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# A HISTORY OF MODERN POLITICAL THOUGHT

*The Question of Interpretation*



GARY BROWNING

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# A HISTORY OF MODERN POLITICAL THOUGHT

## *Preface*

Some books write themselves. This one did not. The idea came to me one weekend in blazing hot sunshine. I was to write a book that would get to grips with the question of interpretation by reviewing the modern history of political thought in the light of several interpretive paradigms. I wrote out ideas in a whirl of activity and then collected them and myself in rewriting them. By the end of the next month and the sunshine I had sent my ideas to Oxford University Press. I let them settle there. The rest is history or at least a number of years of unremitting industry. It has not been an easy book to write. I worked with my initial inspiration and continued to work through my imaginative sense of what was to be done. Imagination combined with perspiration as I read and re-read texts and contexts to get a sense of what was to count in the intellectual reach of interpretive schemes. How is a particular political thinker to be included and examined? I worked hard to nail interpretations of thinkers that would cohere with what I wanted to say about wider interpretive schemes. Days came and went along with particular interpretive trails. In the end I had something resembling a book and then it was a case of reconstructing the resemblance to take account of alternative trails. The resulting study emerged slowly along with my own interpretive standpoint. I realized quite early that I wanted to develop a synoptic perspective. It would be dialectical and would testify to the legacy of Hegel and Marx. Who knows if the resulting work is a part of the Hegelian tradition? Certainly it represents a continuous if critical reflection on Hegel's ideas and in particular his conception of the history of philosophy that was inspired in part by encountering Oakeshott at an impressionable age and reading through all of Collingwood's writings. Yet it also reflects working with deconstruction. My enthusiasm for the history of ideas was reinforced by reading Skinner many years ago and by devouring Gadamer in a night or two way back in the 1970s. So the book has many sources of inspiration and represents a concern to be integrative and dialectical in interpreting ideas. Nothing of any note is a mere mistake and must be recognized and worked with.

The history of ideas is in part a work of mourning for the dead. Derrida is instructive on this. In revisiting the dead, their spirit is rekindled and so my thoughts are engaged by the dead who have gone but continue to speak. In the last five years I have lost many who mattered and who continue to matter as their spirits stay close. I am thinking of Conal, my son, who would have appreciated the concentration that I have put into this book even if he would have been clear and honest in his assessment. I am also thinking of my mother,

Myra, who read my first book as a labour of love which must have been hard labour and of my father, Frank, who softened in his last years in a way that has lent itself to a reinterpretation of his and my life. Monty too deserves a mention as he sought fruitlessly for a happiness that was beyond his capacity. They all suffered from mental frailty either at the end of things or in ways that troubled what should have been years of growth and enchantment but they all showed me that illness and suffering can be interpreted in multiple ways and should neither be denied nor dismissed.

I would also like to thank friends and colleagues who have helped with the writing of this book. My wife, Raia, has been wonderful. She knows what is involved and shares many of my convictions. She has been a constant help and guide in enabling me to make use of time and in talking over aspects of my argument. My daughter Eleanor shows a wonderful spirit of vitality and warmth. Andy Kilmister read a draft and provided invaluable and considered criticism. Doerthe Rosenow and Victoria Browne read chapters and I have presented papers on Derrida, Foucault, and Gadamer to audiences at Oxford Brookes and Brunel University. Anne-Marie Kilday and Tina Miller at Oxford Brookes have been supportive and Nick Hewlett has been a great friend through this project and beyond. Dominic and Olivia at Oxford University Press have been patient and supportive.

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## Introduction

Titles serve as a way of introducing texts, signposting what is to be read. Of course, signposts can be misleading, because their directions have to be interpreted. The title of this book guards against misinterpretation by registering its interest in the nature of interpretation. This book reviews ways in which the history of modern political thought can be interpreted and shows how distinct styles of interpretation have been applied to selected modern political thinkers. Interpretation in the history of political thought is controversial. There are seemingly endless disputes over interpreting a thinker in this way or that. Marx may be labelled a determinist, a social scientist, a class warrior, or a philosophically inclined normative theorist. Likewise Machiavelli is represented in multiple ways. He has been an evil ideologue, a realist, a proto Marxist and a conventional Renaissance republican. There is also more general debate on the nature of the enterprise. Its contestability is revealed in disputes over its relations to the disciplines of philosophy and history. Klosko, in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Political Philosophy*, observes that 'the history of political philosophy spans two different disciplines, history and philosophy. In working in the area, it is essential to keep the two separate.'<sup>1</sup> This separation, however, cannot be taken for granted, because political thought takes place in time and some but not all of its historic forms may be styled philosophical. Indeed, Dunn, in a landmark methodological essay, 'The Identity of the History of Ideas', argues strongly for combining the two disciplines in the history of political thought. As he remarks, 'both historical specificity and philosophical delicacy are more likely to be attained if they are pursued together, than if one is deserted for the other at an early stage of the investigation.'<sup>2</sup> A theme of this book consists in its engagement with the ways in which past forms of political thought raise historical and

<sup>1</sup> G. Klosko, 'Introduction', in G. Klosko (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Political Philosophy* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 1. See also J. Pocock, 'Theory and History: Problems of Context and Narrative', in J. Dryzek, B. Honig, and A. Phillips (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Political Theory* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 169.

<sup>2</sup> J. Dunn, 'The Identity of the History of Ideas', *Philosophy*, vol. XLIII, no. 164, 1968, pp. 85–104.



philosophical questions. Historical contexts distinguish past political concerns from present ones, while philosophical presumptions about these past concerns can be questioned in the light of present theoretical and political considerations. The interpretive interplay between past and present and between theory, politics, and history is a theme of this book's engagement with interpretation.

A determination to get to grips with the contestability of interpretation in the history of political thought explains the rationale of this book. It is a book of two parts. Its opening part reviews general interpretive approaches to the subject and the succeeding part analyses selected modern political theorists. The two parts go together. A sign of their compatibility is conveyed by our dual analyses of Hegel and Marx, who elaborate general schemes of interpretation and seminal substantive theories of modern politics. If Hegel and Marx reveal the affinity between substantive social and political theory and wider frames of interpretation, this book more generally shows how generic schemes of interpretation frame analyses of particular political theorists. Individual studies of past theorists are structured by general interpretive assumptions. These assumptions may or may not be presented in particular acts of interpretation. A commentator, say, may offer a convincing view of Bentham's notion of utility, without delivering a general analysis of the status and accessibility of past ideas. In this book exemplary general schemes of interpretation are examined expressly. The rationale for doing so is that they matter, and the ways in which they do will be justified in the course of the ensuing argument. These general schemes offer ways of constructing and assessing past political thinking. They do so in distinguishable and in some respects contrary ways, which allow for distinctive and sometimes conflicting interpretations of particular theorists. Hence the discrepancy between images of Marx and Machiavelli that was flagged at the outset is in part to be explained by the multiple ways in which interpretation may be conceived. An indisputable feature of the history of political thought is its sophisticated practice of reinterpretation, so that judgments on past thinkers are subject to continuing modifications. This continual process of reinterpretation tends to be ignored in standard general texts that furnish seemingly definitive if condensed summaries of past thinkers. Reflection on the question of interpretation shows how the process of reinterpretation is neither contingent nor arbitrary but derives at least in part from the character of interpretation itself.

The interpretive schemes that are reviewed in this book do not exhaust the repertoire of its notable forms, but serve to highlight how explanatory strategies repay attention. They frame the ways in which particular interpretations are conducted. The selected schemes consist in the dialectical teleology of Hegel and Marx, the historical analyses of Collingwood and Oakeshott, the contextualist turn of the Cambridge School and affiliated authors, the textual and discursive deconstruction of Derrida and Foucault, and Gadamer's

hermeneutical interpretation of horizons, past and present. These schemes are not readily commensurable, because they assume selective positions in reviewing past thinkers. Hegel and Marx see past thought as bearing upon the present, and assimilate its forms as component elements within their own theoretical systems. Collingwood and Oakeshott insist upon the autonomy of historical understanding and yet connect their own political theories to ongoing traditions of political thought. The contextualism of the Cambridge School announced itself in opposition to preceding forms of commentary, which omitted reference to the historical contexts in relation to which past thinkers formulated their theories. In contrast Derrida and Foucault interpret past texts against the grain of what their authors intended, assuming that authors do not set the agenda for interpreting how flows of language or forms of discursive practice are to be understood. Gadamer takes past and present to provide interpretive horizons that are adjusted reciprocally in a process of interpretation that yields an outcome that neither replicates the past nor reflects the prejudices of the present.

The changing formulations and distinguishable features of these interpretive schemes are reviewed in the following chapters. To interpret particular past thinkers in the light of one of them is to view thinkers from a certain angle that foregrounds or accentuates what is ignored, underplayed, or opposed in alternative interpretive styles. What they entail is abstract without attending to how they operate in practice. Hence in chapters 8 to 18, reviews of several modern political thinkers will be conducted which draw upon the previously outlined interpretive perspectives. This focus upon particular modern political thinkers is of intrinsic value in that it reckons with notable theorists of modern politics. Yet it also highlights what is at stake in interpretation, because past thought is not simply there, waiting for our uncomplicated access to its ideas. It is accessed by processes of interpretation that are framed in distinct ways. There is no better way of appreciating what is involved in these frames of interpretation than in reviewing how they make sense of actual past thinkers. In reviewing the impact of the Cambridge School's challenge to preceding assumptions, Gunnell argues that reflection upon its transformation of the study of particular thinkers such as Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Locke provides an ideal register of its value.<sup>3</sup> Analysis of how generic ways of interpreting ideas impact upon interpreting particular thinkers is undertaken rarely and one of the features of this study is that it contributes to this relatively neglected analysis of political thought.

The second part of this book reviews modern political thinkers, and assesses the pros and cons of the interpretive perspectives that are reviewed in the preceding section. The analysis of individual modern political thinkers

<sup>3</sup> J. Gunnell, 'History of Political Philosophy as a Discipline', in G. Klosko (ed), *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Political Philosophy*, pp. 60–75.

incorporates biographical, textual, and contextual commentary so as to convey the character and provenance of their thinking. Its critical edge is sharpened by considering interpretations of their thought that draw upon the interpretive schemes, which are reviewed in the first part of this book. Hence, Machiavelli is reviewed by engaging with the interpretive commentaries of Skinner and Pocock, who are exemplary representatives of the contextualist Cambridge School. Their commentaries have altered presumptions about Machiavelli by alerting readers to the intellectual pedigree of his thought and to the historic political concerns to which his writings were addressed. A focus upon Oakeshott's stylish construal of Hobbes as a distinguished contributor to a traditional form of political philosophy is supplemented by reviewing Collingwood's endorsement of Hobbes's justification of centralized legitimate political authority along with Foucault's contrary but not disconnected dismissal of it. Locke's political thought is scrutinized by appraising Dunn's historic study, which reads Locke in the light of his assumed contextual specificity, and which runs counter to re-readings of Locke as prefiguring liberal argument and to Dunn's own second thoughts on the subject.<sup>4</sup> The paradoxes underlying Rousseau's political thought are foregrounded by Derrida's deconstructive textual analysis, which critiques his retrojection of an idealized and purportedly uncivilized state of nature by observing his resort to the very aspects of civilization that are deprecated in its formulation. Kant's international political theory is examined by reviewing Hegel's early and trenchant critique of its Enlightenment contradictions and by analysing its ambiguous critique by Foucault and Derrida. Subsequently Hegel's political thought is interrogated by reviewing its early and radical Marxist critique and by considering complaints against its alleged metaphysical closure that are offered by French post-structuralism and Gadamer's Heideggerian hermeneutics. Multiple traditions of Marxist analysis of Marx are analysed in the spirit of Gadamer's hermeneutics to show how the passage of time and changing interpretive contexts allow Marx to assume a multiplicity of guises. At the close of the twentieth century Derrida's deployment of a reconstructed Marx to counter neo-liberal orthodoxies of international order reveals how a past thinker can be re-construed under the impact of subsequent events. Bentham's political thought is examined by focusing upon Foucault's reading of Bentham's proposed Panopticon as the central exhibit of a wider picture of disciplinary power. The relevance of J.S. Mill to the present is assessed in the light of Collini's contextualist portrayal of his Victorian moralism and

<sup>4</sup> See J. Dunn, *The Political Thought of John Locke: An Historical Account of the Argument of the 'Two Treatises of Government'* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1969). For his later thoughts on the subject see J. Dunn, 'What is Living and What is Dead in the Political Theory of John Locke', in J. Dunn, *Interpreting Political Responsibility: Essays 1981-1989* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1990), pp. 9-25.

Skorupski's invitation to perceive his ongoing relevance. The status of Nietzsche's radical critique of modernity is assessed by examining how Foucault, and Derrida appropriate it to their own radical agendas. Finally, the politics of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* is revisited by attending to its Hegelian credentials and by relating hermeneutically its exposure of the oppression of women to preceding forms of political thought.

In reflecting upon the interpretation of these political thinkers, the distinctive credentials of interpretive schemes are demonstrated. Past political thinkers are revealed to be more than museum pieces awaiting exhibition. Rather, political thought is constructed and reconstructed in the light of alternative interpretive assumptions and changing contexts. Interpretive schemes yield individual and contrary results. Past theorists are identified as reflecting unfamiliar assumptions that have receded from view, yet they are also shown to speak to current issues. Mill is a case in point and the pros and cons of conflicting views on his contemporary relevance will be reviewed in due course. The Conclusion of this study addresses issues that arise in the course of its successive analyses of interpretation. It defends interpretive pluralism, because alternative schemes of interpretation are shown to yield positive outcomes when their perspectives are applied to particular theorists. The dependence of the insights that they provide upon their distinct perspectives renders them incommensurable so that there is no knock-down argument to establish the superiority of one over the others. Textual interpretation cannot be encapsulated either by the reconstruction of a past author's intentions as exponents of the Cambridge School would have it or in the deconstruction of authorial perspectives as post-structuralists insist. An author's intentions bear upon their doctrines in ways that contextualist interpretation reveal, yet alternative interpretive perspectives show how texts can reflect rather than express a discursive practice or how they can be entangled in unintended contradictions arising out of their privileging particular ideas.

While embracing interpretive pluralism, this study is critical of the reflexive explanations of their interpretive practices that are offered by individual schemes of interpretation. They are shown to harbour blind spots in their reflexive interpretations of what they are doing that militate against their monopolistic explanatory claims. They aspire to but do not deliver autonomous sufficient forms of explanation. Our Conclusion goes beyond—without denying—an interpretive pluralism in setting out a relational, more inclusive account of interpretation that is developed out of the preceding critical review of several interpretive styles. A dialectical perspective is defended that revisits the interpretive holism of Hegel and Marx while abandoning their self-styled certainties, particularly over the imagined teleological end of history. Our commitment to dialectical holism recognizes the internality of the relations obtaining between the component parts of the interpretive process. There are no externalities to interpretation in relation to which it can be measured.

There is neither an underlying identity to political practice nor an actual record of the past thought of theorists such as Hobbes or Marx. The practice of politics, political thought, and the history of political thought are all interpretive activities, which preclude the idea of objects that are external to interpretation. Interpretive insight is not to be achieved by aligning interpretation to an external reality but rather by relating interpretations and components of interpretation to one another, so as to frame a cohesive coherent interpretation that respects the interplay between the elements constituting the interpretive process. Our summative conception of interpretation in the history of political thought is framed by a critical dialectical review of the several schemes that are reviewed previously. It is critical and inclusive in that it respects a plurality of interpretive perspectives, including continental and Anglophone, contextual and deconstructive, and develops a dialectical holistic conception of interpretation by reflecting upon their practices. Given the inherently interpretive character of political thinking, present forms of political thinking resemble past forms so that dominant conceptions of the present do not supersede past ones on account of a superior alignment to enduring political realities. Present forms of thinking establish their credentials by comparison with rival and past forms and by interpreting present political constructions that emerge out of preceding conditions.

### PLAMENATZ AND THE NATURE OF POLITICAL THOUGHT

General interpretive schemes differ radically from one another but they share at least one thing in common. They hold that interpreting the history of political thought requires an express view of interpretation and its procedures. Their reflexive approach to the subject contrasts with the general run of standard histories of political thought in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which line up a number of historic theorists without analysing overly the process by which the line-up is constituted. There are canons to the right and canons to the left, but no-one seems to care too much about the interpretive framework by which they are positioned. In a historical review of the subject Farr observes, 'Line-up canon and tradition came to be conceived as existing "out there" or "back then," not literary artifacts of a genre. They appeared as natural kinds or found objects that the historians of political thought were humbly narrating.'<sup>5</sup> There are many surveys of the history of

<sup>5</sup> J. Farr, 'The History of Political Thought', in J. Dryzek, B. Honig, and A. Phillips (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Political Theory*, p. 230. For a relatively recent and engaging example of the

political thought, which assume past texts to represent successive components of a canon yet they attend neither to how individual texts are to be analysed, nor with the inter-relations between them. Redhead's *From Plato to Nato* and Williams' *Political Theory in Retrospect* are serviceable examples of this kind of text, which provide successive summaries of past thinkers but beg questions about how the history of political thought is to be interpreted.<sup>6</sup>

Plamenatz's multi-volume study, *Man and Society* serves as a paradigm of a text that assumes analysis of past political thinkers is to be conducted with a minimum of fuss. Questions pertaining to past and present, to continuities and discontinuities, to the interpretive authority of authors, and to the inter-play between texts and contexts are neither addressed nor determined. *Man and Society* is dated both by its gendered title, by its breezy acceptance of the manifest relevance of past theorists to the present, and by its presumption of an untroubling amenability of texts to theoretical analysis. In his celebrated article, 'Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas' (1969) Skinner disparages a merely textual study of the history of ideas. The passage of time has persuaded Skinner to rework his original article for its inclusion in a retrospective collection of essays so as to soften its polemical tone. Yet ironically the original version remains relevant to an historical appreciation of how Skinner challenged the practices of commentators on the history of political thought by defending a specifically historical form of analysis. The article announces a new style of doing the history of political thought by denouncing standard practice, which it takes to be sub-standard.<sup>7</sup> Skinner considers a merely textual approach to distort its presumed purpose in explaining past ideas by imagining it can 'consider and explicate a determinate set of "fundamental concepts" of "perennial interest"'.<sup>8</sup> Skinner conducts a polemical assault on unreflective commentaries, concentrating his fire upon those who unthinkingly either assimilate past texts to present concerns or

genre, see G. Williams, *Political Theory in Retrospect: From the Ancient Greeks to the Twentieth Century* (London, Edward Elgar, 1992).

<sup>6</sup> B. Redhead (ed), *From Plato To Nato* (London, BBC Books, 1985); G. Williams, *Political Theory in Retrospect*. In the Introduction to their commentary on political thinkers, Boucher and Kelly do not profess their text to be historical because it does not specify the historic development of ideas but rather elaborates on the ideas of selected past thinkers. See D. Boucher and P. Kelly, 'Introduction' in D. Boucher and P. Kelly (eds), *Political Thinkers* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 16.

<sup>7</sup> See the original version, Q. Skinner, 'Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas', in J. Tully (ed.), *Meaning and Context—Quentin Skinner and His Critics* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1988), pp. 57–89. See also my subsequent comments in chapter 4 on the article, Skinner, the Cambridge School, and Contextualism. Pocock highlights the seminal role of Skinner's original article in J.G.A. Pocock, 'Quentin Skinner: The History of Politics and the Politics of History', in J.G.A. Pocock, *Political Thought and History—Essays on Theory and Method* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 128–9.

<sup>8</sup> Q. Skinner, 'Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas', in J. Tully (ed.), *Meaning and Context—Quentin Skinner and His Critics*, pp. 57–89.



relate them to allegedly universal questions. Plamenatz serves as one of the authors whom he has in mind, and is duly criticized in a footnote to the essay.<sup>9</sup> In his Introduction to *Man and Society*, Plamenatz subscribes to an unproblematic, unreconstructed sense of the unity between past and present forms of thought. In reflecting upon the character of past theories he observes, 'They are ways of looking at men and society which are of perennial interest.'<sup>10</sup> While his methodological observations are elliptical, they are memorable. He warms to the idea that Hobbes's synoptic philosophy possesses an evident cross-temporal power, and he is happy to assert that a concentrated reading of a text of any consequence will yield the meaning of its doctrines. He declares, 'No doubt Hobbes is a special case. We can get more of his meaning by merely reading what he wrote than we can say of Machiavelli's or Montesquieu's or Burke's. It is a matter of degree. But even in their case, we learn more about their arguments by weighing them over and over again than by extending our knowledge of the circumstances in which they write.'<sup>11</sup>

Given his interpretive recipe of meditating upon past texts, Plamenatz can be labelled a textualist but he operates without delivering a considered critical justification of his methodology. In so doing he is to be distinguished from those who offer a considered defence of the primacy and value of concentrating upon texts. For instance Strauss, the celebrated American scholar of the history of political thought, invests texts with an authority that warrants their close scrutiny due to their intimation of profound truths that are not disclosed expressly on account of their authors' recognition of the need to sidestep persecution and unsympathetic readers.<sup>12</sup> For Strauss the value of classical and pre-modern texts turns upon their insistence on a universal truth, which is subsequently abrogated by modern forms of historicism and relativism. A modern descent into subjectivism and relativism undermines the integrity of personal and public life and is a baleful consequence of the wrong road that has been taken with the advent of modernity. The relevance of the classic texts of political theory is clear; either, like Plato's *Republic* they convey a timeless truth or, like Machiavelli's *Prince* they insinuate a disturbing and immoral compromise with the ways of the world. The urgency and foreboding menace of Strauss's justification of the relevance of the great texts of political theory stands apart from Plamenatz's more measured and less elaborated sense of their continuing contribution to political thinking.<sup>13</sup> Plamenatz neither assumes a decisive and retrogressive break in historical understanding nor

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>10</sup> J. Plamenatz, 'Introduction', in J. Plamenatz, *Man and Society* (London, Longmans, 1963), p. xxvi.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. xvi.

<sup>12</sup> See L. Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1988).

<sup>13</sup> See J. Plamenatz, 'Introduction', in J. Plamenatz, *Man and Society*, p. xxv.

attributes esoteric strategies to past thinkers. He merely assumes that past texts convey meanings of perennial relevance that can be ascertained by a clear-headed scrutiny of texts on the part of a disinterested analytical commentator. His reading of past texts presumes no arcane knowledge of how they might have been composed, nor elaborate contextual understanding of what authors might have been trying to do in the light of their current political situations. What Marx and Engels might have been trying to do in writing *The Communist Manifesto* or Mill in composing *On Liberty* do not require consideration; the first is a revolutionary document that declares its principles openly and the second is an analysis of the political freedom that is to be enjoyed by an individual. Principles and arguments supersede particular circumstances and their pros and cons can be identified by close textual analysis. Plamenatz makes few presumptions about the purposes underlying past texts and is silent on the ways in which they might be read. He carries little academic baggage save for an enthusiasm for texts, a determination to see their continuing relevance, and forensic skills to be applied to their analysis.

For Plamenatz the meaning of a piece of past political thinking is to be established by a reading of doctrines that retain their validity over time. Past political thought is resumed in a subsequent interpretation without recourse either to an accompanying parade of historical scholarship or to a general exploration of how preceding texts are to be interrogated. The point of reviewing past political doctrines is exhibited by their manifest relevance to the contemporary world, which, in turn, testifies to their susceptibility to contemporary interpretation. This message is clear if undertheorized. It is not altered unduly by Wokler's commentary on Plamenatz's approach in a post-humous edition of *Man and Society*. Wokler's respect for Plamenatz as both a teacher and a political theorist is evident in his endorsement of his practice of textual analysis. He offers a plea of mitigation for Plamenatz's omission of contextual explanation in that exigencies of publishing are held to have induced him to concentrate on texts and to exclude supplementary contextual analysis.<sup>14</sup> Plamenatz is observed to have been aware of what historical scholarship might offer in furnishing accounts of the contexts in which ideas are framed, but also to have recognized with some plausibility that philosophical interpretation might be conducted as a discrete activity. Wokler maintains that Plamenatz had analysed some of the less philosophical thinkers in the light of their historical contexts, showing a facility in relating their ideas to their provenance in particular contexts. Yet this historical contextual material was sacrificed, because of the constraints imposed by the organization of the

<sup>14</sup> R. Wokler, 'Introduction', in J. Plamenatz, M. E. Plamenatz and R. Wokler *Man and Society: Political and Social Theories from Machiavelli to Marx: Hegel, Marx and Engels and the Idea of Progress*. Revised edition (London, Longmans Group, 1992), p. ix.



text as a whole. References to historical circumstances pertaining to political ideas that were shaped most evidently by contextual influences were excised from *Man and Society* because there was insufficient space to include them while adhering to the two-volume format of the text.<sup>15</sup>

Ironically, given that Skinner and the Cambridge School highlight how the intentions of past authors are integral to the meaning of texts, the intentions of Plamenatz in writing *Man and Society* have not been considered by historically minded critics. Just as the meaning of *The Communist Manifesto* depends in part on ascertaining how Marx and Engels envisaged its role in promoting the Communist League, so the point of *Man and Society* derives from Plamenatz's sense of how it might impact upon current political science. Wokler urges that Plamenatz's enthusiasm for analysing the ideas of past political philosophers arises out of his perception of how they might counteract the inadequacies of the contemporary positivist turn in current social and political science. Traditional political thought might provide an antidote to a current exclusive focus upon empirical political behaviour.<sup>16</sup> Likewise Philp, in his Introduction to the publication of Plamenatz's posthumously published lectures of 1975 on Machiavelli, Hobbes and Rousseau that were to be delivered in Cambridge, sees persisting value in Plamenatz's analytical skill, which holds up in the light of subsequent scholarship. He recognizes how Plamenatz's approach was directed against the contemporary turn to positivism in philosophy.<sup>17</sup> The historic texts of political philosophy are valuable for Plamenatz because they analyse the values that inform political conduct. Philp and Wokler appreciate how Plamenatz employs his analytical skills to criticize past theoretical explorations of values. Wokler urges that the philosophical arguments of past thinkers are pitched at a sufficient degree of abstraction to justify Plamenatz's view that their meaning was 'not determined solely by the circumstances that occasioned their production.'<sup>18</sup>

Skinner disparages reading past theories in the light of present convictions, because it abstracts ideas from the past contexts in which they were formulated, and tends to assimilate them to unrelated interests and circumstances of the present. He is clear in rejecting the assumption of perennial ideas whereby ideas are insulated from historical circumstances. Neither Plamenatz nor Wokler and Philp elaborate on how the contemporary use of past ideas might be justified. Plamenatz himself has little to say on how ideas might be relevant to very different contextual circumstances. Plamenatz's practice has, however,

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. xi.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. ix. See also J. Plamenatz, 'The Use of Political Theory', vol. III, no.1, 1960, pp. 37–47.

<sup>17</sup> See M. Philp, 'Introduction', in J. Plamenatz, *Machiavelli, Hobbes and Rousseau*, eds. M. Philp and Z. A. Pelczynski (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>18</sup> R. Wokler, 'Introduction', in J. Plamenatz, M. E. Plamenatz and R. Wokler *Man and Society: Political and Social Theories from Machiavelli to Marx: Hegel, Marx and Engels and the Idea of Progress*, p. xi.