

thinking in turbulent times: on the relevance of sixteenth-century political thought

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Abstract

By looking at political thought in historical periods that mirror our own, we can discern patterns of thought which clairvoyantly recognise the new and fearfully retreat to established patterns of thought. Sixteenth-century thought confronts us with the search for newly emerging political orders. Focusing on four thinkers, this paper explicates the emerging pattern. It reflects on the contemporary relevance of sixteenth-century thought and the relevance of the history of ideas.

Keywords history of ideas; sixteenth-century thought; methodology; teaching

HOW TO APPROACH THE HISTORY OF IDEAS

In teaching the history of ideas there are two main challenges to be met. Firstly, interest in political theory and even more so in the history of ideas cannot be taken for granted. Many students of political science consider their subject to be an empirical guide to understanding politics; accordingly, the theoretical and historical elements relevant to political science do not always spark great intrinsic interest. In meeting this challenge, the lecturer's own enthusiasm for the subject plays a vital role, that is, any

topic can be interesting if presented in that way by someone who cares. Therefore, meeting this challenge needs a subjective and not a systematic answer. The second challenge is to teach the history of ideas in ways that convey its relevance to a better understanding of the (political) world. The question here is how to reconnect the history of ideas with the everyday experiences and questions of students of political science. Certainly, this challenge can be met in more than one way. I posit that one of the most important insights to be gained from the history of ideas is that texts concerned with the ways in which human beings

organise their common world, that is, political texts, tend to contain an intricate mixture of ideas that are highly relevant and others that seem irrelevant or even outright alienating. Looking at the particular mixture rather than just looking at what seems to be immediately relevant enables new, almost methodological, insights into the past and present relevance of political thought. Furthermore, it conveys the relevance of the history of political thought to political analysis in a broader sense.

There are a number of different approaches to the history of ideas; while they require different ways of dealing with the texts, they do not represent mutually exclusive alternatives, as these approaches enable us to ask different questions. Historicising approaches emphasise the historical and cultural context of ideas. They point towards the situation of text and writer in the debates of their time and allow us to assess the impact on these debates. Classifying approaches focus on the 'eternal' relevance of ideas and attempt to extract those arguments, ideas or positions, which seem to concern problems of prevailing interest (Waas, 2000). 'Begriffsgeschichte', finally, puts the ideas and their development throughout history at the centre. The ideas themselves become indicative of historical change (Koselleck, 1982). All these approaches provide us with a multidimensional understanding of the value of political texts.

In what follows, I will argue that building on the insights of these approaches to political texts allows us to discern specific patterns of thinking characteristic of different periods of time. In order to do that, we are required to look at the particular mixture between those ideas that would be at the forefront of a classifying approach to the history of ideas and those that seem of primarily historical interest. We must look at different authors to understand the complexity of thought in

that period and the myriad ways in which ideas could be combined. We can then ask how such seemingly contradictory standpoints, as they likely appear to us, were thought of as an integrated whole. The understanding we gain is one of the contingency of political thinking. Not only can one argument seem reasonable, but many different, partly contradictory, interpretations may appear as equally (in)adequate reactions to the problems of a specific period. There is ample room for variation and transformation of ideas, not just in the sense of a progressing development (Kelley, 2001: 585) but also in the sense of a continuous integration and disintegration of individual elements.

Studying specific periods with an emphasis on the prevalent patterns of thinking provides us with a complex picture of the ways in which political thinking has reacted to the challenges of its time. On a meta-level this creates the opportunity to look at contemporary political theory not just in terms of its 'eternal value' or its being situated in specific theoretical or political debates. The history of political ideas reveals the character of political theory as a complex reaction to political phenomena. Political thinking in this sense always holds the grains of future paradigms and worldviews while at the same time reiterating many arguments and ideas that will lose their attractiveness over time and disappear from the forefront of theoretical thinking. I suggest that because of this, not only are certain ideas especially relevant for us at particular times, but some historical periods are also of more interest than others because they mirror developments we recognize in our own world. If we perceive political order to be in transition then we are likely to be drawn toward periods that are characterised by just such transitions.

Although this approach allows us, in principle, to consider almost any text with relevance to political life it implies a

certain point of view with regard to these texts: all texts will be looked at as primary sources of what seemed to be central political ideas of that time from the perspective of their authors. This does not by any means preclude the study of the history of reception of an idea or an author, nor does it argue against the study of secondary literature. But reception and scientific investigation will have to be recognised as representations of the time in which they were written, beyond being interpretations the original author's thought. Rather than portraying Prussian King Frederick's *Anti-Machiavel* solely as a reply to Machiavelli, the above approach leads us to reflect on it as a reaction to the immediate challenge of leadership in the eighteenth century. Frederick's essay will represent, just like Machiavelli's *Prince*, an intricate mixture of ideas we might consider relevant or interesting and others we find negligible. It can serve as another example of how political thought is influenced by political realities and how it instructs and frames them in return. Generally speaking, any text can be looked at in this manner. It will, however, be most interesting to look at certain time periods and various texts preferably by different authors in order to decipher patterns of thinking. Discerning the general patterns of engagement with specific historical challenges and times of change needs such a broader perspective.

Clearly, this approach does not seek to replace others entirely. Rather, it attempts to extract typical patterns of political thought in a particular historical constellation. It is based on the proposition that ideas losing their attractiveness and ideas retaining or even increasing their perceived relevance over time are always intermingled in political thought. Surely, ideas and questions hardly ever disappear entirely. Nor is political thought either an accurate description of reality or a misguided interpretation thereof. It is most likely the integration of rising ideas

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with ideas in decline, a combination of both that, nonetheless, appears as a conclusive and integrated whole to the authors themselves. A conscious reflection of the way this happens can teach us something about the way we react as both clairvoyant and ignorant to the empirical challenges of our time even in one strain of thought that appears to us to be an integrated whole. Although not intrinsically ideologically biased, such reflection instils a moment of relativity into political theory. It implies that any political thinker, including ourselves, will get some things beautifully right and others ridiculously wrong – at the same time. Understandably, this can feel uncomfortable to those seeking more definite answers, but in my view it is a more realistic approach to political theory.

In many ways, the sixteenth century marks an important turning point in European history and European thinking about politics. Social, spiritual and economic orders were in upheaval and a great sense of change and instability prevailed. The beginning of the sixteenth century also marks the time of an intensive debate among European intellectuals on the problems of their time. Within a relatively short time span in the 1510s and 1520s Niccolò Machiavelli, Martin Luther and Thomas More wrote their most important texts and, because of the rapidly proliferating new technology of letterpress printing, quickly found many readers.¹ All these thinkers engaged keenly with the central problem of their time, the lack of political stability, and

formulated quite different answers. Only sixty years later, with yet another perspective on the problem of conflict in Europe, Jean Bodin presents us with a theory of sovereignty that marks an important step in the development of the modern state, which is the answer to the sixteenth-century question of stability. All four thinkers are among the more canonical ones for sixteenth-century political thought, for they shaped clearly 'modern' ideas. On the other hand many of their basic presumptions remain firmly rooted in medieval and classical thought.

The dynamic and influential historical political constellations of that period make sixteenth-century thought a rewarding object of teaching in itself. I believe it to be interesting beyond that because it somewhat mirrors today's world. Our world is also in transition, as the order that began to emerge 500 years ago faces a crisis it seems ill-designed to turn into an opportunity. Nation-states struggle to provide an adequate framework for an increasingly global economy. They regularly fail to meet environmental challenges and they crumble where identities diversify and de-territorialise. The system that provided stability and, indeed, progress, seems to have reached its limits. Our question, similar to that posed in the sixteenth century, is to determine how a new, more adequate order can emerge out of the old and failing order. Which elements of it will evolve to provide important pillars of a new order, and which others will disappear? It is not possible to explore these parallels here, but the analogy shall serve as a justification for why I chose the sixteenth century as a period of particular interest.

I will now begin by briefly presenting a picture of the complexities of sixteenth-century political developments focused on the above-mentioned four thinkers and then go on to extract a complex pattern of thinking in turbulent times.

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The essay will conclude with a return to the question what makes teaching and studying the history of ideas worthwhile.

THE COMPLEXITIES OF THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY

At the end of the fifteenth and the beginning of sixteenth century, a complex interplay of political, economic and spiritual-cultural developments all over Europe merged into a highly intricate pattern of change. The upheaval was considerable. Early capitalism fundamentally impacted the way economic processes worked and consequently the strength of individual players. The monetary economy that replaced the barter economy created more opportunities for profits generated out of trade and credit, but it also increased the risks associated with trade, production and currency exchange (Kinder and Hilgermann, 2004: 215; Münkler, 1995: 209ff). Cities such as Augsburg and Florence emerged as financial centres, profiting from these developments and experiencing the risks and setbacks. Mercantilism became the dominant economic doctrine, strengthening the centralised territorial management of economic affairs. The means of production changed and so did the leading producers of important goods. While Florence was the centre of textile production during the fifteenth century, the beginning of the sixteenth brought England to the forefront, where wool production and new technologies enabled

the mass production of everyday textiles. An early proletariat emerged, presenting new problems for the cities. Risk, speculation and the accumulation of capital became the leading features of the economy (Münkler, 1995: 164ff).

Political developments were by no means less complex. France, England and Spain began to consolidate as territorialized states with an increasingly centralised authority, while Germany and Italy remained divided. Italy suffered from the attempts of France and Spain to gain influence over the Italian peninsula and the lack of a unifying force in the country (Schulze, 1994: 47). In Germany the tensions between regional princes and the king were fuelled by debates on the role of the Pope and the church in German politics (Brecht, 1986: 64ff). The old feudal political order proved ill-suited to meet the demands of modern production and warfare, as did other institutional arrangements such as the common city-states and their allegiances (Spruyt, 1996). At the same time, the very understanding of the world was changing. The Renaissance brought classical thought back into intellectual debates and, perhaps for the first time, a truly European debate on the nature of human beings, religion and politics emerged. Many thinkers (and artists) began to put the individual at the centre of their reflections and a new understanding of the individual as a maker in, and of, history emerged. The role of religion in both politics and private lives was questioned. All in all, the time was characterised by considerable change and, of course, political thought in the broadest sense reflected these developments. The challenge was to develop frameworks that would enable a better understanding of this changing world and provide orientation in the labyrinth of manifold challenges.

The contingency of political thinking is apparent in all political thinkers. Niccolò Machiavelli, for example, spent the better

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– and in his view more satisfying – part of his life as a political ambassador and public official of the city of Florence. He witnessed the frequent changes of government, the insecurities of a brief period of theocracy and the slow economic demise of the previously rich and influential city. Machiavelli was most bothered, however, by the inability of Italian rulers to unite the country and defy foreign influence, a failure he attributed as much to their lack of foresight as to their inadequate understanding of political processes (Machiavelli, 1986: 103).

Similar to Machiavelli, Thomas More was an important political official in the England of his time. He was also a lively contributor to humanist debates and observed the spiritual as well as political-economic developments of his time with great scepticism (Nipperdey, 1975: 133ff). More vehemently supported the primacy of the Pope and criticised the social unrest created by early capitalism; to him, the times lacked a clear moral bearing and insufficiently dealt with the challenges of changing modes of production (Nipperdey, 1975: 130).

Luther, in contrast, was neither a political official nor – in his own view – a political philosopher, at least not in the strict sense of the word. His concern as a teacher and priest lay with the pastoral care and spiritual guidance that could be provided to those seeking orientation in

turbulent times (Kinder, 1969). However, he frequently received and replied to requests for advice and spiritual guidance by political actors in the conflicts of his time and usually opted for maintaining the prevailing order (Luther, 1954c; Brecht, 1986: 72). Consequently, he turned against an uprising of the German farmers who transformed the spiritual reformation into a broader political project (Luther, 1954a). The political repercussions of severing the strong institutional ties between religion and the state, however, were much more severe than Luther intended or anticipated.

It is in this context of emerging religious conflict, which was just as much a political conflict, that Jean Bodin sought a juridical solution to the dilemma of conflicting authorities. Like the other three, he engaged in politics as an advisor, applying his more abstract insights to the concrete problems of his time. Bodin envisaged an impersonal state of a time-transcending reality, thereby reacting to the fierce and destabilising political struggles in sixteenth-century France (Badie, 2002: 21). In light of the conflicts caused by religious disagreements, he opted for religious tolerance (Hattenhauer, 1992: 374).

Machiavelli, More, Luther and Bodin share important experiences as sought-after, as well as rejected, political advisers. Their engagement with politics was always critical and revealed the problems and aberrations of their time. Moreover, they took sides: sometimes like Bodin by not taking sides, sometimes like More at the cost of their own lives. Their lives themselves would serve well as an insight into politics in turbulent times. However, it is their writings that offer the most intricate picture of the challenges associated with providing intellectual guidance and understanding in times of rapid and fundamental change, and the limitations that we face in transcending our own times in thought and theory. It is,

of course, not possible to review their writings in much detail here. For the purposes of my argument it will suffice to present their central ideas on two related issues – the individual and the state.

THE SEARCH FOR NEW POLITICAL ORDERS

Renaissance thought is not only characterised by a revival of classic ideas and a reconsideration of classical texts. It is also marked by the emergence of the individual as the centre of attention. The arts reflect this by a new portrayal of people, as particular rather than generic, in pictures and sculptures. In political thought the shift is highly consequential. Machiavelli, for example, does not only presume history to be governed by laws of necessity that transcend particular historical situations (Machiavelli, 1977: 5). He portrays the individual as the maker of history, most notably in the form of the acting, virtuous prince (Machiavelli, 1986: 51ff). The individual who understands the necessities of history, acts accordingly, and therefore manages to order the state in a way that secures stability. The idea of political affairs being managed by men is, of course, not unprecedented. However, it represents a significant shift from earlier medieval ideas, which situated the individual in an organic order that was god-given and governed (Ullmann, 1974: 74f). Only when the willing and acting individual becomes the basis of historical development does it make sense to look at the ways in which human action shapes that history, determines its direction and produces reality. Yet, Machiavelli remains rooted in Renaissance thought and experience as he references luck and circumstance as highly influential factors (Münkler, 1995: 302). When virtue fails fortuna has taken its toll and made all the careful planning and adequate acting

useless (Machiavelli, 1977: 259; 1986: 59). Machiavelli's portrayal of fortuna remains ambivalent from a modern point of view, as he claims the possibility of limiting fortuna's influence while maintaining that it cannot be eliminated by knowledge of necessities alone (Machiavelli, 1986: 193; Coleman, 2000: 259).

The idea of man making history, both in its presumption that man *can* make history and in that he *should*, is not predominant in Luther's thought. His priority is to encourage and enable good Christians to save their souls and advise them as to how to live in the world. The making and contributing to worldly affairs may be a Christian duty, but it is not what secures salvation (Luther, 1954c: 20). Contrary to Machiavelli's world, Luther's world is ordered by God, even if different rules apply to spiritual and worldly affairs. Both are, as Luther argues, concerned with quite separate things which nonetheless are equally part of the world God created for man (Luther, 1954c: 18; Althaus, 1969). The revolutionary and consequential thought is that all people are equal before God. Belief and salvation of the soul do not need a priest or bishop to mediate the process of individual salvation. God's word works directly, and priests can only facilitate the process of individual understanding (Luther, 1954c: 41). This primarily theological argument on the equality of man (Kinder, 1969: 51), and their freedom in all matters of conscience and belief (Braun, 1987: 72), has significant political implications. It displaces all claims by religious leaders and administrators for the need to cooperate with a (religious) institution in order to secure salvation, thus freeing the individual from external pressure with regard to its spiritual needs. Furthermore, Luther's argument places these matters of spiritual development outside the realm of worldly authorities, laying – probably inadvertently – the seeds for a

protected private realm. However, Luther did not frame this freedom in terms of a political right of the individual, but merely as an advice to the true Christian in his dealings with worldly affairs. Resistance against the worldly order on the basis of this freedom of conscience was not legitimate (Hattenhauer, 1992: 358); Luther strongly supported the existing and still medieval institutions (Brecht, 1986: 72).

Both Machiavelli and Luther place the individual at the centre of their thought, albeit in quite different ways. Although Thomas More has rightfully been described as a humanist thinker, that is, part of the most fashionable and innovative intellectual discourse of his time, his approach to the individual is somewhat more complex. Clearly, he believes men to be endowed with reason and capable of fashioning the world, for neither his critique of the English penal system nor the *Utopia's* carefully laid out institutional system would make sense unless he believed the world was fundamentally shaped by human action and not divine planning (Nipperdey, 1975: 126). Nonetheless, *Utopia* – with its rigid institutional setting, very limited private spaces, and highly structured temporal organisation (Morus, 1960: 50ff) – is strongly reminiscent of medieval monasterial life and of later ideas about communal life, as found in communist thought, that clearly depart from the modern liberal approach to the individual; his *Utopia* is anti-individualistic (Nipperdey, 1975: 131). However, it is just through this institutional setting that fundamental ideas about the individual find their expression. More uses the first book of the *Utopia* to utter a strong critique of the contemporary English penal system: not only did it not address the reasons for crime, it also punished crimes inadequately. The incentives to avoid crime were not set, so the laws failed to provide more security but could serve solely to punish (Morus, 1960: 23ff). The underlying assumption

places the individual and the political institutions in a new relationship. Institutions are to serve the individual, to enable everyone to live a virtuous life, not the other way around. The individual is the standard by which institutional design must be measured (Nipperdey, 1975: 122).

Bodin presents us with a much more sophisticated idea of the state than the earlier thinkers. Yet, he fails to accord the individual a special place in his scheme, correlating the ideas of the person and the individual and defining society as natural to man (Lewis, 1968: 211f). His state consists of households rather than individual citizens and the relationship between the individual and the state therefore remains mediated (Bodin, 1981: 98, Hattenhauer, 1992: 375). Stronger, maybe, than the other thinkers, however, he demarcates a private realm, claiming that the state should be responsible only for those issues that are common to all households. Although this is not in itself a conception of individual rights it points towards the separation between public and private realms that is characteristic for modern thought and builds on rights then accorded to the individual.

Considering the individual is, of course, a classic development of the sixteenth century and the beginning of a whole new approach to political thought that places the question of when and how individuals come together in a political community at the centre of inquiry. All four thinkers, albeit with different intensity, forecast the rise of more unified and territorialised communities as an answer to contemporary upheavals. And again, their ideas of the emerging political structures interweave medieval/classical and modern ideas.

Machiavelli and Bodin both suggest that strong leadership is a basic condition for stability. Machiavelli sees the need for a virtuous man to unite (Italy) and install good institutions (Machiavelli, 1986: 199ff;

1977: 143). The institutions are to support the virtues of the people and ensure the stability of the political system. He denies, however, that any such established state could be permanent; on the contrary, he emphasises the everlasting rise and demise of political systems and claims that beyond the virtues of a prince or, at best, a generation of citizens, no state survives for very long (Machiavelli, 1977: 15). The state as such has no transcendent quality.

It is here that Bodin covers new ground. He bases the state firmly on the law and goes so far as to make this the defining characteristic of a state (Bodin, 1981: 98; Hattenhauer, 1992: 375). Sovereignty, accordingly, is temporally unlimited or it is not sovereignty at all and cannot be vested in particular people, as their lifetime is finite, but only in their position (Bodin, 1981: 205ff). Through this argument the state acquires a transcendental and clearly modern quality. In terms of the origin of the sovereign authority, however, Bodin remains rooted in the medieval thinking of a descending authority (Ullmann, 1974: 75; Hattenhauer, 1992: 375). The sovereign derives his authority from God, and while the emerging absolutism builds on this argument, the theoretical debates of the seventeenth century begin to question just that basis of legitimacy.

Reformational influences, among which Luther is not insignificant, contributed greatly to the weakening of legitimacy derived from God. At the core of Luther's argument is a strict separation between worldly and spiritual affairs. In terms of spiritual life, God's word is the yardstick and salvation is the goal (Luther, 1954c: 31). Worldly authority, however, serves a different purpose. It must ensure the greatest possible protection from harm to all people through the enforcement of laws. In a world inhabited only by true Christians, of course, these laws would not be necessary, Christians living among

each other do not need laws (Luther, 1954c: 13; 1954b: 58). Forcing people to live 'just' lives, however, even if it cannot ensure their spiritual salvation, is a high good that God wants to be achieved. Luther even justifies the use of force in securing it, arguing that such violence was only a temporary displacement of order and a small price to pay for stability (Luther, 1954b: 55). In this respect he mirrors the Machiavellian argument. Thinking in terms of the ruled rather than the ruler, Luther tackles the issue of resistance to worldly authority. He names a number of instances in which resistance may be permissible, but he then denies that any man can ever be sure that such an instance has arrived. Consequently, he argues that in terms of salvation the true Christian need not worry and should in cases of doubt support worldly authority as a Christian deed towards his neighbour (Luther, 1954c: 18).

Of course, Luther might have argued differently had he not believed the world to be ending soon (Brecht, 1986: 61) but the consequences remain the same. Luther's argument has no state-creating potential like Machiavelli's. It justifies the (and any) existing order (Kinder, 1969: 65f). Neither does he ask what constitutes a good worldly order like Bodin, as salvation cannot be achieved in this world but only in the next. So what begins with a major theoretical step towards the modern state, namely the clear distinction between worldly and spiritual affairs, gives painfully inadequate answers to the problems arising from such a worldly order. Luther fails to move beyond a religiously based understanding of politics.

Luther regards salvation in the next life as the highest good. The state cannot secure spiritual salvation and therefore in the world no salvation can be achieved. Yet, he dares to depart from and openly oppose clerical teachings of the time.²

More, on the other hand, stands by the Catholic Church and the Pope; he supports the traditional order and opposes questioning the authority of the Church in his political activity. Nonetheless, his *Utopia* is a radical answer to the questions of his time, void of consideration for the Catholic Church's interests.³ The first part of the *Utopia* criticizes social inequalities created by early capitalism and the inability of the political system to deal adequately with the emerging problems (Morus, 1960: 24ff). It is a critique of governing and accordingly the answer given in the second part of the book is an institutional one. More suggests that only a carefully planned and managed society will be able to control crime, moral demise and ensure a reasonably good life for everyone. This society rests on three pillars: firstly, the abolition of private property and discouraging of the presentation of symbols of wealth (Morus, 1960: 64ff); secondly, a system of rules and laws covering all areas of individual life developed through a representational democratic system (Morus, 1960: 53ff); and thirdly, a central role for religion paired with a high level of religious (and intellectual) tolerance (Morus 1960: 96ff). While his aim is to design a society rather than grow it organically, and many of the institutional arrangements he makes resemble much later and more modern ideas, the central role religion plays as *part of* the system of rule and the obvious disregard for a separation between public and private arenas of life are incompatible with contemporary ideas of a good society, at least in the Western world. More, however, seems to see no contradiction in the democratic governance of a system so total in reach.⁴

The sixteenth century was marked by disorder and change. Consequently – in this world 'rethinking itself, raising questions where there had been certainty, and discovering new ways' (Sargent, 1984: 198) – Machiavelli, More, Luther and

Bodin are connected by the search for stability as their common theme. Their answers, however, vary greatly. They foresee, albeit quite differently, major features of the emerging nation-state with great clarity: its territorial basis, its grounding in law, its separation of religion and politics, its technical apparatus for the administration of life. Yet these ideas remain firmly connected to medieval and classic ideas such as the desirability of a contemplative life, cyclical ideas of history and a lack of belief in progress, legitimacy of worldly order derived from God, and so on. Their concern with order is a very immediate response to the instabilities of their time and shadows questions of what might constitute good order. Dominant themes of the following centuries, such as the legitimacy of political order and the importance of individual rights, are overshadowed by the pressing problems of a changing world, that make it appear as if any order is good order.

This is not to say that any of the thinkers denied the need for good order; they all present us with some idea of what they believe to be good order and certainly agree that bad order will not prevail and therefore cannot grant stability. But they are only just beginning to grasp an idea of the new emerging political order and, of course, cannot anticipate or imagine all the challenges arising from it. This pattern of thinking, so characteristic for sixteenth-century political thought, combines the search for stability with elements of the emerging nation state, medieval ideas of legitimacy and the good life, and classic ideas of historical change. It is indeed an intricate connection of foresight and ignorance and a most distinct expression of the ways political thought reflects rapid and fundamental change. Political thinkers attempt to grasp the elements of emerging order and fill in the 'blanks' with elements from the established world views.

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Such patterns may be described for many historical periods and times but those most interesting to us will be found in periods that we believe to mirror our own. We, too, live in turbulent times and it seems to me that a fundamental change in possible patterns of order is under way. The political system that so elegantly, if not always peacefully and just, guided us through European modernity is hard pressed to meet the challenges of contemporary technological, environmental and social changes. And it has begun to change. Even if the nation-state is not disappearing, as some claimed, it is certainly changing significantly, maybe beyond recognition in response to our problems. New mechanisms of addressing problems are emerging, too, at local, transnational and non-territorial levels – some of which have been recognised, others not. Of course, quite like the sixteenth-century thinkers, we reflect these changes and so does political theory. And most likely our pattern of thought is already an intricate mixture of descriptions of the new emerging order and of hopelessly inadequate old ideas. We get some things right, but important questions cannot yet be asked, because we are wrapped up in the immediate upheaval of our time. Only over time will the new questions of what constitutes a good order and good living emerge and subsequently be answered.

On that rather abstract level, the end of modernity through which we are living mirrors the birth of modernity in the

sixteenth century. Looking back at the sixteenth century, therefore, is a bit like looking back at ourselves from 500 hundred years in the future. We can look at Machiavelli, More, Luther and Bodin and ask: where did their immediate problems cloud their priorities and judgements? Where did they unquestioningly stick with old ideas? And where do we? We may not be able to answer these questions but being able to ask them can help to achieve a better understanding of change in world views and certainties.

TEACHING POLITICAL THOUGHT WITH RELEVANCE

The preceding argument shows that, beyond the traditional approaches, there is another perspective to be gained from the history of ideas. Rather than solely situating ideas in their historical context, following them through intellectual development or evaluating their eternal relevance, I suggest looking at patterns of thought and reflecting upon the ways in which they combine clairvoyant insights of things to come with a more fearful retreat onto the firm ground of established thinking.

What does this imply for teaching political thought? Firstly, what we are to learn from an engagement with the history of ideas is not just of historical or eternal relevance. Nor has the history of ideas done its deed when we look at the changes that ideas incur over historical time. The history of ideas contributes to our awareness of the contingency and frequent inadequacy of our own thinking and of its roots in the past. Through studying the history of ideas as an intellectual process in periods that mirror our own we can begin to contextualise, qualify and open our own arguments.

Therefore, secondly, students should be encouraged to study original texts in knowledge of their context and with sympathy for the authors, yet critically

and creatively. They should be encouraged to realize that even the most brilliant minds are prone to argue for ideas that are old-fashioned and will only provide partly adequate answers to future problems. Patterns of thought are unlikely to be 'all wrong' or 'all right' but much more likely to be both. And this is true for Machiavelli and his contemporaries as well as for anyone engaging in political reflection today.

Thirdly, acknowledging the contingency and ambivalence of our own interpretations of the world can lead us to engage with more serenity in inter-cultural, ideological or conflictual political debates. It is necessary to argue for truths and standpoints we have recognised. It is important to think along new lines without fantasising. We need to try and understand our time, to think the new, to argue and disagree. But it is also vital to know that we cannot be right about everything. We should try to 'get it right' and not be discouraged from thinking by being proven wrong. Time will move our thinking along and help us understand new circumstances. So will our debates, arguments and disagreements. The history of ideas, because it allows for a historical perspective on ideas, can serve as an experimenting field for the critical, creative and productive engagement with theoretical conceptions. It can be a practice field for critical thought for all those seeking to contribute originally and innovatively to thinking about political problems.

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Notes

- 1 Machiavelli's main texts were only published posthumously in 1931/32.
- 2 This, of course, is a logical consequence of his argument that the Church should not be involved in worldly affairs, quite like the worldly princes should keep out of the spiritual guidance of people.
- 3 There is some debate in the literature about whether or not More meant the *Utopia* to describe an ideal society (Nipperdey, 1975). For the purposes of my argument, this does not matter much, because either way More's idea of how a state can be constructed from reasoning and his insistence on the importance of institutional arrangements is not limited to the particular society described in *Utopia*. It is the way in which he thinks about reacting to the problems of his time, rather than the concrete suggestions he makes, which is so intriguing.
- 4 Some might argue that Rousseau makes a similar argument. However, in contrast to More, Rousseau considers a private realm necessary – or at least helpful – for any political system to prevail. He merely denies that any limits to a private realm may be settled eternally in advance (Rousseau, 1977: 32f).

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