
Review

A history of modern political thought: the question of interpretation

Gary Browning,

Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2017, viii + 431 pp.,

ISBN: 978-0-19-968228-7 (hardback); 978-0-19-968229-4 (paperback)

Contemporary Political Theory (2019) **18**, S20–S23. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41296-018-0197-4>; published online 2 February 2018

The market for single volumes introducing major political thinkers and themes of the Western canon is now a competitive one. As well as Iain Hampsher-Monk's and Janet Coleman's classic *History of Political Thought* textbooks (1992 + 2 vols, 2000), options for students or general readers now also include Bruce Haddock's *A History of Political Thought: From Antiquity to the Present* (2008), and a third edition of David Boucher's and Paul Kelly's *Political Thinkers: From Socrates to the Present* (2017). Additions to this genre should be evaluated not for achieving originality or significant difference from other similar volumes (which is increasingly difficult), but for offering the student concise, unpedantic accuracy, signposts to important and recent scholarship, and an enjoyable reading experience; and, to the tutor, a versatile teaching resource.

Gary Browning's twist on the genre aims to introduce not only primary authors from Machiavelli to Beauvoir, but also the emerging canon of secondary, interpretative commentary that has crystallized around each thinker. So the 'contextualist' scholarship of Pocock and Skinner on Machiavelli is summarized; as are Oakeshott, Collingwood, and Foucault on Hobbes; the work of Dunn and Macpherson on Locke; Derrida on Rousseau; Hegel and Foucault on Kant; and Marx, Oakeshott, and Collingwood on Hegel. For Marx, Browning surveys a whole cadre including Gadamer, Kautsky, Cohen, Hardt and Negri, and Derrida. Then come Foucault's treatment of Bentham; Collini and Skorupski on Mill; and Foucault and Derrida on Nietzsche. Browning then presents his own study of Simone de Beauvoir's use of Hegel – an addition which is, I think, especially to be welcomed for, as Browning points out, *The Second Sex* has exerted 'a prolonged impact in opening up the relevance of sexual identity to social and ethical questioning' (p. 363).

Historians of political thought will probably take issue with Browning's mapping of their own fields of scholarship – which he would anyway have expected. Sympathy is undoubtedly due for Browning's constraints (all of this is surveyed in just over two hundred pages, the second half of the book). But some



major lines of interpretation are unfortunately passed over. For instance, although Browning notes that, ‘On Hegel’s death, opposing camps of Left and Right Hegelians ... disputed the meaning of his system’ (p. 265), the Right Hegelians are not discussed, and Oakeshott and Collingwood are drafted in to provide the alternative interpretation of Hegel to that of Marx. Other commentators are perhaps over-represented, especially Foucault, who speaks in the chapters on Hobbes, Kant, and Nietzsche, and is allowed to dominate the chapter on Bentham. The reader might feel that a stricter limiting of introductory material and of Foucault’s and Derrida’s voices would have yielded room for some of the missing territory (such as scholarship on Hegel) to be better covered. Nevertheless, what is included will indeed be useful for students in need both of introductions to primary thinkers, and debates to engage with in their reading and written work.

A History of Political Thought is, though, a book of two halves, and so far I have described only the second. The first half documents Browning’s ‘determination to get to grips’ with what he calls *the* question of interpretation (p. 2). To this end he surveys what he sees as the main figures in interpretation debates: Hegel and Marx, Oakeshott and Collingwood, Skinner (and the ‘Cambridge School’, or ‘contextualism’), Derrida, Gadamer, and Foucault. Browning understands each to be offering ‘general interpretive approaches’, ‘generic schemes of interpretation’ (p. 2), ‘frames of interpretation’, ‘generic ways of interpreting ideas’, ‘interpretive perspectives’ (p. 3), ‘interpretive styles’ (p. 388). His intention is to develop a ‘synoptic perspective’ (pp. v, 273) of his own, consciously and reflectively informed by those surveyed, and then to apply this perspective to the classic authors, without proposing a ‘final statement’ on any of them. In the event, Browning declines to say very explicitly what he takes – or perhaps more importantly, what *we* should take – from the ‘generic schemes of interpretation’ surveyed. And, though he refers throughout with approval to Gadamer’s ‘fusion of interpretive horizons’ (pp. 138, 283, 313, 367), it will not be entirely clear to students unversed in Gadamer’s work how these ‘horizons’ themselves should be interpreted.

Browning’s synopses of these theories of interpretation are not uncritical, but some specialists will be quick to identify inaccuracy in the criticisms that are given. He perpetuates, for instance, the widespread myth that ‘contextualists’ wish to ‘rule out theoretical critique of past arguments’ (p. 384), to proscribe the *use* of past authors in contemporary debate (p. 85), and that they ‘presume that ideas and texts are susceptible of unambiguous intentional analysis’ (p. 86). In fact, it is thought to be precisely such ambiguity that might prompt a historian to seek evidence other than the text, if what he wants to find out is what an author thought he was doing in saying, writing, publishing, etc. Similarly, Collingwood is accused several times of assuming too much separation between past and present, and of being unaware that ‘the interpretation of the past is inevitably to be conducted from a present’ (pp. 138, 383). Collingwood actually argues the exact opposite of the first, and deals



explicitly with the second – which elsewhere Browning seems partly to recognize in Collingwood's theory (pp. 48, 373), and in his practice (p. 186).

The question of interpretation is not settled at the close of the first part of the book because, as Browning points out, 'There is no better way of appreciating what is involved in these frames of interpretation than in reviewing how they make sense of actual past thinkers' (p. 3). He is undoubtedly right. But the interpretative narratives concerning the canonical authors are mostly allowed to speak for themselves. One also notices that the 'test cases' for interpretative approaches are also those with which they have already (famously) dealt. It also becomes clear that the interpretation theorists selected for the first half of the book are only those who have *also* offered commentary on the primary authors; and likewise, commentators are only included in the second half if they are obviously connected to some kind of theory of interpretation in the abstract. The two halves are thus mutually restricting which, although neat, has the disadvantage of leaving out important studies of the primary authors *and* giants of 'hermeneutic' debates (Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Wittgenstein, Ricœur). Even if the mutual restriction principle is wise, some discussion of the interpretative and hermeneutic implications of Kant's thought might have been a valuable addition (see Makkreel, 1990).

The question of interpretation, then, is deferred to the conclusion of the book, which comprises an original essay, 'Political thought and history' (pp. 372–398). Here Browning calls for what he calls 'a plurality of interpretive perspectives' (p. 372). This is a noble cause, but also impossible to disagree with. Indeed, one might point out (as Browning acknowledges on p. 396) that such pluralism already exists in practice. The argument for 'interpretive pluralism' is rather abstract, and does little to explain concretely what an 'interpretive pluralist' would do differently in practice. For example: 'A dialectical holistic perspective on the history of political thought takes account of the interplay between its constitutive conditions and provides a comprehensive interpretive framework that encompasses differing features and styles of interpretation' (p. 392). The reader might suspect that Browning is actually exaggerating existing 'conflict' among these theories of interpretation, and escalating what are really different horses for different courses to the status of rival stables (pp. 375–382). It is not demonstrated that these different historians, philosophers, commentators, and so forth really do claim 'to provide exclusive and comprehensive forms for interpretation' (p. 389). It might be argued that this is a misunderstanding, generated perhaps by the insufficiently pluralistic presupposition that *the* question of interpretation is uniform. It might be argued further that questions of interpretation are better answered within the context of particular investigations; that the question, 'How should I interpret this?' should be specified with the counter-question, 'Well, what exactly are you trying to find out from it?'; and that any 'comprehensive interpretive framework' (p. 392) needlessly imposes an unprofitable restriction upon investigative autonomy. Browning himself is primarily interested in how old arguments might be *used*



today, which is why, with that purpose in mind, he is anyway surely right to insist that 'Intentionality is not the sole guide to the reading of a text' (p. 212).

Reference

Makkreel, R. (1990). *Imagination and Interpretation in Kant: The hermeneutical import of the Critique of Judgment*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.

Christopher Fear
University of Hull, Hull HU6 7RX, UK
c.fear@hull.ac.uk