarterly* in 1965. Then he goes on to say that

his much more extensive critical comments were regularly discussed in his faculty and graduate seminar on 'The History of Political Thought; at the London School of Economics and Political Science during the late 1960s and early 1970s... The seminars examined specific works by Pocock and Skinner and many of the earliest critiques of the Cambridge School that were published were written by former participants in those seminars and clearly reflected Oakeshott's ideas. They included critiques by Oakeshott's colleagues, students and former students, such as K.R. Minogue, Bhikhu Parekh, R.N. Berki, David Manning, Harro Höpfl and W.H. Greenleaf (p. 15 n. 3).

No one noticed until Thompson that Oakeshott influenced a fair amount of the serious criticism of the Cambridge School. (Though I have found a similar point about the 'Oakeshottians' in Kelly 2009, p. 164.) Needless to say, there have been other important critics of or commentators on the Cambridge School: Ian Shapiro, Joseph Femia, Peter Steinberger, Cary Nederman, Emile Perreau-Saussine, as well as Lamb and Hampsher-Monk, none of whom could be considered part of a 'London School'. But the names listed above, along with the estimable Boucher, have been continual thorns in the side of the Cambridge School, and, interestingly, on a side which knows about philosophy, politics and history. There is also John Gray, who knew Oakeshott and stirred Oakeshott into the volatile fluid of his political sensibility along with Berlin, Hayek, Santayana and others. As far as I know, Gray has not intervened with the Cambridge School, apart from praising some of Dunn's political books. Minogue certainly irritated Skinner. Skinner rebutted his criticisms, and those of Parekh and Berki, without much consideration, preferring to argue with those who disagreed less with him. But, as far as I know, he has never engaged with Boucher's relentless criticism: Boucher, who noticed (in Boucher 1986) that there was something odd about the Cambridge School habit of writing about historical writings as if they were spoken utterances. There would be an interesting tale to be told here, if anyone could be bothered to carry out the necessary interviews, write a book and find someone to publish it—a sort of epic interactive intellectual history where the history would be doubled, not only the history of the historians but the history the historians were writing about. But returns continue to diminish, and of course there are less interesting subjects to write about.

The best chapter in the book is chapter 5 in which Thompson details Pocock's slight misunderstandings of Oakeshott and Skinner's refusal to engage with Oakeshott. This is mild but devastating. Even Pocock comes across as a slack reader of Oakeshott, and is revealed as such, while Skinner comes across as someone who did not even try to read him. Thompson quotes from an interview Skinner gave in 2002:

Michael Oakeshott's philosophical work was of no influence at all. He was widely acknowledged as an illuminating commentator of Hobbes, although I must confess that I found him virtually unreadable on the subject. But if you want to know how he appeared to students of my generation in the 1960s, you would find a very good guide in Brian Barry's book, *Political Argument*. [I don't mean to imply that I could ever have formulated my views on Oakeshott as trenchantly as Brian did in that book, but when I read it I recall agreeing completely.] Oakeshott seemed a figure of the past, and we rejected his anti-rationalism and his political conservatism outright. [I should add that I always found Oakeshott interesting to talk to, and very generous and encouraging too.] But nothing prepared my generation for his apotheosis under Thatcherism, nor the high esteem in which his philosophy continues to be widely held. (Koikkalainen and Syrjamaki, 2002, p. 45, quoted here on pp. 90-1, though Thompson does not quote the sentences in square brackets.)

There are several things to be said about this. The first is to note the reference to a 'generation'. It is as if Skinner has his own version of Noel Annan's *Our Age*: though not exactly the same one (for the reason that Annan said (in 1991 p. 529) that after the Second World War everyone in Cambridge was discussing *Oakeshott*). Another thing to say is that I also asked Skinner about Oakeshott on 15 January 2002 and received a similar answer. Here are the notes I made shortly after the interview (which I have not published before):

Oakeshott was famous, had a legacy, but (Skinner knew about his career) to 'people of my generation' was 'negligible', 'precious' (about Hobbes) and the 'Hegelian material' of *Experience and Its Modes* led to a 'neo-common law' Conservatism. A certain amount of suppressed nastiness in this and, as if to explain, Skinner said that it was the era of the welfare state and it was impossible to say what Oakeshott was saying. A good riposte, he suggested (almost for the sake of my health) was Barry in *Political Argument*. Oakeshott was 'philosophically confused and politically disgraceful'. There was no evidence he understood Oakeshott or wanted to.

I remember consulting Barry's *Political Argument* shortly after the interview, and I should not have been surprised to find that it was a characteristically shallow account of Oakeshott, indicating no particular interest. It seems that Thompson followed the same trail since he, too, has taken a look at Barry's worthless book. (Barry's claim to fame being that he thinks he willed Rawls into existence and then, to celebrate, sailed somewhere on a boat to write a book about reading Rawls's book.) Thompson is polite about this, but it is a sign of gross irresponsibility on Skinner's part—Skinner, who has read a vast number of codices in the Rare Books Room in the Cambridge University Library—to depend on a smudge in *Political Argument* and High Table smear in the time of Thatcher, when Oakeshott could be done down by association. I have read many slight or slipshod theorists more seriously than Skinner ever took Oakeshott. That is to say, I would condemn them in my own right, and not by referring to what someone else says about them. In refusing to read Oakeshott because he was on 'the wrong side' politically we encounter rather starkly a reluctance—and I quote, though it does not matter from exactly where—in Skinner to be liberated 'from any disposition to suppose that [his] concept must somehow be the real or the only one'.

The sixth chapter on *Leviathan* is very effective in indicating that while the Cambridge School, at least in Skinner, has tended to reduce Hobbes to someone who engaged in ideological politics, Oakeshott did not so much argue against this as say that while one could study Hobbes this way it was not the only way. While Skinner has wanted to reduce *Leviathan* to an intervention in an argument, Oakeshott, while not disputing that this could be done, preferred to make sense of it as political philosophy (p. 106). The point is that Skinner claimed only *one* way was possible, while Oakeshott claimed there were *two*. Oakeshott certainly took Skinner to have argued this way, both in his review of *Foundations*, but also in a seminar paper he wrote in 1979 or 1980 (which is to be found in Oakeshott 2004b, p. 417). I have already quoted Skinner on the one occasion in which he explicitly replied to Oakeshott: 'The idea of being above the battle makes little sense'

for the reason that ‘in political argument there is nothing but the battle’. Oakeshott would have considered that utterance the end of all philosophy.

It seems to me that the particular Skinner legacy, after we separate out all the particular historical demonstrations, is the following:

A confusion about whether the historian of political thought should exclusively concern himself with the historical study of the past out of which some texts emerged *or* whether he should concern himself with the relevance of that historical study of the past (supposedly conducted in exactly the same way, that is, in the first instance, exclusively concerned only with the past) to the present.

A confusion about whether the historian of political thought has to assume that political thinkers in the past always had some immediate and local practical concern which is the only context in which they can be understood *or* whether he is free to suppose that although this might be of some importance historically that there are in fact other historical ways of making sense of their writings but also other non-historical ways.

I do not think that Skinner has done enough to overcome these confusions. His work has perpetuated them. And this is why I think his writings *about* the history of political thought have proved of much stimulation and suggestiveness. It is as true in academic politics and history as it is in poetry or novels that a certain polemical appearance of clarity along with an actual lack of clarity with a certain changeability of position can do much more to perpetuate a reputation than something much more simple or coherent. Consider *The Waste Land*. I mention literature, because there are ‘difficult’ novels or poems which are studied, one imagines, not because they are good, but simply because they are difficult. I am curious to see how the historians of political thought of the future will respond to the ambiguities of the Cambridge School position.

As I have already said, Skinner is not Dunn, and neither of them is Pocock. And then there are others: Tuck and Hont, pre-eminently, and Geuss, the author of brilliant essays, and even the to my mind over-rated Bernard Williams—who may end up with more of a reputation than anyone else in the short term simply because he speaks directly to the analytical normative types who do not know much history and so can only take their history in the form of a pill. And then there are others only loosely associated or interested: Whatmore, Winch, Burrow, Collini etc, and others who have written separately: Cowling, for instance. There are many inheritors: of whom the names that spring to mind are Runciman, Armitage, Brett, Bourke, Brooke, Sagar, as well Duncan Kelly, Isaac Nahkimovsky, Duncan Bell, though there are of course many others—Runciman being the only one who is close to being the sort of public figure that Oakeshott was: in fact, probably more of one, since Oakeshott did not write for the *London Review of Books* or care enough about actual politics to broadcast about it. It seems to me that, especially among the youngest generation of Sagar and Sophie Smith and others, there is a renewed desire for actual relevance. But whether it is grounded in a doctrine, such as Skinner and Dunn and Pocock developed, abandoned, mused on, is unclear: and the exact nature of the debt owed to the Cambridge School is unclear. But as long as historians of political thought appear *both* want to write strictly Butterfieldian history of an anti-Whig sort *and* want to put their anti-Whig findings to some argumentative use, it is likely that something like an ambiguous Cambridge School doctrine will remain far more appealing than the precision, the negativity and the indifference of Oakeshott.

We can still find repetition and supposed clarification of Cambridge precepts in the contemporary literature. At least two papers published in 2019 have sought to offer reassertions and revisions of the original Skinnerian protocol. History matters for philosophers, say William Bosworth and Keith Dowding in *The Review of Politics*, because anachronisms are ‘bugs [which] can cause political arguments to crash’. But philosophy matters for historians, says Adrian Blau, in *History and Theory*, in a piece published to mark the fiftieth anniversary of Skinner’s famous article, because historians have to engage in analysis in order to understand the historical meaning of a text. Even if the first seems absurd, and the second trivial, we can see that somehow both refer to a crux which is not easily abandoned. As long as normative political philoso-

phers can say (as Kelly did in 2006)—and quite reasonably on their own terms—‘We can ignore history’, there will be the equal and opposite reasonable answer, ‘We cannot ignore history’.

This brings me to the question of why the ‘Cambridge School’ has acquired such a strong reputation. The answer may simply be that the School has conveyed to non-historians that history is something they should not forget. By ‘non-historians’ I mean political scientists and political philosophers and political theorists—depending on whatever we suppose political theorists to be (and there is something to be said for G.E.G. Catlin’s old idea that if scientists deal with *is* and philosophers deal with *ought* then theorists should be the ones who deal with both).⁶⁰ The Cambridge School is not often seen in its fullest context; and its fullest academic context is the professionalisation and what I have seen called the scientification of political science, especially in America, in the twentieth century. By the 1950s political science was completely separated from history, while political theory—the remainder of political study when political science was abstracted from it—was nothing more than a junkyard of fragments from the history of political thought. Many political philosophers disliked this: some, like Strauss, polemicised against it, while Oakeshott ploughed his own furrow. The revival of political theory, or philosophy, in the 1960s and 1970s was eventually revealed—presumably to Brian Barry’s great relief—to be nothing to do with Riker’s and Downs’s ‘political theory’ of ‘public choice’ but everything to do with Rawls’s ‘political theory’ of revived normativity, contract theory, and principles of justice. The success of Rawls was related to the fact that he, and many others, had succeeded in separating their own endeavour as surely from history—and the history of political thought—as the political scientists had done. The scientists colonised the *is* of politics, the theorists or philosophers colonised the *ought* of politics, and, not for the first time, the *was* of politics—the *was* of older views of the *ought* and *is* of politics—was set to one side. This is the context in which the protest of the Cambridge School was registered. History could not be ignored, and especially not by the so-called theorists and philosophers. Others had said this vaguely in the 1920s, and others had said it more emphatically as part of their heroic or epic recreations of tradition in the 1950s—I am thinking of Voegelin, Strauss, Arendt, Oakeshott etc—but no one said it directly, as if what one had to do was simply get on and write some proper history first. The phrase ‘Cambridge School’ may be, if this is correct, simply a shorthand for the suggestion that we should not ignore history. Scientists should not ignore theory, and theorists should not ignore history. And why? The clearest answer was actually given by Bertrand de Jouvenel in the opening pages of his *Pure Theory of Politics* (1963): because politics has not changed since the beginning and is unlikely to change until the end. But, as the Cambridge historians always insist, our ideas about it have changed. Both are true. So politics is a static subject and a dynamic one, at one and the same time.

It is static, so we still have reason to read Plato and Aristotle, Machiavelli and Hobbes, but it is dynamic, so we still have reason to read them historically. Oakeshott in one manner and Skinner and the rest in another manner, or set of manners, have attempted to do something to reflect the dual static and dynamic nature of the subject. Oakeshott did rather better at reflecting on both, I think. But the word ‘Oakeshott’ has no polemical force in this context: he is infamous for other reasons, and most of the men and women he influenced have not written historically. But there is no question that the words ‘Cambridge School’ have polemical force in this context. Oddly, it may have its greatest influence in the context—excuse my relentless Pocockian use of this word—in which history is not the *first* thing on anyone’s mind. The Cambridge School, on its bluntest and most famous side, is a stumbling-block to any simple attempt to make sense of politics in an immediate or timeless or abstract manner. It says ‘No’ to *this*, and then it writes an oddly baroque and antiquarian and yet suggestive form of history, and says ‘Yes’ to *that*. Its ‘No’ is simple and clear. It is ballasted by a thousand elaborate properly historical works on aspects of the history of political thought. But, for that very reason, its ‘Yes’ is diffuse and obscure. And this is likely to remain the case. Oakeshott would not have wanted to settle for that.

Richard Bourke, now Professor of the History of Political Thought at Cambridge and presumably expected to keep some sort of flame alive, has written (in 2016, p. 477) that ‘the Cambridge School has long struggled to reach a consensus on the relationship between history and philosophy’. I am not sure if anyone has sought a ‘consensus’ (as opposed to imposing one) but certainly history-and-philosophy has always

been the crux, the crisis, the centre of concern, and one which has been distinctively leavened by the third element of politics: because, as Ernest Barker rightly remarked (in 1953, p. 11), ‘as Oxford has wedded political theory to philosophy, so Cambridge has wedded it to history’. Elsewhere, and about a different subject, Bourke has remarked (in 2017, p. 75), ‘Surely we can do better than Oakeshott’. In response to this it is necessary to say that in order to do better than Oakeshott we have, at least, to understand Oakeshott. Not many have yet understood Oakeshott. And if history is, as Oakeshott thought it was (in 1999, p. 70), ‘an uncovenanted circumstantial confluence of vicissitudes’—this line has to be savoured slowly, like whisky (and it *does* describe the best pure histories like Cowling’s *Impact of Hitler* or Stone’s *Atlantic and Its Enemies*, histories of deeds rather than histories of words, and, incidentally, both written by whisky historians)—and if, as Oakeshott explicitly recognised, histories of words are harder to write than histories of deeds, then of course *there is going to be no simple or obvious or even coherently or conveniently complex way of relating history and philosophy* according to any method—or methodology.

The Cambridge School has at times tried to legislate for the writing of history, though in trying to legislate against the philosophers it has made it difficult to develop a philosophy of its own. Here are some suggestions for the Cambridge School as it enters its second half century, though not offered in the spirit of legislation. Legislation of any sort for the writing of the history of political thought is out of place, since the history of political thought is, as an object, a hypothetical object, and, as an engagement, an unfocused engagement which can only be focused through the determination of the writer to illustrate some point with reference to history or to draw attention to some argumentative novelty—a novelty which of course may be an antiquity. History is not a legislative science but a deliberative one. Historians, no less than philosophers, are engaged in abstractions of various sorts: and they should not be embarrassed about saying so; even if their abstractions are less abstract than those of the philosophers. Researches will never replace thought: at its worst, history is just excerpts with commentary. Since ‘politics’ in its modern sense is a consequence of separations effected by the Greeks, Romans, Scholastics, Humanists, Political Scientists etc throughout the entire history of the West, we have to recognise that ‘politics’ as defined now is a useful abstraction which, if it is to be understood historically or even philosophically, cannot *only* be considered in its separated form but must have its original conjunctions restored to it, including its conjunctions with religion, law, ethics and, indeed, history. There is nothing to be gained by emphasising ‘text’, or ‘context’, or ‘intention’ too much. No doubt there are texts: and there is something behind them; but what it is most important to recognise is that there is something before them, namely the consciousness and purposes and ‘contexts’ of the contemporary historian or philosopher, whose attention, individually or collectively as acting out of some tradition, has been drawn to something old, new, borrowed or blue in those texts. It is important to recognise the limitation of making too much of the historical status of words—to recognise that history is almost always at its best when it is a history of deeds—and yet also to recognise that any radical critique which asks that words be treated as epiphenomenal to not only deeds but structures is to raise the bar too high for analysis to be more than the free imposition of supposition on an intractable subject matter. Almost all critique, like almost all methodology, is gestural. The history of political thought may, in the end, be not much more than an elite engagement, in which certain students—bored of the dust of endless histories of deeds and weary of the self-importance of living philosophers—turn, as Machiavelli and Montaigne did, to the great dead, to achieve some sort of fellowship with the closest that we have to gods, our literary ancestors. This is put to use, at times, since certainly a fair amount of life is about the battle: and we should be wary of those who try to make the history of political thought into an instrument (though we should be consoled that, as an instrument, it could never be anything but blunt). But, in addition, there is something above the battle. Politics, as everyone knows, is the only subject in which the foundational texts may still be read with benefit. This is because politics is unchanging, as an activity, but has continually changed, in how we have framed it in our ideas about it. It is therefore both dynamic and static. This makes it a difficult subject, yet also a simple and accessible one. No callow or crude view can ever be wholly dismissed. Finally, the historian should not be disdainful of the philosophy of history, for, at its best, the history of political thought is a philosophy of political history.

NOTES

1. I allude to Leavis's notorious claim, 'We were—and we knew we were—Cambridge—the essential Cambridge—in spite of Cambridge'. David Craig, critic and poet, in *London Review of Books* 12 (8 November 1990) said he asked Leavis about this claim, and Leavis said, 'That was a calculated hyperbole'.
2. It has been suggested that Pocock's competence about religion is late in his career and relates to the eighteenth century. Pocock's earlier ignoring of religion and consequent misreading of the seventeenth century is the subject of Davis 2008. On Skinner's neglect of religion see Collins 2009. Pocock admittedly did draw attention to Hobbes's third and fourth books of *Leviathan* in 1970. But while Pocock and Skinner generally have tended to ignore religion, until recently in Pocock's case, John Dunn's first book *The Political Thought of John Locke* (1969), remarkably, was about nothing other than the dependence of Locke on religious rather than political assumptions. Contra Young, it is Dunn rather than Pocock who deserves credit for stirring religion back into the history of political thought of the Cambridge School.
3. See Catlin 1956, p. 818. Note that this is emphatically not how Oakeshott saw political theory, though he saw it in more than one way. For him, in 1961, 'political theory' was 'the questionable enterprise of recommending a political position in the idiom of general ideas', and thus lower than 'political philosophy'. This line, quoted by Thompson on p. 96, is, interestingly, taken from Oakeshott's review of Laslett's edition of Locke's *Two Treatises*. Later on, in 1973, and perhaps Thompson should have noticed this, political theory was 'theory' arrested by a determination to focus on the fact of 'politics' and its postulates, and so not different from political philosophy. See Oakeshott 2004a.

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