

## John Dunn and the history of political theory

Davide Cadeddu

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## John Dunn and the history of political theory

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### ABSTRACT

In 1992, John Dunn published an essay in Italian (which came out in English only years later) in which he summarized and clarified certain aspects of his historiographical vision concerning the history of political theory. A careful analysis of the text – corroborated by a consideration of later comments as well as general historical-theoretical references – gives us an insight into the lights and shadows of his thought. This reinterpretation reveals the originality of a perspective that examined the meaning of ‘canon’ within the history of political theory, and indicated certain cultural and political aims to be consciously pursued through it. This original thought has recently been consolidated by other considerations on the need for a global history of political thought capable of offering interesting food for thought. Nevertheless, these seem to have emerged from a change of opinion on Dunn’s part, focusing to a greater extent on certain (more or less well-defined) moral duties that should be pursued by scholars of the history of political thought.

### KEYWORDS

History; historiography; political theory; John Dunn; Cambridge School

Almost as if echoing Edward H. Carr’s 1961 University of Cambridge lectures<sup>1</sup>, ‘what is history of political theory?’ is the question that John Dunn wishes to answer in his essay *The History of Political Theory*, originally published in Italian as *Storia delle dottrine politiche* in March of 1992<sup>2</sup>, at the same time as his most famous work dedicated to John Locke<sup>3</sup> was translated, helping to establish his presence in Italian culture.<sup>4</sup>

The text – which merged into *The History of Political Theory and Other Essays*<sup>5</sup> in 1996 – is organized in a simple way, but, partly because of its brevity, is in many ways overly condensed, both in the

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<sup>1</sup>See Edward H. Carr, *What is History? The George Macaulay Trevelyan Lectures Delivered in the University of Cambridge January–March 1961*, with an introduction by Richard J. Evans (London: Penguin Books, 2018).

<sup>2</sup>John Dunn, *Storia delle dottrine politiche*, It. tr. by Teresita Vanotti, Milano, Jaca Book, 1992 (1996<sup>2</sup>); repr. in *Politica. Procluzioni di J. Dunn*, A.M. Hespana, L. Ornaghi, A. Panebianco, J.-C. Thoening, *Vocabolario a cura di L. Ornaghi* (Milano: Jaca Book, 1993), 49–67.

<sup>3</sup>*Il pensiero politico di John Locke* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1992); or. ed. *The Political Thought of John Locke. An Historical Account of the Argument of the Two treatises of Government* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969 (1990<sup>2</sup>)). Some years before Dunn’s work, *Western Political Theory in the Face of the Future* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), had already been translated into Italian as *La teoria politica di fronte al futuro* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1983).

<sup>4</sup>Lastly, see the second edition (2016) of John Dunn’s, *Il mito degli uguali. La lunga storia della democrazia*, prefazione di Gianni Vattimo, con un saggio di Mario Ricciardi (Milano: Egea, 2006) (It. tr. of *Setting the People Free: The Story of Democracy*, London: Atlantic Books, 2005); and John Dunn, ‘Il futuro della democrazia nel nuovo millennio’, *Rivista di Politica*, no. 2 (aprile-giugno 2010): 19–31. In general, the works by John Dunn appeared in Italian are the following: John Dunn, *Pensare la politica* (Roma: Di Renzo, 2002) (original version in Italian, not published in English); *La democrazia. Storia di un’idea politica dal VI secolo a.c. a oggi*, a cura di John Dunn, prefazione di Lorenzo Ornaghi (Venezia: Marsilio, 1995); John Dunn, *Stato nazionale e comunità umana. Possibilità di vita, obblighi e confini delle società* (Milano: Anabasi, 1994). For the other Dunn’s works in Italian see a *Bibliography of the Works of John Dunn*, in *Political Judgement. Essays for John Dunn*, eds. Richard Bourke and Raymond Geuss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 333–43.

<sup>5</sup>John Dunn, *The History of Political Theory and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 11–38.

Italian and the English version.<sup>6</sup> A problematic element in the translation (both in the title of the essay and within the text itself) may be the translation of the plural word ‘dottrine’ (doctrines) with the singular word ‘theory’ as had been the case years earlier in the Italian version of the better known work by George H. Sabine.<sup>7</sup> What is, however, clear in both Dunn’s works, as well in the work of authors close to him in terms of methodological inspiration, is the interchangeable nature of expressions such as ‘political thought’, ‘political philosophy’ and ‘political theory’ overall<sup>8</sup>, to a greater extent than had previously or subsequently been the case in Italy, where, in any case, no coherent solution had been found.<sup>9</sup> In fact, as John Pocock has observed,

the term ‘political theory’ is imprecise; it has been used in a diversity of ways, and the contributors to this *Handbook* are probably not agreed on any single usage. From the standpoint from which this chapter is written, it is observable that ‘political theory’ is often used as if it were interchangeable with ‘political thought’, a term equally inexact. In the first half of the twentieth century, there were written a number of ‘histories of political thought’, or of ‘political theory’, of which the subject-matter and the method were practically indistinguishable. [...] These ‘histories’ of political thought/theory were canonically constructed [...]. Classically – and it should be emphasized, for historical reasons, many of which were good – they began with the invention in fourth-century Athens of what was termed ‘political philosophy’, so that ‘political philosophy’ became a term of equal status (and imprecision) with ‘political thought’ and ‘theory’. A historical grand narrative emerged, in which ‘the history of political thought’, ‘theory’, or ‘philosophy’ moved from Platonic or Aristotelian beginnings through a medieval period in which ‘philosophy’ encountered Christian theology, into one in which this encounter was liquidated and replaced by modes of thought, theory, and philosophy it was agreed to term ‘modern’.<sup>10</sup>

Regardless, then, of a possible nominalist stalemate, the work in question is still intellectually vital, insofar as it offers a clear (and in some ways, original) answer to the dilemma surrounding the relationship between history and action, historiography of political thought and political theorizing. With regards to this, Iain Hampsher-Monk wrote: ‘The tremendous strength of the contextualist case – as a technical philosophical argument – seemed to have been bought at the cost of the contemporary political availability of past political theory or proposition or concepts within it’. He then specifies:

One of the persistent criticisms of the ‘historical revolution’ has been that it detached the history of political thought from the activity of political theorizing, by seeming to fix exclusively limited historical meanings on texts which we had been used to treat as open and available.

<sup>6</sup>The essay was also translated into French and Hungarian. Regarding this essay, however, I cannot agree that ‘Dunn’s prose resists penetration not because it is graceless or clumsy but because it is fractalized; issues repeatedly reformulate themselves down to microscopic levels without terminus’ (Loren Lomasky, ‘John Dunn, *The History of Political Theory and Other Essays*’, *Constitutional Political Economy*, 9, no. 1 (March 1998): 79). Chandran Kukathas – whose opinion on Dunn’s book is offensive – stated in general that ‘Dunn’s prose is far from accessible’ (Dunn, John. *The History of Political Theory and Other Essays*, *Ethics* (January 1998): 432).

<sup>7</sup>George H. Sabine, *A History of Political Theory* (New York: Henry Holt, 1937); It. tr. *Storia delle dottrine politiche* [edited by Umberto Campagnolo] (Milano: Edizioni di Comunità, 1953).

<sup>8</sup>Theory in History. Problems of Context and Narrative’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Theory*, eds. John S. Dryzek, Bonnie Honig, and Anne Phillips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 163–4; reprinted in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Science*, ed. Robert E. Goodin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 102–10.

<sup>9</sup>See Saffo Testoni Binetti, *La stagione dei maestri. Questioni di metodo nella storia delle dottrine politiche* (Roma: Carocci, 2006), 7.

<sup>10</sup>See John G.A. Pocock, ‘The History of Political Thought: A Methodological Enquiry’, in *Philosophy, Politics and Society*, eds. Peter Laslett and W.G. Runciman. Second Series (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1962), 183–202; John Dunn, ‘The Identity of the History of Ideas’, *Philosophy*, 43 (April 1968): 85–104; e Quentin Skinner, ‘Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas’, *History and Theory*, 8, no. 1 (1969): 3–53. To reconstruct the initial interpersonal relations through which these three essays became the founding writings of the so called ‘Cambridge School’, see Richard Whatmore, *Introduction*, in John G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton-Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2016), xii–xxii. See also Samuel James, ‘J.G.A. Pocock and the Idea of the ‘Cambridge School’ in the History of Political Thought’, *History of European Ideas*, 45, no. 1 (2019): 83–98; and John G.A. Pocock, ‘A Response to Samuel James’s ‘J.G.A. Pocock and the Idea of the ‘Cambridge School’ in the History of Political Thought’, *History of European Ideas*, 45, no. 1 (2019): 99–103.

Finally, referring specifically to the writings from the 90s, he adds: 'Recently, however, members of the historical school have been displaying signs of wishing to evade these strictures – if strictures they be'.<sup>11</sup>

After the introductory part of the essay, which sets out the terms of the argument, Dunn's essay takes the form of an objective reflection on the subject matter, the method and the meaning of the historical reconstruction that should characterize the history of political theory. In conclusion, after a chapter dedicated to the questions that might arise and potential answers to them and the methods described, the essay concludes with some final considerations on the potential for a fuller understanding of the contemporary political reality offered by the history of political theory.<sup>12</sup> In 2001, precisely in reference to the essay *The History of Political Theory*, even Quentin Skinner seemed to agree with the view expressed there: 'John Dunn has recently surveyed this movement [at the University of Cambridge], to which he has contributed so notably'.<sup>13</sup>

If, according to Dunn, it is possible to maintain that the intentional or unintentional consequences of political actions are of greater importance than the intentions that generated them in the first place, in order to understand these consequences it follows that understanding the social, economic and political causalities which have in turn produced them is relevant. Inside the internal academic breakdown of the task, enquiring into the causality regarding the function and results of the political practices and institutions has been attributed to the social sciences, while the function of analysing the values, goals and intentions nurturing these practices and institutions belongs to the history of political theory.<sup>14</sup>

Within this view, one of the great merits of the history of political theory is its ability to dispute an academic reductionism which considers political knowledge to be primarily focused around the analysis of tangible empirical causes, while the history of political theory permits in-depth investigation of moral causes. The principle of causality has been considered in many of the history of political thought classics, but, effectively, these are at their most topical and profound in relation to the attention paid to the nature and strength of human values. The goals of the history of political theory, in fact, comprise remembering and demonstrating the profound existing hiatus, in political terms, between facts and ideas, thoughts and actions. What is more, this attests to the persistence of historical values within the following ideologies and political practices, which better demonstrate their evident and instrumental nature. In contrast to the positivist social sciences, the history of political theory enables reasons for the force and fragility of concepts present within various ideologies to be identified through a long term privileged perspective, and the practical and valuable reasons enabling them to be considered. This provides a more thoroughgoing understanding of current politics, revealing the profound discontinuity manifested over time, and gives us an insight into the fact that the themes of the past (as the egalitarian socialist revolution might have seemed in 1992) do not merely disappear, but rather take other forms and content in a near future. For this reason too, the history of political theory ultimately has greater imaginative and creative capacity – both in viewing and projecting into the future – first than the other social sciences and, secondly, than professional politicians and bureaucrats. As Bhikhu Parekh has observed, according to Dunn, the great authors of the past had 'the "cognitive resources" from which we can "wring" a sharper analysis of the important dimension of our world'.<sup>15</sup>

The history of political thought focuses not only on human beings' fickleness, but also on the conditions and meaning of politics. This is why the history of political thought, to Dunn, is inherently incapable of offering knowledge on a par with that of the natural sciences. With this essay, he

<sup>11</sup>Ian Hampsher-Monk, 'The History of Political Thought and the Political History of Thought', in *The History of Political Thought in National Context*, eds. Dario Castiglione and Ian Hampsher-Monk (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 1678.

<sup>12</sup>See J. Dunn, *The History of Political Theory*, §'Understanding politics: values, practices and institutions'.

<sup>13</sup>Quentin Skinner, 'The Rise of, Challenge to and Prospects for a Collingwoodian Approach to the History of Political Thought', in *The History of Political Thought in National Context*, eds. D. Castiglione and I. Hampsher-Monk, *cit.*, p. 176, note 5.

<sup>14</sup>See J. Dunn, *The History of Political Theory*, §'Understanding politics: values, practices and institutions'.

<sup>15</sup>Bhikhu Parekh, 'Theorising Political Theory', *Political Theory*, 27, no. 3, June, 403.

explicitly declares his desire to explain why – despite the efforts of American social scientists and English analytical philosophers – political theory cannot help but be a profoundly historical discipline, at least in the immediate future. This observation seems to attribute something more to the historical dimension than is generally allowed by Bhikhu Parekh: ‘Dunn argues that the history of political theory is integrally related to and even an important part of political theory itself’. The same author generally defines Dunn’s view as: ‘an essentialist view of political theory’, because it must be critical, action oriented, normative, engaged with the world, concerned to identify the possibilities and agents of change, historically based, and so on’.<sup>16</sup>

If, in the light of humankind’s capacity for self-destruction, politics has never been so important, Dunn shows how little its understanding has increased, despite its bond with this great importance. Knowledge of politics is stubbornly historical in approach, because, he argues, it regards a form of activity conditioned by rigid constraints and imprecise information and created by human beings whose abilities and practical sense are limited. Knowledge of politics is not limited to understanding the ends and means of rational action, but rather implies evaluating the present situation and its possible consequences. According to Dunn, the history of political theory contributes to the development of the ability to forecast political actions and goals conforming to an evaluation of past experiences. As he argued in 1990, ‘the purpose of political theory is to diagnose practical predicaments and to show us how best to confront them’. In order to pursue this task, political theory can train us in three different skills:

Firstly, in ascertaining how the social, political and economic setting of our lives now is and in understanding it as it is; secondly, in working through for ourselves how we could coherently and justifiably wish that it to be or become; and thirdly in judging how far, and through what actions, and at what risk, we can realistically hope to move this world as it now stands towards the way we might excusably wish it to be’.<sup>17</sup>

For Dunn, political theory must elicit prudent public choices, by evaluating the circumstances in which decisions are taken. For him, only history, in general, and the history of political thought, in particular, can enable us to acquire the analytical capacity necessary to the pursuit of this end.<sup>18</sup>

The fact that the history of political theory is limited to European or Western experience can make it seem culturally conservative, but Dunn argues that it can be understood in relation to its geographical and historical discontinuity with other traditions of thought and also in relation to its concrete cultural domination. Beyond this, we must remember that political thought has developed continuously and self-consciously at the heart of the Western tradition and has been analyzed through increasingly rigorous and systematic study. Dunn proposes taking up the challenge involved in generating a cosmopolitan history of political theory capable of taking on board the various cultural traditions and their relationships with each other with knowledge, balance and appropriate sensibility. It would, however, seem that he accords little value to the complexity inherent in political theories in different contexts and periods within the Western tradition, as he argues that it is impossible for a single individual to realize a global history of political thought, and observes that nowhere has a think tank managed to gather all the knowledge necessary for this purpose.<sup>19</sup> In contrast to this firmly held belief, an implicit comparison between political categories belonging to different cultural worlds might offer a different hermeneutic perspective (and perhaps a more radical and intense one),

<sup>16</sup>*Ibidem*, 403, 406.

<sup>17</sup>John Dunn, *Interpreting Political Responsibility* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), 193.

<sup>18</sup>See also the considerations expressed by Nicholas J. Rengger, ‘Introduction: Political Theory Agonistes’, in *Political Theory, Modernity and Postmodernity. Beyond Enlightenment and Critique*, ed. Nicholas J. Rengger (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 13–26, and the partially revised essay by Nicholas J. Rengger, ‘Trust, Prudence and History: John Dunn and the Tasks of Political Theory’, *History of Political Thought*, XVI, no. 3 (Autumn 1995): 416–37. On Dunn’s thought, see also Takamaro Hanzawa, ‘The Political Thought of John Dunn and the Cambridge School’, *History of European Ideas*, 19, no. 1–3 (1994): 179–83; and Roy Tseng, ‘Scepticism in Politics: A Dialogue between Michael Oakshott and John Dunn’, *History of Political Thought*, XXXIV, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 143–70. In general, see John Dunn, *Political Obligation in its Historical Context. Essay in Political Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980). For a general view, see John Dunn, *The Cunning of Unreason. Making Sense of Politics* (London: Harper Collins, 2000).

<sup>19</sup>For an attempt in this direction, see James Babb, *A World History of Political Thought* (Cheltenham, UK-Northampton, USA: Edward Elgar, 2018).

even as regards the same categories considered, profoundly bound up as they are with the Western tradition.<sup>20</sup>

A particularly interesting passage is at the end of the introductory chapter, where Dunn considers historical knowledge of political theory not only as a cognitive resource, but as a form of political activity itself (a continuation of civic and even military practice).<sup>21</sup> This observation at least partially confutes Loren Lomasky's comments about the book whose essay *The History of Political Theory* forms part:

Political science, though informed by theory, is at bottom a practical science. So says Aristotle, and James would heartily concur. When want of hope detaches theory from practice the result is a politics with the vitality sucked out. That may be the primary lesson conveyed by this erudite, literate, but ultimately desiccated collection of essays.<sup>22</sup>

Bhikhu Parekh's consideration is different:

for Dunn, political theory is a form of action, not what I might call first-order action of the kind in which citizens and political activists engage but rather an equally important second-order action that illuminates the context of choice and sets the agenda for political practice.<sup>23</sup>

The fact that – according to Dunn – the historiography of political theory is also a political activity which justifies the academic diatribe revolving around diverse contents added little by little – in accordance with the various orientations – to the object, the method and the purpose of this field of knowledge. In this regard – he argues – we must be further warned, because any content might potentially be given to the object, method and meaning of the history of political theory, each of the three elements interacting and influencing the other two.<sup>24</sup>

Regarding the object of the history of political theory, this revolves around a nucleus of works that, selected over the course of time from the convergence of various scholars, have been elevated to the status of 'classics' and constitute a relatively stable 'canon'. This nucleus would appear to be exempt from controversy, but Dunn observes that the groundwork upholding the need for the existence of any ensemble of reference texts can, in any case, be controversial. The solidity of the discipline should be guaranteed regardless of this, as, according to the author, it is in no way neutral but relates to a specific vision of Western values.<sup>25</sup>

If constituting a nucleus of text is a potentially infinite process involving ongoing redefinition of its confines, Dunn maintains that, be that as it may, reconstructing the history of political theory is not devoid of a particular, cumulative intellectual capacity and the potential for a precise response to similarly clear queries. Of the possible questions, he distinguishes four in particular. That regarding the meaning an author expresses with his work can be answered only by attentively analyzing the context framework and the author's original intention: note that that from the first line of the 1969 work, *The Political Thought of John Locke*, the author observed that the validity of his historical interpretation depended on his capacity 'to elucidate why it was that Locke said what he said, wrote what he wrote, and published what he published in "The Two Treaties of Government"'.<sup>26</sup> In the second question (regarding a text's capacity to uncover aspects of the social context within which it was written), Dunn observes that we tend to a symptomatic type of answer (specific to the Marxist approach), which in fact renders the history of political theory unnecessary. The third relevant

<sup>20</sup>It is interesting to recall, among others John Pocock 1964 attempt, 'Ritual, Language, Power: An Essay on the Apparent Political Meanings of Ancient Chinese Philosophy', *Political Science*, 16, no. 1 (1964): 3–31; reprinted in *Politics, Language and Time. Essays on Political Thought and History* (London: Methuen, 1972) (and also Chicago-London: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

<sup>21</sup>See J. Dunn, *The History of Political Theory*, §[Introduction], final part.

<sup>22</sup>L. Lomasky, *John Dunn, The History of Political Theory and Other Essays*, cit., 80.

<sup>23</sup>B. Parekh, *Theorising political theory*, cit., 403.

<sup>24</sup>See J. Dunn, *The History of Political Theory*, §[Introduction], final part.

<sup>25</sup>See J. Dunn, *The History of Political Theory*, §[Introduction], §The subject matter.

<sup>26</sup>J. Dunn, *The Political Thought of John Locke*, cit., 6. More generally, about the period in which Dunn wrote his work on Locke, see Samuel James, 'The "Cambridge School" in the History of Political Thought, 1948–1979' (Thesis (Ph.D.), University of Cambridge, Faculty of History, 2012), chapter 2.

question regards the different meanings accorded to a specific work by those using it, either contemporary to or subsequent to its writing. For Dunn this is a question that is more difficult to answer because of the notable archival work and complex skill required. He shows, in fact, how little work has actually been done on the way reception of a particular text evolves over the course of history.<sup>27</sup> Finally, the fourth question does not regard the past, but the current meaning of a work. This latter question makes sense of the three preceding questions and potentially answers them. This is the starting point for the history of political theory as a university subject.<sup>28</sup> As Stephen L. Esquith noted,

these heuristic questions can help partially untangle the causal links among political, economic, and social institutions and practices and the values that motivate and organize human action across their boundaries. Neither social science nor moral philosophy consistently can make this claim.

The greatest merit of the history of political theory is, according to Dunn, that it avoids a positivist separation of causal analysis and the study of values.<sup>29</sup>

Dunn dwells on three perspectives pertaining to the method that he believes should connote the history of political theory. The first view presents Quentin Skinner's approach, considering the texts historically with the intention of analyzing them as complex human actions which can be understood only if the motivating intentions (conscious or unconscious) are taken in to account. Next, Dunn highlights the Marxist-influenced methodology which sees texts as the historical product of a well determined social context, of which these are perhaps the unconscious expression. Finally, he turns his attention to the interest of the texts *sub specie aeternitatis*, always generating new intellectual stimuli in its readers. As he correctly observes, the three perspectives respond to different and legitimate questions, because some reflect the intellectual interests of those pursuing them.<sup>30</sup>

And yet, it is the first approach that has developed to the greatest extent over recent decades. The intellectual roots of this approach – the author reveals – lie in German historicism and idealism in accordance with the methods used in British post-World War Two historiography.<sup>31</sup> Here, however, Dunn seems to forget the intellectual debt Skinner recognized in Collingwood, in turn profoundly influenced by Benedetto Croce and Italian historicism.<sup>32</sup> Amongst the center-stage players in the historicizing outlook, he mentions Quentin Skinner and John G. A. Pocock, in particular. Pocock comes across more as a historian of political thought and language, than – however little clarified the distinction – a historian of political theory. For Pocock, thought is a characteristic of the human experience and should be understood within the context of the society and times in which it manifests. Skinner, on the other hand, demonstrated a keen sensibility for the political lexicon and those verbal and cultural constraints that permit and condition expression. In Skinner, more than in Pocock, it is author intentionality which is significant to understanding the profound significance of the analyzed work. Both together, however, according to Dunn, have contributed to the development of a historicizing analysis of expression, awareness and political experience in general.<sup>33</sup> As Maurizio Viroli argued, this approach underlines the need to write a history of ideas that is closer to the concrete experience of men and women and more able to stimulate our intellectual imagination in our efforts to understand social and political reality.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>27</sup>In this regard consider the reflection generated by the so-called Constance School, started by Hans Robert Jauss, *Literaturgeschichte als Provokation der Literaturwissenschaft* (Konstanz: Konstanz Universitätsreden, 1967).

<sup>28</sup>See J. Dunn, *The History of Political Theory, §'Questions and answers'*.

<sup>29</sup>Stephen L. Esquith, 'The History of Political Theory and Other Essays. By John Dunn', *The American Political Science Review*, 91, no. 1 (March 1997), 168.

<sup>30</sup>See J. Dunn, *The History of Political Theory, §'Method'*.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibidem*.

<sup>32</sup>See Girolamo Imbruglia, 'John Dunn, Storia delle dottrine politiche', *Rivista Storica Italiana*, CVI, no. 3 (September 1994): 786. On the methodological debate in Italy, see S. Testoni Binetti, *La stagione dei maestri*. On the relationship between Collingwood and the so-called Cambridge School, see Q. Skinner, *The Rise of, Challenge to and Prospects for a Collingwoodian Approach*, 175–88.

<sup>33</sup>See J. Dunn, *The History of Political Theory, §'Method'*.

<sup>34</sup>Maurizio Viroli, "'Revisionisti" e "ortodossi" nella storia delle idee politiche', *Rivista di Filosofia* (aprile 1987): 136. See also Vittor Ivo Comparato, 'Vent'anni di storia del pensiero politico in Italia', *Il pensiero politico*, no. 1, (1987): 15; and Mauro Barberis, 'La storia



If this cultural progression is important, because it has accentuated the importance of language in human action, Dunn identifies one last contribution – generated by authors such as Reinhart Koselleck, Alasdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor and Bernard Williams – in the study of the changing historical concepts. Both the history of the political lexicon as well as the history of political concepts – if capable of a historical approach and a historical enquiry into the vicissitudes of words and concepts – can contribute to the history of political theory, whilst remaining profoundly different.<sup>35</sup>

In relation to the meaning of the history of political theory, John Dunn begins from the assumption that political understanding lacks clearly defined boundaries. The nucleus of great works which have taken their place in the history of political theory canon might thus seem one which precludes a broader understanding of politics, while in reality this actually only constitutes an effective cognitive resource, at the service of the knowledge that is necessarily limited by a similarly limited human being.<sup>36</sup> As Patrick J. Kelly underlined, in agreeing with Dunn's opinion, the history of political thought classics

will not provide us with a solution to complex contemporary issues, but [they] can make us aware of the variety and diversity of the political issues at stake. Knowing our past gives us a better grip on the present, although it does not give us a key to unlocking history as crude Marxists might have thought.<sup>37</sup>

In fact, according to Dunn, political theory – as Parekh observed – ‘needs to be more historical than at present in the sense of being intensely alert both to the unique possibilities and crisis of our age and to the cognitive resources of traditional political theory’.<sup>38</sup>

For the same reasons, in 2018 John Dunn claimed that there is currently a general need for a global history of political thought, although there is no realistic possibility that this will come to fruition in the near future and nor is it clear what satisfying this need might involve.<sup>39</sup> The purpose is always the same: enhancing political judgment, clarifying what politics means today in practice, sharpening awareness of personal involvement in politics and evaluating the consequent personal actions. This need is only partly academic: those (not indifferent to the future) interested in the history of political thought perceive radical changes in the subject matter – the growing intensity of practical and unusual interaction between people in the world – and want to understand it. But, above all, the need arises from a directly political and general aspect linked to where the most important threats to people's security come from. According to Dunn, the threat sources are threefold: the problem of social inequality related to the dynamics of capitalism; issues relating to the environmental challenges; and the danger deriving from religious or civilizational differences within and between human populations.<sup>40</sup>

In the face of this, Dunn's radical thesis is that the social sciences give us too few tools to understand what is happening in the current human world, because they are incapable of taking ‘the measure of human comprehension and experience of politics’.<sup>41</sup> The global history of political thought could, in part, be an epistemic cure for an epistemic damage inflicted by academia on itself. After learning to recognize the plurality of human evaluations of the best way to live (and consequent

delle dottrine politiche: un discorso sul metodo’, in *Sette studi sul liberalismo rivoluzionario. Con un'introduzione metodologica e un'appendice bibliografica*, ed. Mauro Barberis (Torino: Giappichelli, 1989), 9–42. For an interpretation of the differences between Quentin Skinner's and Leo Strauss' approach, see Raphaël Mayor, ‘The Cambridge School and Leo Strauss: Texts and Context of American Political Science’, *Political Research Quarterly*, 58, no. 3 (September 2005): 477–85. In general, see also Julien Vincent, ‘Concepts et contextes de l'histoire intellectuelle britannique: l'«École de Cambridge» à l'épreuve’, *Revue d'Histoire Moderne et Contemporaine*, 50–2 (avril-juin 2003): 187–207.

<sup>35</sup> See J. Dunn, *The History of Political Theory, § Method*.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>37</sup> Patrick J. Kelly, ‘The History of Political Theory and Other Essays. John Dunn’, *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, 30, no. 2 (June 1997), 415.

<sup>38</sup> B. Parekh, *Theorising Political Theory*, cit., 404.

<sup>39</sup> John Dunn, ‘Why We Need a Global History of Political Thought’, in *Markets, Morals, Politics. Jealousy of Trade and the History of Political Thought*, eds. Béla Kapossy, Isaac Nakhimovsky, Sophus A. Reinert, Richard Whatmore (Cambridge, MA–London, England: Harvard University Press, 2018), 285–309.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibidem*, 290.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibidem*, 294.

practical predicaments), it might, on the strength of this, be possible to compare and understand the point at which they converge by knowing the facts and the reasons behind the political processes which have generated them thus far. The global history of political thinking might focus on elements capable of generating conflict, considering how the existing historiographies of the various world communities might be of help as the way in which each community sees its formation and relationships with other communities over time.<sup>42</sup>

To this purpose, Dunn underlines the need for a sort of new dialogue between the global history of political thinking and analytical political philosophy, and the need for a new history of political thought focused on general human interactions, overcoming past national traditions and the habit of prioritizing attention on certain texts and their fate.<sup>43</sup> All this does not presuppose the global history of political thinking as a way in which we can develop peace and coexistence, but it seems a useful source of practical insight with which to learn how far we can trust one other.<sup>44</sup>

In relation to the essay published in 1992, Dunn's position clearly changed. On one hand, John Pocock had replied, noting 'the unglobality of contexts' and stressing the risk that the global discourse might turn into a sort of intellectual 'ideology'.<sup>45</sup> On the other, it might be added that Dunn rethought even the role played by the historical text 'canon': 'What that history most requires', he stated, 'is not a scholastic history of texts or intellectual genres and their fate over a time and space but a history of the interactive fates of humans themselves'.<sup>46</sup> This probably also explains why he no longer uses the expression 'political theory' and instead prefers 'political thought' and 'political thinking', arguing that historians of political thought 'have privileged insistently in their vision of it a succession of elaborate texts, all of which in one way or another claimed or asserted a degree of cultural, social, or political authority'. In Dunn's new vision there is no relevant difference between Quentin Skinner, John Pocock and Leo Strauss: 'They have prioritized texts over life and have treated texts predominantly, and all but inevitably, not as a record of life but as a site of presumptive authority over it'.<sup>47</sup>

His need to put the role of the history of political thought 'more frankly' to himself – he says – has helped him to identify the task that had, in any case, shaped his work 'for nearly half a century' and that he had 'so far failed to undertake and now certainly must'.<sup>48</sup> The new role invoked by Dunn for the history of political thinking across the globe does not, despite his fears, seem 'stupefyingly arrogant', 'just alarmingly unsophisticated', or 'helplessly naïve'.<sup>49</sup> On the contrary, his desire to elevate the task of the history of political thought to a role in intercultural dialogue and world peace seems to have narrowed it down to a greater extent than in the past. As Samuel James wrote, considering a passage from John Dunn's book on John Locke,

the romantic conviction that it was a moral duty (as well as a counsel of prudence) at least to attempt to understand other people was at the core not only of Dunn's early historical work, but also of the central arguments of the career in political theory which followed upon it.<sup>50</sup>

The same 'moral duty' is visible and now more than ever his epistemological arguments are subordinate to his ethical commitment to the point of prompting him to contradict himself.

His assumption that the content and goals of the global history of political thinking are not easy to define appears paradoxical, despite their being clearly indicated. Would it be possible to be more precise, without describing what the global history of political thought's future should or might be in

<sup>42</sup>*Ibidem*, 299.

<sup>43</sup>*Ibidem*, 302–3.

<sup>44</sup>*Ibidem*, 305.

<sup>45</sup>John G.A. Pocock, 'On the Unglobality of Contexts: Cambridge Methods and the History of Political Thought', *Global Intellectual History*, 4, no. 1 (2019): 1–14.

<sup>46</sup>John Dunn, *Why We Need a Global History of Political Thought*, 302.

<sup>47</sup>*Ibidem*, 303.

<sup>48</sup>*Ibidem*, 307–8.

<sup>49</sup>*Ibidem*, 307.

<sup>50</sup>See Samuel James, *The "Cambridge School" in the History of Political Thought*, 180.

utopian terms? Even in this specific case, the globality discourse risks prompting a uniformity that is far removed from real life with its texts and contexts. One can agree with John Dunn that the main current political need is to understand politics as a global process, but the goals of intellectual work are up to individual scholars because they emanate from their own lives. There can be no official academic role for the global history of political thinking.

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