

How to Do the History of International Thought?

Abstract

This chapter discusses how key questions in the practice of intellectual history tie in with the preoccupations of international relations scholars. It begins by discussing the mainstream, largely ahistorical, early 20th century approach to intellectual history, nowadays most notably associated with the work of Lovejoy. As well as the similarities of this viewpoint with the conventional notion of conceptualizing international thought in terms of timeless patterns of thought, as practiced by for example the classical English school. It then lays out Skinner's 1969 contextualist challenge to the notion of political thought as a timeless conversation across the ages as well as how a new historicist sensibility has been applied to the study of international thought. The following section evaluates the traction of critiques of contextualism within the contemporary literature on international thought with a focus on the role of ideas in political practice. The chapter concludes with a brief consideration of whether there is any point in doing intellectual history. The challenge is, to steal a phrase from Nietzsche, whether historians of international thought are doomed to be either antiquarians or gravediggers.

Before considering 'how to do the history of international thought?' we need to briefly discuss 'what is international thought?' to paraphrase Martin Wight's term. Wight contrasted political theory, which concerns itself with the organisation of domestic relations within a state, with international theory whose subject matter consists of speculation on how relations between states are ordered (Wight, 1966). It is useful to note that this includes both analysis of actually existing relations between states as well as notions of how international relations ought to be organized. The idea of international relations as, at least primarily, inter-state relations is of course the conventional viewpoint among IR scholars (Bull, 1977; Wendt, 1999).

There exist at least two possible alternative visions to the usual state-centric viewpoint. One emphasises the centrality, as well as the relative novelty, of ideas concerning the ordering of 'the global' (Hurrell, 2007). Though humans have of course imagined geographically limited spheres of experience and knowledge as their world for a very long time -Greek and Roman notions of the *oikoumene* / *orbis terrarum* provide a Eurocentric illustration of this point- there is an important shift after 1500 when voyages of discovery made it possible for, at first Europeans, to begin speculating about the global on the basis of increasing and relatively accurate knowledge about our world as a

whole that included the Americas. It has been argued that further turning points in conceptualising 'the global' followed around 1860 and 1970 due to technological shifts (Bell, 2013).

A second viewpoint seeks to explicitly question the state-centric take by highlighting the novelty and specificity of a world divided into sovereign states. If the subject matter of IR is limited to the study of interstate relations then that leaves out most of history as empires and other hierarchical structures have played a predominant role in ordering relations between different human communities. This viewpoint thus seeks to broaden the subject matter of international thought to ideas relating to ordering relations between different political communities of which the modern sovereign state is just one recent and specific type (Keene, 2005). Thinking about the changing ways in which humans have imagined the nature and limits of a political community allows us to question the usual fairly rigid distinction between doing political or international thought (Linklater, 1998; Brett, 2011).

I will follow this second viewpoint on what international thought is for the purposes of the chapter, as this broader definition allows me to illustrate key questions in how to do intellectual history through a focus on the evolution of that most reified of notions, the modern sovereign state. I will also subscribe to the semantic shift from 'theory' to 'thought' among students of political ideas. The point of this move is to emphasize that most political theorizing is a mundane and practical activity. It is not exclusively practiced in the ivory tower and is also not necessarily particularly explicit or sophisticated (Freedman, 2004). All societies, including the 'international' one, have contested ideas on how they are ordered.

A timeless discussion

An influential strand of the early 20th century practice of intellectual history was somewhat ironically distinguished by its relative ahistoricism. These writers, for whom the term textualists may serve as a useful label, primarily approached intellectual history as a timeless discussion organised around enduring questions that human beings had talked about for over two millennia. This approach is nowadays most famously associated with the American philosopher Arthur Lovejoy, who founded the *Journal of the History of Ideas* in 1940 (Burrow, 2007; Skinner, 1969). For textualists the main focus lies in close readings of the works of pre-eminent past thinkers whose thought is perceived as relevant for our contemporary world as they were in effect discussing the same timeless issues that we confront today. This was a history from peak to peak. There is no point in studying the obscure forgotten writings of second-rate intellectuals when one can learn from canonical masters such as Plato and Aquinas. In terms of political ideas the textualist vision entailed imagining a relatively coherent and self-conscious European tradition of political theory that centred on the problematic of the political community and stretched from the ancient Greek city-state to the nation state in contemporary Europe and its North American offshoot. This type of history of political thought was centred in the United States and usually practiced in political science (or philosophy) departments rather than history faculties. Before concluding this short sketch, it is useful to note that works by writers such as Lovejoy do at times include not inconsiderable attention to the historical milieu of political ideas (Grafton, 2006; McMahon, 2014). Thus, though the notion of textualism does not do complete justice to early 20th century scholars, it arguably captures an important dimension of their preoccupations and serves as a useful ideal type of how to do intellectual history.

The textualist vision of political theory as an ageless lunchtime discussion at a celestial gentlemen's club frequented by European great thinkers is relevant for IR scholars as it bears considerable similarities to the conventional approach to intellectual history as practiced within the discipline. As the problematic of the international has been conceptualised as more or less timeless, it follows that one can reconstruct an equally ageless and relevant tradition of thinking about the international. If the international is indeed a 'realm of recurrence and repetition', in Wight's words (1966, 26), this then makes say Thucydides immediately relevant for contemporary (or Cold War era) concerns. There is however a significant contrast with political theory in that IR scholars have tended to more explicitly subdivide international theory into timeless alternative visions of the international, which are then contrasted and studied comparatively (Bartelson, 1996; Schmidt, 2002). This has been done most explicitly in the context of the classical English school, on which I will focus due to its role as an important precursor to the historical turn in IR.

For Wight international theory could be organised into three analytical traditions: realism, rationalism and revolutionarism (Wight, 1991). These were to a large extent reproduced by Hedley Bull's trichotomy of the Hobbesian, Grotian and Kantian traditions (Bull, 1977). Wight viewed these ideal types as useful abstractions that allowed scholars to make sense of a multitude of bygone international thought through noting similarities as well as shifts in arguments made across wide temporal distances. Thus, Wight can in his famous essay outlining the three traditions for example bring to the reader's attention the resemblances between radical arguments made by various religious fanatics in early modern Europe, French Jacobins as well as latter-day Bolsheviks. It is useful to emphasise that these analytical traditions primarily served the role of ideal types of thinking about the international. Wight for example notes in the context of revolutionary thought that it is not always clear that the traditions are continuous and self-conscious historical ones. He also shows awareness of the analytical limitations of the toolkit. The rationalist tradition is described as the broad middle road of European thought that at times seems so heterogenous as to potentially lose its usefulness as a concept. It is also noted that particular thinkers are also often complex and not easily pigeon holed into a particular strand of thought, as with the possible intellectual fog surrounding Hegel's viewpoints. Despite of these caveats, it is clear that the notion of the existence of relatively unchanging transtemporal patterns of thought has played an important role in how IR scholars have traditionally viewed the exercise of intellectual history. It is thus worthwhile to now consider an influential critique of the conventional viewpoint on intellectual history.

A contextual turn

Quentin Skinner wrote perhaps the most famous essay on method in intellectual history in 1969. The basic point was that in order to understand a text such as *Leviathan* or *The Prince* one needs to reconstruct why its author wrote it. In order to do this the scholar needs to uncover the less meticulously analysed contemporary political debates in which Thomas Hobbes or Niccolo Machiavelli were engaged. This requires going beyond a close reading of the text itself in order to situate it in a particular historical context. For Skinner thinkers are primarily concerned with political questions that were relatively specific to their time rather than participants in a self-conscious transtemporal discussion concerning a limited number of ageless theoretical issues. Skinner explicitly positioned the

essay as an alternative viewpoint to the then influential textualist approach to intellectual history, most notably identified with Lovejoy's writings (Bevir, 2011; Skinner, 1969).

Though Skinner explicitly builds on the then prominent linguistic turn in philosophy in making his two-step argument that in order to truly understand the meaning of a text one needs to discover its author's intention and that this is only possible through uncovering the text's discursive context (for a critique, Bevir 1992), perhaps the key point in understanding Skinner's take is in recognising that it is a historian's historicist critique of intellectual history as it had been practiced by philosophers and political scientists. It was perhaps the specific historical context of the textualist ascendancy in the study of political ideas that made Skinner's explicit historicism resonate. Though it is important to note that there are notable differences in emphasis among the scholars educated as historians in Cambridge conceptualised as an eponymous school -as an illustration John Pocock has been more interested in wholesale sketching of past languages of politics rather than uncovering particular authorial intentions- they all share a broad historicist inclination that comes across clearly and polemically in their most prominent member's early essay (Bevir, 2011; Burrow, 2007).

It may be worth to briefly illustrate the contextualist turn with reference to Skinner's empirical work. This has been mainly concerned with the study of the shift from a medieval to a modern conception of (European) political theory. According to Skinner one of the key, if not the key, dimension of this transformation was the invention of the modern concept of the state as an impersonal entity that held sovereignty and was separate from the person of its prince. Skinner argues that authors such as Machiavelli and Hobbes play pivotal roles in this transformation. In order to approximate why they are making these innovative ideological moves it is necessary to painstakingly recreate their ideological milieu (eg Skinner, 2002, Chapter 14). As Skinner's project spans for centuries from the renaissance to the aftermath of the reformation this is a massively ambitious and in practice somewhat *longue durée* undertaking. It is on these grounds that Skinner has at times been accused of going around his own rigorous early methodological standards that conceived the main task of the historian as the construction of a primarily contemporary context rather than a diachronic grand narrative. A sympathetic critic may also point out that this methodologically historicist story is in terms of its primary focus not completely different from that of the earlier textualists. The object of inquiry is still the Western tradition of political ideas, and Skinner's primary rationale for studying political context is to 'enable us to return to the classic texts ... with a clearer prospect of understanding them' (1978, xiii; also Wallenius, 2018). Despite these substantive continuities, the contextual approach remains useful as a contrasting ideal type of how to do intellectual history. More practically, it has established itself as the mainstream approach in the history of political thought and also more recently become a very influential framework for the study of international thought.

In disciplinary terms there are two dimensions to the contextualist shift. Firstly, IR scholars have grown explicitly critical of the earlier mainstream notion of how to study international theory that I have illustrated with reference to the classical English school. On the other hand, historians of political thought have increasingly come to realise that theories of politics within communities constitute only half of the story. As an illustration of the consequences of this shift, let us consider the traditional notion of separate Hobbesian, Grotian and Kantian patterns of international thought. Recent work has to a considerable extent challenged the usefulness of these abstractions in understanding the evolution of European international thought. It has instead been argued that these three writers should be contextualised as contributors to the influential early modern natural rights tradition (Bartelson, 1996; Tuck, 1999). This work, which draws on insights by Voltaire and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, substituting a largely ahistorical analytical conception of a tradition of thought with a historical and contextual one results in a considerably different understanding of intellectual history.

The influential conventional notion of a liberal tradition (Doyle, 1997) has also been questioned by work challenging the idea that liberalism necessarily entails an anti-imperialist viewpoint. It has been pointed out that seeing a straight line from Immanuel Kant's relatively cosmopolitan position to contemporary liberal thought misses how the construction of immense European colonial empires during the nineteenth century was to a considerable extent rationalised through liberal arguments, including by canonical thinkers such as John Stuart Mill and Alexis de Tocqueville (Jahn, 2005; Pitts, 2005). This work is part of a broader trend towards a more global perspective in the study of European political thought, which has also highlighted how the works of Francisco de Vitoria and Hugo Grotius, conventionally seen as fathers of international law, cannot be understood without acknowledging the great emphasis they place on the analysis of relations between European and non-European communities (Anghie, 2005; Keene, 2002). Though not all of this scholarship draws explicit methodological inspiration from Skinner's contextualism its historicist sensibility is broadly speaking compatible with Skinner's agenda. The fact that the contextualist approach has become the mainstream viewpoint on the history of international thought among historically minded IR scholars - if not perhaps the discipline as a whole - can in addition be gauged from the method sections of recent textbooks (Brown, Nardin, & Rengger, 2002; Keene, 2005). Having now outlined the new orthodoxy I will next turn to consider potential lines of criticism as well as the question of possible alternatives.

Contextualism contested?

The question of whose thinking is worth studying is a good starting point to what is possibly the most interesting critique of the contextual approach to intellectual history. The basic argument would be that though Skinner and his epigoni do a great job in recontextualising the likes of Hobbes, Kant and Grotius a primary focus on the linguistic moves of exceptional thinkers offers at best a partial and perhaps more urgently an unrepresentative viewpoint on the history of political ideas. This point of course builds on a paradox readily acknowledged by Skinner: the exceptional nature of a great theorist such as Hobbes, who is seen to tower above his contemporaries, makes him a very bad guide for understanding broader currents of political thought in seventeenth century Europe. In a similar vein, contextualising John Rawls is probably not going to help us a lot in understanding the ideological currents that characterised world politics in the era that followed 1945. It may be that a plausible case can be made for shifting the spotlight even more so from great thinkers to thinking done in other parts of the stage, which consists of their broader ideological context.

The notion of studying the role of ideas and culture in broader political practice -rather than in the ivory tower- is of course not a novel one. And there exists a number of literatures that can serve as points of reference for a turn to practice in the study of international thought. The most obvious one is perhaps the self-conscious constructivist tradition, which consolidated the viewpoint that culture is worth some attention among mainstream IR scholars (Wendt, 1999). Historical studies, often tracing the evolution of notions of political legitimacy (Bukovansky, 2002; Reus-Smit, 1999), have played an important role in this cultural turn, which can be at least partly contextualised as a reaction against the increasingly narrowly rationalist assumptions of mainstream North American IR. Constructivism has in recent years been complemented by work applying a practice viewpoint to the study of world politics. This work focuses on the study of practices, such as diplomacy or international law, as key sites of world politics (Brunnée & Toope, 2011; Costa Lopez, 2016; Wallenius, 2019). In terms of theory

some authors also conceptualise a habitual and implicit logic of practicality that plays a separate if complementary role to the more well-known constructivist idea of a logic of appropriateness focused on normative reasoning (Adler & Pouliot, 2011).

In order to not to completely reinvent the wheel it is useful to note that the study of international thought in practice has important earlier exponents, including the classical English school. Wight was explicit about the need to trawl bygone international thought from forgotten literatures not included in the narrow canon of political theory (Holzgrefe, 1989; Keene, 2017; Wight, 1966) and more broadly speaking the historical study of practices, such as diplomacy and international law, constituted the second dimension of the group's research agenda. This study of the evolution of the institutions of international society, to employ the school's own jargon, included an important ideational dimension (Bull, 1977; Gong, 1984; Keens-Soper, 1978; Wight, 1977).

We are also importantly not restricted to political science in terms of alternative templates for the study of international thought. The role of ideas and culture in human society is studied across the humanities and social sciences. As an illustration historiographical approaches with which political scientists are less familiar may offer intriguing viewpoints for the study of international thought. It has been argued that the focus on uncovering authorial intention in Skinner's contextualism implicitly ignores the issue of a text's reception (Vergerio, 2019). Literary historians have in contrast emphasised the importance of the study of contested receptions in order to understand a text's historical importance since at least Hans-Robert Jauss' essay from 1967. For Jauss reception does not remain constant and uncontested. The 'understanding of the first reader will be sustained and enriched in a chain of receptions from generation to generation; in this way the historical significance of a work will be decided' (1982, 20). More broadly speaking the study of bygone ideas is central to the practice of cultural history. These historians have criticised the Olympian preoccupations of conventional intellectual history and sought to excavate more mundane patterns of thought. This sensibility, which can be understood as doing anthropology across time, argues that the thought of the forgotten many, and not only the canonical few, is worth studying and can be innovative (Darnton, 1971; also Wallenius, 2018). This naturally includes excavating the often excluded thought of marginalised groups, such as women and non-Europeans in the context of an international society dominated by European men (Owens 2018; Shilliam 2010; also Ashworth Chapter). Cultural historians have also importantly paid extensive attention to how new ideas become diffused, through technologies such as printing or sites such as coffee houses, within the public sphere, which ties in with literary scholars' emphasis on the study of receptions that is somewhat downplayed by contextualism (Blanning, 2002; Darnton, 1995).

As an illustration of how the turn towards the study of political ideas in practice has had important results, let us briefly consider the origins of the modern sovereign state. In contrast to Skinner whose primary focus is on treatises, scholars have turned their attention to practices such as treaty making, which allows for a novel viewpoint for process tracing broader shifts in political ideology in which theorists such as Hobbes do not perhaps play such a central role. The rise of the sovereign state can be tracked in the changing language of treaties. These become binding not only to the signatory prince but also his successors. The prince is also slowly replaced by the sovereign state as a member of international society and becomes merely its ruler (Roshchin, 2006). The origins of the novel though nowadays default notion of an international order consisting of territorially bounded states that exercise exclusive sovereignty can in equal vein be analysed through treaty making (Branch, 2012). This work on the external dimension of sovereignty naturally builds on earlier work that was for a time overshadowed by Skinner's primary focus on the domestic theory of the sovereign state (Hinsley, 1966). Practice orientated work has equally highlighted the importance of relations between

Europeans and non-Europeans, both in hierarchical and more equal contexts, for the evolution of the modern concept of sovereignty (Alexandrowicz, 1967; Anghie, 2005; Branch, 2012; Gong, 1984; Keene, 2002; Koskenniemi, 2001). In empirical terms, non-European international thought remains a key underexplored site for further work in a research field that has conventionally been marked by its Eurocentrism (Liu, 2004; Shilliam, 2010; Zarakol, 2018).

After having outlined some potential lines of criticism of the contextual approach, it may be worth briefly considering the counter argument. If one looks at Skinner's later empirical works rather than his early essay on method, it is clear that he does in practice engage with the changing reception of political ideas across time, the role of largely forgotten ideologists such as Marsilius of Padua, as well as literary genres that offer us insight into the ideas that co-constituted the broader practice of politics (eg 1978; 2002). The key take away from contextualism is not the study of the authorial intentions of prominent theorists but rather that political ideas can only be understood as interventions in specific historical debates. Yet the challenge in simply equating the contextualist approach with a broader historicist sensibility may lie in the fact that the latter has been around for a long time. Even if we do not want to go to Herodotus, the call for a contextual understanding of human societies and an awareness of the possibility of great change across time has been prominent since at least the nineteenth century (Burrow, 2007).

A case for closure?

I will conclude by briefly considering whether there is any point in doing the history of international thought. Are we doomed to be self-indulgent antiquarians whose reconstruction of the political ideas of lost worlds offer no clues for addressing our present predicament? Or alternatively gravediggers who seek to apply bygone thinkers' ideas to contemporary political problems? In the process modifying and mixing them with our ones by applying them outside of their historical context. Would we be better off by being honest about the need to do our own thinking?

Perhaps the most prominent optimistic answer argues that excavating forgotten political worlds can help us step outside of the box of our own unquestioned background assumptions. Skinner argues that realising how different our contemporary political thought is from our predecessors highlights the fact that ideologies have and still can change radically. Despite there being no transhistorical off the shelf solutions to be discovered in classic texts, bygone thought is interesting precisely because it sought answers to very different rather than timeless questions (Skinner, 1969). It must though be noted as a potential qualification that the very act of doing the history of political ideas, for example analysing the shift from medieval to modern European political theory, presupposes the existence of at least a relatively constant concept of 'the political' as a dimension of human societies that can be recognised across time. A critical historicist sensibility that highlights the contingency and specificity of the origins of the contemporary social world is of course not necessarily restricted to a conventional fairly narrow understanding of intellectual history but can also include other historiographical sensibilities including the study of political ideas in practice as well as more materialist preoccupations such as those of the Marxist tradition (Tully, 2002).

A second possible defence for intellectual history is that without it we are more likely to reinvent the wheel on a more regular basis. Many recent debates within IR mirror older now forgotten discussions

(Schmidt, 2002). Even though we must, to paraphrase Skinner, do our own thinking in terms of the specific problems facing us, intellectual historians are struck by not only the strangeness but at times the somewhat analogous nature of past patterns of thought. As an illustration let us consider the fact that the problematic of fostering cooperation between narrowly social self-interested actors, which still orients most IR scholars, hails not from 20th century social theory but to a significant extent mirrors the early modern natural rights thought of Grotius and Hobbes.

My final tentative point is that the history of political ideas is a worthy endeavour because there exists popular demand for historicist, and at times critical, analysis of the making of our contemporary social world as evidenced by bookstore offerings and newspaper op-eds of varying quality. To paraphrase Allen Lane on Penguin's business model, scholars of the history of international thought should keep in mind the possibility of the existence of a considerable and global intelligent reading public, with a potential interest in learning more about the deeply contested and vastly different ways in which the political ordering of our world has been imagined.

Further readings

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