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per una storia delle dottrine



## Trusting the Process: Current Fashions in History of Political Thought

Fidarsi del processo:  
Tendenze attuali nella storia del pensiero politico

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### ABSTRACT

Some very recent “states of the field” of the history of political thought are rich in valuable information and raise many considerations. As often happens, though, rather than dwelling on what is shared, perhaps it could be more fruitful to reason in dialogue with the authors on how their reflection surprises or perplexes. In order to avoid unconscious ideological trends, the main issues to debate seem to be the idea of a role for the history of political thinking, the global perspective, the meaning of context, the relationship between the history of political thought and political theory and, mainly, the concept of scholar’s interest.

**KEYWORDS:** Historiography; History of Historiography; Cambridge School; Political Theory; History of Political Thought.

Alcuni recentissimi “stati dell’arte” della storia del pensiero politico sono ricchi di informazioni preziose e sollevano molte considerazioni. Come spesso accade, però, più che soffermarsi su ciò che è condiviso, forse può essere più proficuo ragionare in dialogo con gli autori su come la loro riflessione sorprenda o lasci perplessi. Per evitare inconsapevoli tendenze ideologiche, le principali questioni da discutere sembrano essere l’idea di un ruolo della storia del pensiero politico, la prospettiva globale, il significato del contesto, il rapporto tra storia del pensiero politico e teoria politica e, soprattutto, il concetto di interesse dello studioso.

**PAROLE CHIAVE:** Storiografia; Storia della storiografia; Scuola di Cambridge; Teoria politica; Storia del pensiero politico.

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It is beneficial from time to time to make a report on the “state of the field”, summarizing where we come from and indicating where we go in order to clarify our actions over time. The awareness this brings is certainly fruitful in scientific reflection, although, generally, it is challenging and risky to take on a synthesis of this kind in any field of interest. For all these reasons, we can only be grateful to the young scholars Danielle Charette and Max Skjönsberg for having worked together and published a study on the “state of the field” of the history of political thought<sup>1</sup>. Recently, even Richard Whatmore has published an overview of the discipline, which, more precisely, is not “a very short introduction” to the history of political thought<sup>2</sup>, but an introduction to the way in which it has been, is and could be studied. These two works are rich in valuable information and raise many considerations. As often happens, though, rather than dwelling on what is shared, perhaps it could be more fruitful to reason in dialogue with the authors on how their reflection surprises or perplexes. Their intent was undoubtedly descriptive, but they also expressed it through quick judgements and to focus on one aspect rather than another implies at least an assessment of its relevance. In order to avoid unconscious ideological trends, the main issues to debate seem to be the idea of a role for the history of political thinking, the global perspective, the meaning of context, the relationship between the history of political thought and political theory and, mainly, the concept of scholar’s interest.

## 1. The Role

The first problematic question concerns a theme also present in John Dunn’s 2018 essay on the need for a global history of political thought<sup>3</sup>. Dunn and Charette with Skjönsberg – who represent the convergence of generations that are very far apart – all seem to hope for a shared role and a direction to follow together. The first author explicitly refers to «the role I am invoking for the history of human political thinking across the globe»<sup>4</sup>. This role, though, seems an invitation to conformity. Furthermore, it seems to imply an anachronistic vision of the past. According to Dunn, «if only we can learn to write» a global history of political thought, it «can and will carry a powerful redemptive charge, that it will on balance aid us in the formidable task of living unmurderously together on an ever more bewildering

\* I wish to thank Janet Coleman, John Dunn, Peter Ghosh, John Robertson, Quentin Skinner, Richard Whatmore, and Samuel Garrett Zeitlin, for comments on earlier drafts.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. D. CHARETTE – M. SKJÖNSBERG, *State of the Field: The History of Political Thought*, «History», 105, 366/2021, pp. 470–483.

<sup>2</sup> R. WHATMORE, *The History of Political Thought. A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2021.

<sup>3</sup> J. DUNN, *Why We Need a Global History of Political Thought*, in B. KAPOSSY – I. NAKHIMOVSKY – S.A. REINERT – R. WHATMORE (eds), *Markets, Morals, Politics. Jealousy of Trade and the History of Political Thought*, Cambridge, MA; London, Harvard University Press, 2018, pp. 285–309.

<sup>4</sup> J. DUNN, *Why We Need a Global History of Political Thought*, p. 307.



scale»<sup>5</sup>. Dunn's position is wholly summarized by the adjective "redemptive", the use of which seems to be in tune with the more or less recent "cancel culture" movement. Instead, the hint of invitation to conformity derives from invoking a role for "Western academia"<sup>6</sup>. As has already been recently stated, comparing this text with the different contents of Dunn's *The History of Political Theory*<sup>7</sup>, there can be no official academic role for the global history of political thinking or any other scientific activity. They must be left free to manifest themselves according to their nature<sup>8</sup>. The "academic role" should not be a subject in itself and, therefore, not only is it not particularly profitable but even pernicious to look for it. The goals of intellectual work are up to individual scholars because they emanate from their own lives.

For their part, Charette and Skjõnsberg hypothesize that «scholars may find that the history of political thought is well suited to this shift of scope»<sup>9</sup>, referring to a hoped-for international and global perspective, as happened to colleagues in anthropology and post-colonial studies<sup>10</sup>. In this regard, when it is noted that historians of political thought are «latecomers to this international perspective»<sup>11</sup>, it is possible to say that the comparison with scholars of these two fields of research seems somewhat inappropriate. In general terms, the field of post-colonial studies was born to reflect on an international context and criticize the legacy of Western colonialism. In other words, without the global perspective, there is no colonialism and, therefore, there are no post-colonial studies. We have a similar argument for anthropology. In fact, in the modern sense, the discipline was born to know other cultures, even before it attempted to compare them with its own. Therefore, there is no anthropology without the other, which was immediately sought beyond the West in a global context.

The history of political thought is a historical discipline. It studies and feeds the identity dimension of the community to which it belongs, which benefits from the historical reconstruction. As Whatmore wrote, summarizing Pocock's thought, «history shapes identity and multiple identities frame lives accepting of and comprising rival narratives»<sup>12</sup>. It can turn to the other, but it does not have to. This is why until now there has been no need to discuss the global dimension of the research perspective of the history of political thought. The theme of the State's

<sup>5</sup> *Ivi*, p. 306.

<sup>6</sup> *Ivi*, p. 307.

<sup>7</sup> J. DUNN, *Storia delle dottrine politiche*, Milano, Jaca Book, 1992; English edition *The History of Political Theory*, in J. DUNN, *The History of Political Theory and Other Essays*, Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp. 11-38.

<sup>8</sup> D. CADEDU, *John Dunn and the History of Political Theory*, «History of European Ideas», 47, 1/2021, pp. 158-167.

<sup>9</sup> D. CHARETTE - M. SKJÕNSBERG, *State of the Field*, p. 481.

<sup>10</sup> See *ivi*, p. 480.

<sup>11</sup> *Ivi*, pp. 480-481.

<sup>12</sup> R. WHATMORE, *The History of Political Thought*, p. 82.

sovereignty seems neither intellectually prevalent in the history of political thought nor relevant to the point of explaining this so-called neglect<sup>13</sup>, even if it lends itself well to the “word game” because it helps to set the idea of national State in opposition to the international or global dimension. In other words, there is no need for methodological or prospective revolutions to broaden the context to a global rather than European or national dimension if the research’s object is, for example, to reconstruct a circulation of ideas worldwide, which is not just a fascinating fantasy, but an actual historical manifestation<sup>14</sup>. Charette and Skjõnsberg say that «globalization has upended “parochial” methods, and the historian of political thought cannot afford to ignore the “global context” in which they work»<sup>15</sup>. Obviously, though, a global approach to the history of political thought is entirely useless and out of place if we must observe a phenomenon that has not been global and that, therefore, risks only receiving an interpretation generated by the shadow of today’s global<sup>16</sup>. Instead, one should be careful of the danger that Whatmore pointed out: «one danger in current trends to moralize history, sometimes by taking what is termed a “global” standpoint, is that the same kinds of utopian and teleological history are replaced just as the exponent of the new histories believe they are doing something different»<sup>17</sup>.

In general, it seems that Charette and Skjõnsberg, with their mainly descriptive intent, are seeking or hoping for a common direction towards which the studies of historians of political thought can turn. Relatedly, Whatmore seems to indicate what historians of political thought, when they wish to define themselves as such, should or should not do, in harmony with what – we will see – cannot be anything other than a personal vision of this field of study in its past, present, and possible future. However, the research boundaries do not need to be defined in advance and in the abstract by some common practice or rule. They can only depend on the researcher’s interest and the heuristic purpose of the study itself. The method and boundaries of research must adapt to the research, identified by each scholar in his or her freedom in the pursuit of knowledge, in dialogue with the broader community (not only academic) which may include various alleged “schools” of thought<sup>18</sup>.

<sup>13</sup> See D. CHARETTE – M. SKJÕNSBERG, *State of the Field*, p. 481.

<sup>14</sup> See, for instance, D. ARMITAGE, *The Declaration of Independence. A Global History*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2007.

<sup>15</sup> D. CHARETTE – M. SKJÕNSBERG, *State of the Field*, p. 480.

<sup>16</sup> I thus agree with J.G.A. POCKOCK, *On the Unglobality of Contexts: Cambridge Methods and the History of Political Thought*, «Global Intellectual History», 4, 1/2019, pp. 1-14. See also D. BELL, *Making and Taking Worlds*, in S. MOYN – A. SARTORI (eds), *Global Intellectual History*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2013, pp. 254-279.

<sup>17</sup> R. WHATMORE, *The History of Political Thought*, p. 111.

<sup>18</sup> In addition to the so-called “Cambridge School”, Charette and Skjõnsberg recall the “Sussex School”, “Harvard School”, and “Berkeley School”, which, however, seem to be even less of a “school” than that of Cambridge (D. CHARETTE – M. SKJÕNSBERG, *State of the Field*, pp. 475-476). In this regard see the interesting considerations of R. BOURKE, *Revising the Cambridge School: Republicanism Revisited*, «Political Theory», 46, 3/2017, pp. 467-477.



## 2. The West

Considering all this attention to a global history of political thought, it is then curious that, above all in Charette and Skjönsberg's article, it is mostly only the culture of Anglo-Saxon countries that is mentioned in the consideration of Western culture. There is reference to a kind of duty for global history but, paradoxically, only Anglophone historiography is considered, with the United States of America and the United Kingdom in the first place. Then we ask ourselves: the Italians, the French, the Germans, the Spaniards – to indicate four other different cultural areas – where are they?

It seems that before the Cambridge School nothing was done about contextualization. Even in the other “state of the field”, Whatmore states:

The history of political thought as an academic discipline [...] emerged in the 1960s as a rebellion against what might be termed here and villain studies. Historians of political thought were critical of “presentism”, the reading into the past of contemporary debates on the assumption that the same questions were being studied over and over through history<sup>19</sup>.

Let us take, for example, the thought of Niccolò Machiavelli. Before Quentin Skinner studied it in an enlightening way, other authors analyzed it, inspired by historicist thought, such as Federico Chabod or Gennaro Sasso. They were neither analytical philosophers nor empiricists worshipping the cult of facts' objectivity, nor Lovejoyans, Straussians, or Marxists<sup>20</sup>. We could mention many other Italian, German, French and Spanish names, only to limit the field to this part of European culture. With its great merits<sup>21</sup>, the “Cambridge school” was preceded in matters of contextualization by certain historicism, which for instance, primarily through Benedetto Croce, influenced Robin Collingwood. The latter partially inspired Quentin Skinner, as he mentioned<sup>22</sup>. As it has been said,

the history of ideas was not reinvented singly and heroically in Cambridge, England, c. 1965; nor even in Cambridge and Sussex conjointly. It took place across a considerable timespan, in a wide variety of centers, across a variety of branches of study, and along varying routes within the various cultures of Western Europe and North America<sup>23</sup>.

<sup>19</sup> R. WHATMORE, *The History of Political Thought*, p. 15.

<sup>20</sup> See F. CHABOD, *Scritti su Machiavelli*, Torino, Einaudi, 1964 and F. CHABOD, *Machiavelli and the Renaissance*, trans. D. Moore, with an introduction by A. Passerin d'Entrèves, London, Bowes and Bowes, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1958; and G. SASSO, *Niccolò Machiavelli. Storia del suo pensiero politico*, Napoli, Istituto italiano per gli studi storici, 1958. For an overview, see at least A. D'ORSI, *One Hundred Years of the History of Political Thought in Italy*, in D. CASTIGLIONE - I. HAMPSHER-MONK (eds), *The History of Political Thought in National Context*, Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 2001, pp. 80-106; and, regarding not just the Italian context, R. GHERARDI - S. TESTONI BINETTI (eds), *La storia delle dottrine politiche e le riviste: 1950-2008*, Soveria Mannelli, Rubbettino, 2008.

<sup>21</sup> See A. BRETT, *Between History, Politics and Law. History of Political Thought and History of International Law*, in A. BRETT - M. DONALDSON - M. KOSKENNIEMI (eds), *History, Politics, Law. Thinking Through the International*, Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 2021, pp. 19-48.

<sup>22</sup> Q. SKINNER, *The Rise of, Challenge to and Prospect for a Collingwoodian Approach to the History of Political Thought*, in D. CASTIGLIONE - I. HAMPSHER-MONK (eds), *The History of Political Thought in National Context*, pp. 175-188.

<sup>23</sup> P. GHOSH, *Hugh Trevor-Roper and the History of Ideas*, «History of European Ideas», 37, 4/2011, p. 505.

In short, before thinking about a global history of political thought, it would be necessary to create a “state of the field” at least truly European or, if you prefer, Western.

### 3. The Context

Therefore, we arrive at the problem of the context, which seems to be the great protagonist, so much so that Charette and Skjónsberg’s essay concludes by pointing out how «as (Western) historians move beyond the West, they have even more reason to stay conscious of their own limits, cultural and linguistic when posing questions to the past»<sup>24</sup>. Actually, there seems to be nothing new on the historiographical horizon in this regard. As mentioned above, we could playfully replace “Western” with “English speaking” and “West” with “English world”, and the phrase would retain a meaningful value. Every historian who moves towards other linguistic and cultural contexts must know his limitations. However, he must know that he also has advantages, such as observing reality through a perspective which is different from the local one. The foreigner’s gaze is always enlightening, even if the foreigner is a westerner. It seems a quite Western-centered concept to think that Western historians should embrace all the possible perspectives and do everything. Other views are always welcome, possibly from other historians and other cultures<sup>25</sup>. It seems excessive, as Whatmore does, to say that Eurocentrism is «necessarily racist, blinkered, imperialist, and colonialist». Surely, «somehow a “global” perspective needs to be developed that allows us to identify our own prejudices»<sup>26</sup>. The problem is “how?”, given that the individual cannot be “global”, because he or she is born and exists in a determined and precise historical and cultural context, defined by judgements and bias. The individual can use a global perspective as a point of arrival, not as a place of departure. Otherwise, it means that everybody is sharing the same bias, globally spread by some dominant ideology. What can help the understanding of the global context is the dialogue among scholars with different cultural perspectives. Certainly, as Whatmore writes, «perspectives are of course influenced by being male, white, and living in particular historical circumstances»<sup>27</sup>. However, all these possible perspectives are not necessarily influenced in the same way and therefore none of them can be explained, without doubts, with references to those historical circumstances.

As for the context, if we are talking about the history of political thought, and therefore of “history”, which has a precise and fairly universal meaning, it is clear that we need the context if we want to understand everything in that context. Of

<sup>24</sup> D. CHARETTE - M. SKJÖNSBERG, *State of the Field*, p. 483.

<sup>25</sup> See also M. CERETTA, *La storia del pensiero politico fra “world history” e “global history”: presupposti, novità, problemi*, «Il Pensiero Politico», 53, 1/2020, pp. 113-123.

<sup>26</sup> R. WHATMORE, *The History of Political Thought*, p. 114.

<sup>27</sup> *Ivi*, p. 112.



course, the problem is to agree on the meaning of context. They might think that the context is only the totality of the pages of the book that contain the sentence they are analyzing, or they might think that it is the world because, to understand the content of the message, one or the other is considered relevant by the scholar<sup>28</sup>.

Moreover, the usual game in the social sciences to claim the necessity of the plural concerning some concepts – in our particular case speaking of “contexts” – to show that we have to deal with complex phenomena is rather futile. It is useless to reveal that the context would not be just one, nor above all intellectual, but also religious, economic, social, and so on, because it is obvious. Inter-contextuality is encouraged as if it were an update of the usual invitation to inter-disciplinarity. It is evident that when we speak of context, we refer to a human activity, located in a more or less vast community, with diverse expressions of the interactions that manifest within it. The fact of focusing on a particular context implies, consciously or not, the inevitable consideration of the other contexts, which are always related to each other and influence each other. We focus on one context in particular for two main reasons. On the one hand, it is not within the human ability to consider and analyze all contexts, and an invitation in this direction is a mere statement of intellectual abstraction<sup>29</sup>. On the other hand, the context which one focuses on will have been chosen through the legitimate interest of the scholar, who cannot claim to satisfy every reader who seeks, in that specific study, content in keeping with their personal interest. It is simply not possible to do everything. It is not even desirable to attempt to do so if this invitation to research hides, again, the unconscious conviction that the facts are objective and that we must reveal them as much as possible. It is essential to focus on what one perceives as most important. The risk is to speak in the abstract of what is not done and what should be done, even if we cannot reasonably do it.

#### 4. Interest and the Canon

This theme of interest seems to be the significant absentee in both “state of the field” presented by Charette and Skjönsberg and by Whatmore. As John Dunn stated, in the 1992 essay mentioned above, the different methods used to study the history of political theory – he pointed out that the main ones were philosophical-analytical, Marxist and historical-contextualist – reflect sharp divergences in taste and interest to varying degrees<sup>30</sup>. Quentin Skinner expressed the same idea<sup>31</sup>.

<sup>28</sup> See in this regard what has been observed by S. MOYN, *History and Theory: A Difficult Reunion*, «Theory & Event», 19, 1/2016.

<sup>29</sup> See what is indicated by D. CHARETTE – M. SKJÖNSBERG, *State of the Field*, p. 476.

<sup>30</sup> J. DUNN, *The History of Political Theory and Other Essays*, p. 19.

<sup>31</sup> Q. SKINNER, *A Reply to my Critics*, in J. TULLY (ed), *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and his Critics*, Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 1988, pp. 231-288.

Therefore, whether or not to contextualize in a certain way depends on the scholar's heuristic purpose. In general, there is absolutely no right or wrong approach: how correct it is concerns the interest it arouses and what one wants to understand.

It is easier to understand the historical formation of the canon of authors and works of the history of political thought if we consider the theme of interest and its cultural sharing. Starting from this interest, volatile as all things human, in a context that is by nature historical and therefore dynamic (with power relationships obviously affecting the shape of a canon), it is then possible that non-Western or female personalities who engaged in political reflections can progressively enter the canon or take the place of others. As Whatmore wrote, «this is a question now shaping the field, but it is not a new one. All societies formulate stories about where they come from. Authors come into fashion and go out of fashion, often for ad hoc reasons»<sup>32</sup>. It is not convincing to hope that we must go in this direction, with «the welcome effect of expanding our political canon»<sup>33</sup>. Whatmore has even said that «historians of political thought now reject the notion of canonical figures in political thought»<sup>34</sup>. Does this imply - we should ask - that those who do not reject it are not (or not enough) historians of political thought? About this he added: «Those whose views before would have been deemed unworthy of recovery are now valued not only for shedding light on “classic” texts but also for contributing to contemporary political discourses that historians want to reconstruct in order to make the past meaningful»<sup>35</sup>. With time, the general attention has become wider towards several personalities of the past (even to avoid endlessly repeating the same observations on the same works). However, this does not seem to necessarily imply the abjuration of “canon”. It is always possible to find some authors and works perceived by most scholars as more complex and more interesting than others. With the egalitarian perspective that Whatmore looks for, we risk entering that famous night in which all the cows are black. In addition, he tends not only to suggest a sort of necessary equipollence of thoughts manifested by all human beings, but even a sort of equivalence of scope between a thought expressed through complex sentences and whatever human creativity manifestation: «Historians of political thought seek to recover the problems and crises communities faced and argued about by looking at what was said, either directly in written form or through significant artefacts from surviving art and buildings to objects of everyday life»<sup>36</sup>. On one hand, it seems too much categorizing to say what historians of political thought do or should do, because the risk is to seem willing to certify the quality. On the other hand, with this broad task, defining historians does not make sense anymore, seeing as they all deal

<sup>32</sup> R. WHATMORE, *The History of Political Thought*, p. 116.

<sup>33</sup> D. CHARETTE - M. SKJÖNSBERG, *State of the Field*, p. 479.

<sup>34</sup> R. WHATMORE, *The History of Political Thought*, p. 20.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>36</sup> R. WHATMORE, *The History of Political Thought*, p. 19.



with thought, economics, society, emotions, architecture, institutions, and so on. To suggest that it is possible to analyse every human action as political thought's expression – because all the human beings live politically and think – is not conceivable. Certainly, it is in some ways, just because human life is history and cannot but include all the human-being manifestations. However, the problem is relevance and the specificity in relation with the possible intelligibility of the historical phenomenon under scrutiny. Are all the historians political thought historians?

The “canon” of classics of political thought, as Dunn taught us<sup>37</sup>, is a cognitive resource that, thanks to the comparative method it can employ, either explicitly or implicitly, goes beyond the list of names and works that the scientific community commonly recognizes. It arises from historical needs, that is, cultural needs and free choices. The risk here is that we may generate a kind of cultural conformism. This conformism could force us to go in a specific direction – maybe that egalitarian direction, mentioned earlier, that could lose the difference of complexity – if we do not want to be accused of conservatism or of a retrograde vision. In the future, maybe, one will be able to say about the present situation what Whatmore observed as true for the Marxist view of some decades ago: «One danger for historians of political thought was that in rejecting a Marxist framework of understanding they were identifying themselves as antiquarians, uninterested in turning the history of political thought into a force for social change»<sup>38</sup>. In this regard, we can see in the text of Charette and Skjónsberg a kind of overlap between women who engaged in political reflections being included in the canon and female scholars who contributed to reflections on the manifestation of political thought. In an essay on the state of a disciplinary field, it makes no sense to note that «the discipline is thankfully not as male-dominated as before»<sup>39</sup>. This fact can be considered positive regarding an analysis of society because it can imply greater possibilities for all and greater equality in training and professional activity. However, «thankfully» is irrelevant unless someone can distinguish whether a man or a woman wrote a study of history of political thought without reading the writer's name.

After emphasized that female historians are increasing, Richard Whatmore presents as a problem the fact that canonical texts of the history of political thought are still mainly written by men: «dead white male philosophers»<sup>40</sup>. With a single statement, one could say that, unfortunately, history went this way. We should not “vindicate”<sup>41</sup> the history telling ourselves a different story. In addition, speaking of dead people should not surprise us as we are reasoning about history. Whatmore's

<sup>37</sup> J. DUNN, *The History of Political Theory and Other Essays*, pp. 11–38.

<sup>38</sup> R. WHATMORE, *The History of Political Thought*, p. 45.

<sup>39</sup> D. CHARETTE – M. SKJÓNSBERG, *State of the Field*, p. 476.

<sup>40</sup> R. WHATMORE, *The History of Political Thought*, p. 112.

<sup>41</sup> D. CHARETTE – M. SKJÓNSBERG, *State of the Field*, p. 478; R. WHATMORE, *The History of Political Thought*, p. 15.

egalitarian perspective tends to betray the historical-contextualist approach he seems to refer to. He says: «The criticism remains that too many male philosophers of European origin are still particularly venerated within a list of political theorists deemed most relevant»<sup>42</sup>. If one wants to understand the past, one undoubtedly must be open to study every human action's manifestation. But, once again, the suggested perspective's risk is tendentially to cancel, for political reasons, the different importance and maybe even the different complexity that authors expressed in their own time<sup>43</sup>.

As for the canon, it is simultaneously interesting and dangerous to entertain the theme of its «decolonization»<sup>44</sup>. As mentioned above, the canon reflects a not pre-determined net of interests and cultural-historical dynamics. The operation of decolonisation seems to imply the creation of an abstract list of authors and works that should interest us but do not interest us enough for some ideological reason. On the contrary, it is good to study what we are interested in, not what we should study to align ourselves with a current cultural trend. Whatmore underlines that «the western male canon has been the touchstone for the subject and remains dominant, but it is being challenged»<sup>45</sup> and that Eurocentrism is «now being questioned and corrected with an unparalleled increase in studies of non-Western traditions of thought in addition to work concerned with political thought in relatively neglected Eastern Europe»<sup>46</sup>. He does not remind us, though, how historiography is Eurocentric also because it was developed and, in the way we know it, even invented in Europe. Europeans were interested in reflecting on their own identity, progressively in relation with the peoples they were getting in touch with for commercial or conquest reasons. However, we should also remember that these «studies of non-Western traditions of thought» express themselves through a canonical shape which is that of European historiography. One can agree with the explicit criticism of Charette and Skjönsberg (which seems in contradiction, therefore, with the general content of their essay) about the idea that «one might conclude from these suggestions that historians of political thought should concentrate their efforts on good arguments»<sup>47</sup>. The verb “should” seems to imply a role for the discipline or a correct direction of the studies of the academic community, renouncing the need to respect the individual freedom of choice and interest. Instead, another is the “should” that must attract attention. As John Pocock wrote, «the moment seems to have come at which we should ask how “global history” is to be other than an ideological tool of globalization»<sup>48</sup>.

<sup>42</sup> R. WHATMORE, *The History of Political Thought*, p. 113.

<sup>43</sup> See *ivi*, pp. 22-3.

<sup>44</sup> See D. CHARETTE - M. SKJÖNSBERG, *State of the Field*, pp. 476-477.

<sup>45</sup> R. WHATMORE, *The History of Political Thought*, p. 24.

<sup>46</sup> *Ivi*, p. 25.

<sup>47</sup> D. CHARETTE - M. SKJÖNSBERG, *State of the Field*, p. 477.

<sup>48</sup> J.G.A. POCOCK, *On the Unglobality of Contexts*, p. 7.



## 5. History and Political Theory

A further theme that pervades the two panoramic essays is the relationship between history of political thought and political theory. In this regard, we can hardly say that the boundary between the two intellectual needs is “increasingly porous” for the simple reason that it has always been constitutively “porous”. It is not only today that the history of political thought has the capacity to be “immediately political”, as John Dunn stated<sup>49</sup>. Historiography’s history has always been “immediately political” because it contributes to changing the polity of that human community that benefits directly or indirectly from the reconstructed historical narrative. The polity corresponds to the identity of that specific community and, therefore, generates inevitable repercussions, direct or indirect, aware or unconscious, on politics, and the policies that that same community comes to issue. To read that «more historians of political thought now admit that academic history has a role to play in the broader civic process»<sup>50</sup> can only cheer the reader. At the same time, it also arouses wonder, considering that historiography has always played this cultural function within all societies<sup>51</sup>.

Regarding this relationship between history of political thought and political theory, it does not seem convincing to argue that the leading scholars of contextualist method of the late 1960s have turned their attention to political theory “partly in response”<sup>52</sup> to the criticism that the historical contextualism prevented the consideration of the political in its philosophical and perennial truth. Here too, we are helped by considering the scholar’s interest in a particular moment of their life. Furthermore, perhaps it helps us even more, depending on the case, to recognize the same perennial porosity of the relationship between history of political thought and political theory to which reference was earlier made in this article. Political theory, more or less defined or systematized, necessarily belonging to a scholar, feeds his or her interest towards some topics of study. Conversely, the study of history fuels the formulation of his or her political theory. Differently from what Charette and Skjönsberg seem to suggest, this is not a novelty of the 21st century but a reality present in the history of historiography (not only in the history of political thought), from Herodotus to Hobsbawm, passing through Livy, Guicciardini and E. H. Carr. The authors state that «political theory needs the history of political thought»<sup>53</sup>. Indeed, equally, the history of political thought needs political theory. It

<sup>49</sup> J. DUNN, *Why We Need a Global History of Political Thought*, p. 299.

<sup>50</sup> D. CHARETTE - M. SKJÖNSBERG, *State of the Field*, p. 480.

<sup>51</sup> See the very recent S. BERGER, *History and Identity: How Historical Theory Shapes Historical Practice*, Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 2022. See also J.G.A. POCOCK, *Political Thought and History: Essays on Theory and Method*, Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 2009.

<sup>52</sup> D. CHARETTE - M. SKJÖNSBERG, *State of the Field*, p. 475.

<sup>53</sup> *Ivi*, p. 482.

is the way this relationship is established - not the naturalness of the relationship itself - that is complex and problematic.