

The History of Political Thought in King's viewed autobiographically 1959-2019  
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John Dunn

I'm afraid that this part of the afternoon is going to be relentlessly egocentric in focus because I'm going to talk about why I've spent so much of my own life thinking about the history of political thought and about why I've come to see it the way I do. But I hope by the end of it I'll have managed to convey something which should be of interest to others. So much anyway for the past of the history of political thought in and from King's, over these seven decades, but what about its future? That, very evidently, is not a matter for me, but it very much is a matter for the College as a place of education, learning and research, and arguably even for it as a place of religion. After all if Cambridge is unfortunate enough to suffer a major terrorist attack, as the City Council were recently and credibly warned it well may be, it will almost certainly prove to do so because King's in particular is so unmistakably and conspicuously a place of religion. Any serious understanding of the politics of the world we live in needs to grasp and be able to explain just why that could qualify it for the purpose.

Between us this afternoon we have, I hope, shown how very many members of Kings over these seven decades have thought seriously and at some length about one or other aspect of the history of political thinking, along with a great many others whom even between us we haven't had time to mention. I hope, too, that we've also managed to convey that not a few of them did so in the attempt to work out how to think more clearly and accurately about politics for themselves, and not just about the politics of particular national communities or of Europe and its diaspora, but of many other parts of the world too and over just as long a span of time: about war and commerce and the relations between them,

empire and its unravelling, and the intimate and continuous remaking of every society across the world. I've stressed myself particularly at the outset the contributions of Classics, Philosophy and what used to be called Oriental Studies to this proliferating process of inquiry, but I might just as reasonably have chosen a miscellany of literatures – English, French, German or Russian - or of social anthropology: Meyer Fortes and Edmund Leach, Stanley Tambiah, Alan Macfarlane or Caroline Humphrey.

The case I want to press on the College and on anyone from the outside who has chosen to come and listen to us, is a case for seeing the history of political thinking as global, as profoundly historical, and also as in its upshot ,overwhelmingly **important**. I don't of course claim that that is the only way in which there is reason to see it and try to do it. It is not, for example, the way of seeing and doing it which has turned the name of the University into a global intellectual brand, even if it shares uncomplicatedly with that way the recognition of political thinking's profound historicity. What I do want to claim is that this way of seeing it has a single drastic merit. It recognizes just how much of human life lies at the mercy of politics and it tries to read the history of thinking about politics as steadily as it can against that ineliminable and fearful jeopardy.

I can't pretend that I've come to see its history in this way through a disciplined process of inquiry or by accumulating expertise of any definite kind: more through a series of unsought out biographical accidents. When I began to work on a segment of that history I did so very much *faute de mieux*, though I certainly enjoyed the work itself greatly, since it brought me many years of exhilarating discussion with Quentin and a, no doubt in my case somewhat juvenile, camaraderie in mocking the confusions of our elders. I didn't for many years think or feel that my own work in the discipline had shown me (or a fortiori shown anyone else) anything of the slightest practical significance; and once I had secured a University job which

entitled me to study politics very much in the present I assumed that I would leave history as such mainly behind me and that it in turn would docilely comply with the desertion. It didn't turn out that way in the end because of four very different contingencies, two of them prior to and two subsequent to the point at which I secured a post teaching in the University. The first three were all directly due to the College. The first of them I owed to Martin Bernal, a Research Fellow and then Tutor of the College at that point who, more or less by inheritance from his formidable father, drew no discernible distinction between politics and intellectual life and with whom, at the College's expense, I ran for two years a seminar and then a conference about revolutions which forced me to see and think about them as densely and painfully historical episodes, and not as screens onto which to project anyone's political tastes. Two years later, when the University at last decided that Politics was a subject fit for undergraduate study it also failed to appoint anyone to teach it but included Revolution eccentrically as the subject of one of the four papers offered for examination, I wrote and delivered a course of lectures about what I had learnt about revolution from our seminar and conference, and when the University the next year once again decided that it did not need to allocate any of the meagre set of appointments it chose to make to the teaching of politics, I chose not to repeat the lectures for the pittance offered and turned them into a book instead. Before this, again solely thanks to the College I also got the opportunity to take leave for a year from Directing Studies in History to teach instead in the University of Ghana and carry out research there with an anthropologist from Cambridge, Sandy Robertson, on the development of a cocoa growing area of provincial Ashanti. I did all this as a loyal and duly grateful feudal dependent of the College, on a contract it was resolutely committed to keeping short term. Then too, as they very much remain, College teaching officers were an expensive luxury, which the College was

extremely reluctant to employ for any longer than it had too. I went to Ghana and did that research because it gave me the opportunity to begin to think seriously about the category from the present I had picked out to try to assess, the postcolonial state, still proliferating at the time, and because doing so offered me a chance to address it in the only way I thought might work. I chose postcolonial states, as the offspring of several generations of imperial cadres and after growing up arguing with my parents about the imperative to end empire as promptly and decently as possible and because I saw it as a category whose numerousness and novelty might be especially worth interrogating as a political theorist. Doing so in Ghana was an intensely involving experience as well as for much of the time an exceptionally enjoyable one and I returned to Cambridge the next year intending to concentrate mainly on thinking about the politics of African countries for some time to come. Three years later, however, Ghana suffered its second successful military coup and the new military government rapidly wrecked the lives of a very large proportion of the population right across the class structure of the country, including many of those at both ends of that structure to whom I had become closest. A place largely of joy for me became a place of desolation from which it took decades to begin to recover. After one brief return visit under that regime I found I couldn't bear to go back again and did not really want to go on working mainly on Africa without a large personal stake in the continent anywhere in particular. The experience of what happened to Ghana then was traumatic at the time, but it left one durable and decisive impact on my life. Seeing a country ruined in a few years by the way it was governed transformed the way I thought and felt about politics and did so for good. It forced me to see politics not as a canvas on which to refine my own political preferences, but as a dense and formidably recalcitrant reality with an ineliminable capacity to inflict terrible harm. It was a perfect preparation for the pleasures of Brexit.

Neither of these first two contingencies marked out a path along which I would need or even want to go on thinking very actively about the history of political thinking, though teaching about how to understand revolution for the thirty five years in which I worked for the University did force me to think through one cumulative failure in political thinking and apprehension which has entered massively into the world's political history over the last century. What really DID force me back more open-mindedly, systematically and doggedly to brood and puzzle over that record was the third contingency I also owed to the College, the decision by Gareth Stedman Jones, my successor as Director of Studies in History to propose to the College's Research Centre a project on the history of political economy as a prelude to Karl Marx, and the arrival to lead the implementation of that project of Istvan Hont. Istvan had as personal and domestic reasons for interrogating the history of political economy as Martin Bernal had to interrogate revolutions, since he had fled Hungary with Anna at a time when his father was a Minister in the government in order to work out why the faith to which his parents had given their lives to serving was failing them so grimly. In the six years for which that project eventually ran Istvan turned the College into the centre of a global network of inquiry and pulled in the most exciting and instructive historians of economic thinking in Europe and North America. For my part he showed me indelibly how drastically the building of a dynamic and highly unstable global market has transformed political possibilities everywhere and how that transformation has torn apart the impressively cumulative coherence in understanding politics which the Mediterranean world and western Europe had constructed over the millennia before. It turned me for quite a long time largely into an amanuensis for Istvan who took some time to learn to express himself in fluent academic English. Even when he returned to King's and Cambridge to teach for the Faculty of History I continued to spend quite a lot of my time in damage limitation

exercises around the fringes of his working space. From that point on he laid out to an impressive phalanx of pupils, mostly not from the British Isles, that strenuous process of recognition and imaginative acknowledgement in ever starker outline and more exhaustive detail. He didn't follow the story closely himself very far even into the nineteenth century – but he showed why by then the world of Europe and beyond had become so hopelessly stuck in what he came to call the permanent crisis of a divided mankind. That was a decisive perception for me. It showed me why all the cheerier themes in political reflection in the long passage since then have turned out hopelessly ingenuous or parochial. Their bearers or champions have simply closed their eyes to that gross stark fact. That division and crisis are still there and no one has yet seen clearly and accurately how they could possibly cease to be. They will still be there for the rest of all your lives.

For thirty years Istvan and I worked together closely, always in the midst of the throng of youthful researchers he assembled around him, on the economic constraints on modern politics and, rather less decisively, on the political constraints on modern economies, in my case to no great effect, though I did at one point, because of doing so, settle down in response to an invitation from Frank Kermode to write a book which tried to explain as clearly as I could just why politics is both so hard to understand and so consistently disappointing. Unsurprisingly this pleased extremely few readers, though I'm afraid not on the whole because what it said is mistaken. You could say accurately of that book, as well as of the work which Istvan and I did in dialogue with one another in the extended company he assembled around him that all of it was perforce a study in the history of political thinking and one continuously responsive to the local sense of how that study must be conducted if it is to eschew fantasy; but it was also, as I have tried to bring out, itself a continuing exercise in thinking about politics. Encountering Istvan was a striking piece of good fortune,

and it took me on a journey I would not have entered on, let alone persisted in, had I never met him and had the opportunity to work so closely and protractedly with him. As in most fairy stories, it also exposed me to some distinctive trials and imposed sundry burdens of its own.

Only the fourth contingency which has shaped so much of my intellectual life over the last quarter of a century was not owed in any direct way to Kings. Like my reluctant passage to Cambridge at all, my engagement with revolution and my briefer encounter with Ghana, it was purely accidental in inception, but it has carried me a long way. It goes back to my undergraduate friendship with Michael Cook, himself the son of a Professor of Ancient History, who made me in my second year as an undergraduate and very much against my own initial inclination, take the Tripos paper in Ancient History and succumb to a mesmerizing and powerfully illuminating teacher Moses Finley and to the remarkable seminar for Faculty and graduate students which he ran with Hugo Jones, the great historian of the later Roman empire on Greek democracy and the decline and fall of Rome, a seminar which Michael and I were somehow permitted to attend and take an active part in. From Moses I learnt by example, as I do not think I could have done from anyone else I have ever encountered, how to think about democracy as a historical reality, which is, after all, all it can ever be. I didn't for the next fifteen years actually go on doing so, except very briefly and opportunistically towards the end of them; but the short chapter I wrote and published at that point provided me with the further opportunity fifteen years later still to assemble together a galaxy of impressive scholars to convey in outline something of what had happened to democracy between Cleisthenes and then.

It was that volume which, from one angle or another, has led to my spending so much of my time since in trying to understand why democracy as a word, a range of vaguely associated

ideas and more or less questionably related institutions has spread around the world as it has and, by its embrace or repudiation, pulled the destinies of so many different populations across the world in such different directions.

I didn't think when I set myself to edit that volume back in 1991 that I had focused on a theme of great practical urgency for the politics of Britain in particular or indeed the politics of Western Europe or North America for that matter. I certainly didn't think that I had focused on a theme that wouldn't let me go, or would involve me deeply in the destiny of a country like Korea which I had never previously even thought of visiting, nor that it would take me round the world to China, Japan, Taiwan and Singapore, to Uruguay and Mexico, Hungary and France, Italy and Armenia, Russia and Croatia, the United States and Canada, and even back again to India, where the arguments with my parents had begun and on which they had always centred. I also had no idea that it would force me to think carefully once more about the history of political thinking in several of those settings where I did at least have the elementary linguistic equipment to set about doing so – in Greece very long ago, and in England, France and North America. I also had no idea that it would force me in doing so to rethink Istvan's agenda of the modern economic constraints on politics and political constraints on economics with renewed energy and far greater anxiety. Nearly three years ago that exercise became very much more painful for any citizen of this country who is not simply in denial. Who would have thought that the people of this of all countries would contrive to divide themselves so bitterly and in such extravagant confusion over interpreting the category democracy. It was not of course the quantum of democracy they have recently enjoyed or the deficits in democracy they have always had to endure which did the dividing, though the point at which that division assumed its current miserable shape was by far the most consequential political choice ever put directly to Britain's

citizens, so you cannot deny that the chance they took to express their divisions or the mechanism through which they proceeded to sharpen them was as democratic an opportunity as they have ever been offered. What it plainly did offer them, whatever else, was a medium through which to deliver the terrible news.

I had been trying for some time by that point to persuade my fellow political theorists and anyone else with the courtesy to listen that we have come to think about democracy in a way which is both absurd and dangerous – trying, it seemed to me to break what had come to be a kind of spell. I might just as well just have waited for the spell to break itself. You scarcely need to be a political theorist now, still less a historian of political thought, to recognize the *débris* it has left.

So what have I learnt from fifty seven years of thinking about the history of human efforts to understand politics and direct it for the better ? Certainly not, alas, any kind of clairvoyance about anyone's future nor a method of inquiry or analytic protocol which, correctly applied, will ensure anyone valid apprehension of the politics of anywhere. I'm afraid I foreswore that gratifying possibility irretrievably while writing *The Cunning of Unreason* two decades ago. I see what I think I have learnt more as a special form of sensitivity training, a widening out of the range of relevance and a clearer sense of the systematic relations between aspects of politics anywhere you might go to and listen attentively, as a training in diagnosis in a field yet to find its Hippocrates, let alone its Pasteur or Alexander Fleming. This, as you'll have heard for yourselves, has been at no stage the outcome of a competently curated academic career; the achievement of an enviable fluency allied to a secure level of technical control. But then neither of those accomplishments is a very suitable upshot of political comprehension, where confident fluency must be essentially rhetorical, and any claim to technical control an exercise either in illusion or deception.

But what reason do even I have to view this outcome as a diagnostic skill rather than a personal delusion, a giant bubble of complacency ? What exactly anyway can awareness of the history of political thinking contribute to diagnosing anything in the present or future. On the purely personal score of course I certainly don't discount the possibility that much of it in my own case IS indeed delusory. Everyone is apt to overestimate the degree of their own comprehension and anyone who has spent their entire adult life in an institution like this one inevitably quite a lot more likely than most. All I would say in mitigation is that I have found it increasingly across the world at least a delusion which I can get quite a lot of people to share. But that is the trivial and purely personal doubt. The scepticism that reflection on history of any kind really could enhance judgment about the future is the real and intimidating doubt. But that, I am quite sure, is a doubt too far. There simply IS no knowledge of the future. Almost all the knowledge we have or could possibly acquire is knowledge about the past. If the past cannot equip us to diagnose, nothing can or could. Every human society has had to think politically for itself and every human being who survives for long enough has to think politically too. They have not for the most part needed to think much or often about Cabinets or Statutes ,or even about governments or laws, but they have had to think about how to live with one another in such ease, safety and enjoyment as they can muster. As the scale and intensity of their interactions has grown over time they have needed to take the measure of ever more sorts of factors; and the models of order they have encountered and constructed, and the repertoires of self-defence or resistance they have fashioned in response have become increasingly complex and bemusing. Most of that history is lost; and what little survives has had to do so in a moving political present which it can never escape. The modest proportion of it that does survive at all has done so above all through contingencies of political organization, literacy

and cultural attention. The most salient of those contingencies simply is the accumulated knowledge of the history of what we still blearily call western political thought – not least because some of its products have entered so pervasively and prominently into the labelling, notation and operating systems of the principal structures we now live in across the world. The fact that they have done so certainly doesn't give those of us who come from what we still think of as the West privileged or reliable insight into what they now mean or indeed what they have ever meant. But they do offer anyone who looks to them at all attentively a wealth of illumination on why they work or fail to work for better or worse as they do.

Because every extant human community has had to understand its own political experience for itself and continuously test out that understanding whilst doing so, everywhere has a local knowledge and repertoire of its own, but most thus far, as far as we know, have made no effort to summarize their experience in an analytically articulated résumé of its implications. Only China, Japan, the Islamic world and just possibly India, have attempted anything distantly comparable to the history of western political thinking and none of these at this point, for very different reasons, has a powerful impetus to converge on any such résumé.

That disparity has become one of the principal factors obstructing mutual political comprehension across the world. Even where it is not the most insistent and drastic source of current danger (which is quite difficult to judge), it is very clear that it sharply increases that danger in innumerable settings. Why are Palestine, Iran, Kashmir, the Korean peninsula and the South China Sea the most dangerous places on earth today, and not only for those who live there ? You will not find the answer in the history of political thought, but you will certainly get the answer wrong if you are blithely unaware of that history. That is the

geopolitical dimension of its diagnostic contribution and what I have mostly been thinking about from one angle or another since I first took up the history of political thinking. Today, sadly, I find myself brooding more on the other side of it – on the ecological catastrophe which looms over us as a species and the local miseries we citizens of Britain have fecklessly inflicted on ourselves and our descendants as we ravage the economy we shall still have to live on and stumble back blindly towards the Wars of the Roses, where this College so adventitiously began.

It will never be effortless for humans to live with each other on any scale and it can always become barely endurable. Politics is the record of our efforts to do so on all but the most intimate of scales and arguably even there. It is densely contextual, endlessly polyglot and often bafflingly opaque. But it has a deep grammar from which it can never stray. Fragments of that grammar, at sporadic intervals, have been picked up and then mislaid throughout the history of political thinking in the west, and must, however unaware of it we in the west may now be, have been picked up too in many other communities over time. It is those fragments and those fragments only which power diagnosis and equip us or any other human beings to see at all beyond our own narrow contexts. I claim two things this afternoon for the College and hope that we have shown both to be true. First that a remarkable number of people have devoted their time here over these seventy years to looking for those fragments, and that between them they have done so with at least some recognition of the breadth of the human communities and the depth of time in which that search has been going on across the inhabited surface of the world. It has always been a flickering torch within a vast darkness but, now if ever, it is a darkness in which all human beings need more illumination, and a torch which the College should do its very best to carry bravely on.