

Leigh Jenco

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Introduction: Thinking with the past: Political thought in and from the ‘non-west’

European Journal of Political Theory

This special issue addresses the diverse ways the past may be used and perceived in different places for political purposes. This is not a new topic—the history of political thought and ideas has always been recognized as integral to the normative, conceptual, and therapeutic work of political theory. However, these histories have tended to reproduce the parochial exclusions of the discipline, in at least two ways. First, as increasingly recognized by historians of political thought, the perceived “canons” of Western philosophy do not reflect the past so much as create it, at the expense of marginalizing or outright excluding the various Islamic, African, and Asian traditions which have constituted it in past centuries (Watt 1972; Clarke 1997; Mehta 1999; Kelley 2005; Dainotto 2007). Second, and less recognized, is a parochialism based on a more subtle exclusion, namely of those alternative ways of relating to the past that have been forged both historically and in contemporary times by scholars and activists who confront a much wider range of different cosmologies, political crises and (post-)colonial power relations than are typically considered in most standard histories of political thought. These histories have been dominated by specific methodologies, such as the historical contextualism of the Cambridge school, which arose to treat the particular intellectual conditions of early modern Europe (Runciman 2001) and whose insistence on historicism in some cases may hinder the inclusion of non-European forms of reasoning within theory and philosophy (Ganeri 2009). Little work has been done in political theory to investigate how thinkers working with more diverse materials, and under various conditions across the world, have historically conceptualized the

political uses of the past, identified the constitutive problems of these usages, or theorized the connection of present politics to past precedents.

This special issue offers a series of articles that address precisely this gap. They inaugurate new paths for considering how the past matters for political thought, and from a global perspective. This mandate does not entail the assumption that there exists some singular global vantage point from which historical ideas might be assessed, or that Euro-American concerns and experiences should be projected ever more broadly across the world's pasts. Rather, these contributors directly engage the globally diffuse, intellectually substantive confrontations of past with present, of tradition with modernity, and of heritage with necessity that erupted (and continue to erupt) as thinkers in diverse societies grapple with the specific dilemmas of their time and place. The specificity of these encounters speaks to their richness and complexity, as well as the diversity of sources from which ideas about the past are drawn and in which they are expressed.

Such specificity, it should be noted, most emphatically does *not* place constraints on the broader applicability of these ideas. In fact, contributors to this special issue each explicitly consider how the complex particularity of their particular subject sheds new and further light on uses of the past more generally, and how these might relate to the political thinking of the present—not only with respect to the genealogies of now-globally dominant “Western” institutions such as democracy, but also to the very ideas examined by their fellow contributors. The subjects of their analyses—ranging from Gandhi, to Javed Ahmed Ghamidi, to Kwasi Wiredu—are thereby rendered first-order theorists of political thought: that is, they are not simply targets for historical contextualization, but think-partners of the essays' authors and constitutive theorists of new histories of political thought forged in tandem with those who research them. In doing so, these essays perform what Taiwanese theorist and activist Chen Kuan-hsing called “Asia as method”: they consider the general

valence of ideas in and from Asia and elsewhere, but without necessarily taking relevance to existing Western concerns as their only criterion of legitimacy as theoretically compelling ideas (Chen 2010). Their inquiries implicitly if not explicitly assess how practices of marking time as global, modern, or cosmopolitan actually privilege certain modes of civilization over others (Mitchell 2000; Hutchings 2011), by exploring how thinkers from typically marginalized regions conceptualize these now-global questions.

Given the mutually transformative status of analyzer and analyzed, and the internally self-reflective nature of these contributions, how might the perspectives developed here challenge dominant understandings of the very categories of 'tradition' and the 'past'? How can historical and imagined connections between persons situated within different geographic and political locales enhance the political imaginaries that constitute healthy political order? This inquiry includes examining how are traditions produced, under what circumstances, and for what purposes; *whose* past it is that theorists claim to be speaking from; and how uses of the past in the imagining of the nation have changed from the time of independence movements in Asia, Africa and the Middle East, to globalized development of the present.

The essays represent a wide geographical and ideational range but they are grouped thematically to underscore the particular contributions each makes to this rethinking of the history of political thought. Indeed, a distinctive challenge of the kinds of "new histories" called for here is precisely how to link the diverse pasts of communities throughout space and time. Reading and creating histories of political thought in a global context cannot always turn on linear chronology, or assume an already-existing temporal relationship between its subjects. Nor can it assume an existing set of concerns that defines properly political and properly historical thought; to do justice to the particularity and difference of these differently-situated histories, we must work from the ground up, and in the process open existing certainties (such as about the meaning of "the political," or the relationship of the

living present to the dead past) to interrogation in light of emerging alternatives (Seth 2008). This gathering of essays, then, is intentionally wide-ranging, and its thematic unity is multiple rather than singular. These essays can thus be read together in a number of different ways: for example, as concerning the postcolonial confrontations with liberal democracy; as presenting four different global perspectives on the past; as rethinking the interface between tradition and modernity, long used to describe Western relations with the non-Western world; or, in the terms chosen here: as an unfolding dialogue about the uses, or refusals to use, the past in the political construction of identity.

Murad Idris opens this inquiry by considering whether and how the particular resources of diverse pasts might require a reconsideration of just where and in what condition we find the past thought that we seek. He argues that political theorists should begin considering how paratexts, as much as the substantive canonical texts that constitute mainstream traditions of thought around the world, can be crucially important both for reconstructing lineages of thought but also for situating that thought within a history of its interpretation and assessing the political motivations of that historical narrative. Reading Ibn Tufayl's philosophical treatise through the lens of paratexts also reveals the extent to which the "past" of *falsafa* (so-called Islamic philosophy) exceeds the categories of "Islamic" or "Middle Eastern" typically used to describe it. This is because, as Idris shows, *falsafa*'s commentaries and contributions extend into debates about autonomy and individualism in Europe, but also enable an alternative timeline of humanistic reform centered on "the East," which arises from (as one commentator claims) Chinese and Japanese renaissances as well as humanistic reform among Turks, Mongols and Indians.

Likewise calling into question the privileged status of canons and their sites of interpretation, Sanjay Palshikar explores the subtle political relationship between Gandhi's

non-violence and Hindu militarists, each of whom draw in different ways from an idealized image of the Kshatriya warrior. In the process, Gandhi points the way to a new kind of history of political thought that turns on the relationship of the self to broader cosmologies of political order. In destabilizing the notion of a historical canon, and in some ways rejecting it altogether, Gandhi's use of the past (in Palshikar's retelling) suggest that tradition may not exist simply as a set of timeless principles that are automatically reproduced, but as a politically contested claim about which pasts do or should persist into the present. By explicitly revealing the political stakes behind claims to tradition, Iqtidar's essay suggests the contingency but also potential creativity involved in drawing from alternative or contested pasts in this way. Her essay shows that Ghamidi's very modern invocation of tradition—played out in television shows as well as more conventional political texts—acts both to assert an authentic Islam even as it recognizes the possibility of internal contestation of that tradition from within. On this basis, Iqtidar suggests an alternative way of reading tradition less implicated in the tradition/modern binary: as both method and sensibility. The kind of creativity that informs Ghamidi's invocation of tradition might also be said to frame Ajei's account of Wiredu's consensual democracy and its delineation of how African pasts continue to bear fruit in the present. Witnessing the negative fallout of a colonial legacy, in which unworkable political institutions were imposed on African communities, Ajei—following Wiredu—invokes an alternative and more positive vision of the past that renders it a resource of future possibility for realizing democracy in Africa.

As these descriptions show, “identity” plays a role in these essays in at least two senses. First, the essays raise questions about how certain ways of using past ideas or materials can, or should, be identified as properly “historical” or “philosophical,” when existing canons of thought privilege certain texts and interpretations as central to academic knowledge production and marginalize others. Second, identity also plays a role in

demarcating the sites from which such uses arise, labelling them as African or Indian, traditional or modern, or otherwise. Both senses of identity are at play in the essays here, because each essay necessarily grapples with the attempt to render historically marginalized texts (themselves with origins or contexts which exceed the cultural or political boundaries of nation-states or demarcated regions such as “Africa”), into relevant material for a discipline that has historically devalued their contribution. To accomplish this task, each essay must ground its discussions in clear focal points that identify for Anglophone readers the context of their subject of inquiry, while at the same time interrogating the very grounds through which that subject is identified as one thing (say “philosophy” or “Islamic”) rather than another (as “history,” “ideology,” or geographically or culturally as simply “non-West”). In other words, the very terms that render their contributions legible, and so enable their further uptake in academic discourse as well as political action, also at the same time reveal the constraints in our disciplinary language. These essays stand as important reminders of the work we have yet to do, but also of the promising work that has already been done.

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