

# A History of Political Experience

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**Michael Oakeshott** Lectures in the History of Political Thought. *Exeter: Imprint Academic*, 2006.

This book survives superficial but fails deeper scrutiny. A facile, undiscerning criticism of *Lectures in the History of Political Thought (LHPT)* is that on Oakeshott's own account these are lectures on a non-subject: 'I cannot detect anything which could properly correspond to the expression "*the history of political thought*"' (p. 32). This is an entirely typical Oakeshottian swipe – elegant and oblique – at the title of the lecture course he inherited from Harold Laski. If title and quotation sit awkwardly we should remember that Oakeshott never prepared the text for publication – a fortiori he did not prepare it for publication under this title. Moreover, for Oakeshott the compound notion of 'political thought' does not denote much either (pp. 33–4). A positive characterization can, however, be made for the notion of 'political experience' or 'intellectual organization' (p. 42), a particular context-bound agglomeration 'of sentiments, beliefs, habits of thought, aspirations and ideas' (pp. 43, 45, 391, 393). This notion, with its enumeration and specification into Greek, Roman, medieval and modern political experience, structures the 32 lectures that comprise the book. Oakeshott's notion of political experience has deep affinities (at least) with the style of political analysis followed by the Cambridge classicist, F.E. Adcock, in *Roman Political Ideas and Practice* (1964), a text surely not fortuitously included in the course reading-list for the original lectures.

Within the discussion of the four major (Western) political experiences, a central nucleus can be discerned in the 'political experience' lectures (lectures 2, 3, 11, 12, 16 and 23–32). These 15 lectures have philosophical continuity with the most important essay of all – the introduction. My focus is thus on these 16 lectures. (Other reviewers will no doubt hone in on one or more of the political epochs; perhaps particular thinkers; or consider the evolution of particular concepts such as law, authority or state.)

## Disambiguating *Political Thought*

Though Oakeshott does not use this terminology, his intention is clear – one needs to subject to scrutiny the creeping promiscuity of the concept 'political thought'. For Oakeshott

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the concept ‘*the* history of political thought’ and its derivative ‘political thought’ are virtually meaningless. The former is taken to be equivalent to ‘a gradual accumulation of political wisdom’ (p. 32); the latter is taken to be a specialized kind of thinking (p. 33). The former is so broad as to render the concept vacuous. Indeed, ‘there has been no continuous history of political activity’ (p. 38). The latter, implies some kind of distinctive metric appropriate to political thought. Properly speaking, political thinking is motivated by a specific activity, an ‘experience’, an activity or experience going by the name of ‘politics’ and subject to the generalized rules of inference and the usual standards of rationality. In other words, political thinking is more banal than many believe and should be divested of the misplaced portentousness attributed to it: it is just thinking, *not a kind* of thinking. It competes for the limelight of consciousness along with thoughts about children, building houses, breeding horses, fashion, banking – the list is endless. It is thus perverse to think that anyone could be in a perpetual state of thinking about politics – however unsatisfactory a political condition one might find oneself in, politics is but one stream of thought among many. Interestingly, Oakeshott’s view is fully consistent with much of recent cognitive science on this matter.

## The Character of Political Experience

Getting a handle on what political thought amounts to seems to be a catch-22 situation. With no experience of political life, there is no political thinking. But even if there were political experience how would we recognize political thought as such if, as we have seen, political thinking is not in any way distinctive? Oakeshott suggests that we should at the very least have some ‘provisional ideas about the political activity which is its necessary condition’ (p. 34). In other words ‘what are the necessary conditions for the activity we call “politics”?’ (p. 35). One would have thought that the identification of *typical* features would be a more promising line. Oakeshott apologizes in advance for what may seem virtually self-evident conditions. Political activity requires:

- 1) a plurality of people with significant internal diversity but with a shared recognition of common customs and laws;
- 2) some form of ruling authority;
- 3) a notion of alternative courses of action implicit in public policy.

For Oakeshott items 1 and 2 are necessary but not sufficient conditions for the emergence of political behaviour. Regarding item 1, with no diversity there is no need for politics. Regarding item 2, many often take the mark of politics to be coextensive with this one aspect. Oakeshott warns against this one-dimensional characterization in the slogan ‘Ruling itself is not doing politics’ and its corollary ‘politics is not ruling’ (p. 37). Item 3 is necessary and perhaps sufficient. The weight Oakeshott puts on the possibility of imaginative deliberation and volition radiates across his work, and underwrites Oakeshott’s notion of freedom. For Oakeshott these three conditions must be jointly and severally met if there is to be any political activity. But more than that, these conditions tell us that:

- political activity comes in degrees of significance;
- political activity comes in degrees of intensity;
- it is pointless to look for causal explanations for such a slow-emerging phenomenon.

Given what we know of Oakeshott, specifically his celebrated critique of rationalism, I think it is a fair inference to take Oakeshott to be saying that it is *desirable* that the emergence of political activity is slow. Oakeshott alludes to the painful experience of post-colonial Africa, a 300-year or more process concertinaed into 60 years. Furthermore, item 3 is an allusion to the troubled notion of a *scientific* history: historical explanations that can be deduced or are probabilistic, both nomological in character.

Political thought might be said to be first recognizable when there is 'deliberation directly connected with political activity [and] . . . in the service of political decision and action' (p. 39). The problem is that Oakeshott here contravenes any logical independence one would want to accord to outlining a characterization of political thought – so, for example, looking to the utterances of political speeches and the employing of a certain political vocabulary (democracy, liberalism, nationalism) presupposes the very concept of political thinking! What Oakeshott is recommending is that there is a contextual aspect, a context in which a 'pattern', a structure or organization of ideas can be divined against a background of other beliefs about the world or, as Quine famously said, a 'web of belief'. When Oakeshott says that 'a history of thought is a history of men thinking, not a "history" of abstract, disembodied "ideas"' (p. 42), he articulates an anti-Cartesian sentiment criticizing the coherence of the idea that cognition is independent of any consideration of the brain/body–physical/social nexus. Again, it should be noted that Oakeshott anticipates and is fully in tune with a major and very current coalition within cognitive science that rejects disembodiment.

Oakeshott identifies two kinds of 'political' thinking, each with very different histories: one diagnostic (theoretical or explanatory) in character, the other practical. Each have appeared under two different modes of thinking – historical and philosophical. Oakeshott is issuing a warning that his *LHPT* are concerned with the theoretical. But more than that, the *LHPT* on offer are primarily a historical study. With these distinctions firmly in mind, one is equipped to recognize arguments designed to *justify* from arguments for *intelligibility*. For Oakeshott this distinction is somewhat analogous to a theology (intelligibility) and 'the sentiments and beliefs of a popular religion' (p. 43) (the practical). Oakeshott's historical study seeks to shed light on both these aspects, aspects that are found in differing degrees across the four political epochs under consideration.

It is interesting to note that, given the key role modality plays in Oakeshott's thought, he declines the invitation to expand upon it. On the one hand this is understandable – *LHPT* are not lectures on metaphysics; explicit consideration of this aspect would have been too rich a mixture for the *LHPT* audience. On the other hand, having floated the notion, some clarification is called for.

Across the lectures dealing with what Oakeshott terms 'political experience' we have Oakeshott's three markers for the identification of something distinctly political (p. 55). Having signalled his intention to examine political vocabulary as key to the identification of political thinking, Oakeshott focuses on the vocabulary or constituent concepts that comprise the Greek political experience (*agora, demos, polis*); Roman political experience (*civitas, rex, patres, comita curiata*); medieval political experience (papal *auctoritas, demesne*); and finally the emergence of the modern European state.

## To Publish or Not to Publish

The decision to publish a writer's work posthumously, even relatively polished work, or miscellaneous work that suggests a natural coherence, is fraught with problems. In reviewing the first volume of the series, Kenneth McIntyre articulates three concerns that are just as pertinent to this volume and beyond, concerns which I freely amend:<sup>1</sup>

1. If Oakeshott himself deemed these lectures unsuitable for publication, what is the justification for publishing them now? Why would one not just read the Oakeshott that he intended to be read?
2. Is there anything particularly noteworthy about these lectures?
3. Last, but by no means least, does this collection significantly alter our understanding of the character of Oakeshott's work as a philosopher or historian?

Strictly speaking, items 2 and 3 are derivative forms of item 1, offering particular forms of justification. Thus I consider 1–3 in reverse order.

### Question 3: Does this Collection Significantly Alter our Understanding of the Character of Oakeshott's Work?

I detect an editorial tension in the justification offered by the editors for this volume. They first acknowledge that *LHPT* do *not* contribute much (directly) to current Oakeshott scholarship (p. 3). Then they go on to specify their grounds for publishing these lectures: *LHPT* 'shed new light on Oakeshott's own thinking. They do so not least because they enrich our picture of his self-conception as a teacher as well as a scholar of political thought' (p. 3). This, on the contrary, confers a great deal of import on *LHPT*. We are after all talking of *new* light on Oakeshott's *thinking* and his *scholarship*. What else is there to an intellectual legacy? Is this editorial hyperbole or has a genuinely compelling case been made for publishing *LHPT* on these terms?

It is always interesting to find 'proto-ideas' in a thinker's work. Here the ideas are not so much ideas in the rough, but an early *fully* developed variation. Like a single malt Islay whisky, Oakeshott had the luxury (and of course the connoisseurship) of not having to bottle his thoughts for immediate consumption. It is only when we come to the last quarter of the book, the modern epoch, that the style and substance seems less 'sketchy' and there is a sense of the mellifluous fluidity we associate with Oakeshott. The reason is simple. Beyond the character of history, it was the character of the modern state, specifically the understanding of the proper relation of public interest to collective decision-making, that was Oakeshott's abiding concern, reaching its full expression in *On Human Conduct* (1975). Oakeshott writes in the preface that 'The themes explored here have been with me nearly as long as I remember . . .' (p. vii)<sup>2</sup> Let us consider two such examples from *LHPT*, both examples resonating back to earlier work, and forward to later work. First:

A modern European state may be thought of as a political dwelling which has been constructed largely out of second-hand materials.

It is like a house which has been built, without the aid of an architect, by many hands, over many years, in response to many different circumstances, out of materials got from the ruins of a medieval castle and a medieval abbey.

Some of the stones have been recut and reshaped; others have been left very much as they were pulled out of the ruins. All have been fitted together differently and put to new uses . . . (p. 374)

This analogy is clearly the progenitor of what was to become one of Oakeshott's most celebrated images – the 'dry-wall' analogy – from his *On History and Other Essays* (1983). Historical thinking is analogous to building a dry-wall: we build the wall (infer the historical hypothesis) that best fits the stones together (explains the available evidence), emphasizing the intrinsic circumstantiality of history.

The second example is to be found in Oakeshott's conceptualization of the inherent, necessary and perpetual tension that was to constitute two modes of human association. In the posthumously published *The Politics of Faith and the Politics of Scepticism*<sup>3</sup> (originating from the early 1950s), this distinction is self-evidently marked in the title. In his 1958 Harvard Lectures,<sup>4</sup> the distinction is characterized as a 'divided consciousness', two moral dispositions – the former the morality of individuality, the latter the morality of collectivism. This polarity then morphs in these lectures (lectures 31 and 32, entitled 'The Office of Government') into the distinction articulated as a pull between *telocratic* and *nomocratic* belief or dispositions. The distinction, which has other interim manifestations, finds its final articulation in *On Human Conduct*: a polarity of civil association and enterprise association (*societas* and *universitas*). It is worth noting that a) these two poles have never been *exemplified* as pure types, and b) the non-teleological character of civil association with its emblematic emphasis on the rule of law is essentially liberal in character.

The upshot: *LHPT* shed no developmental light on Oakeshott's ideas.

## **Question 2: Is there Anything Distinctive about These Lectures?**

If one were seeking a 'reliable' survey of the history of political thought, then there are many other texts that could fill this role more than adequately. On these terms there is nothing to commend this book. And if one looked to these lectures as an exercise in the history of ideas, again there are several other writers whose work would more than suffice. The editors rightly note that there should be *some* interest in Oakeshott's historical and contextual approach, which is in stark contrast to the *a*-contextual approach characteristic of many recent introductory texts – a world where, for example, Locke is discussed with not even a whisper of God. The introductory lecture alone neatly sketches Oakeshott's approach and it is this lecture that people should read.

## **Question 1: Is it Sufficient Justification to Publish to Make These Works 'Easily' Available?**

We need to look to the overall editorial *raison d'être* for some guidance. In the preface to the first volume of this series,<sup>5</sup> Luke O'Sullivan emphasizes the collecting of unpublished and published writings, the latter comprising works that have proved very difficult to obtain. The latter task I have no qualms with: the project is editorially straightforward and would be providing a very useful service (I would be thrilled to have a good copy of Oakeshott's very deep essay 'The Concept of a Philosophical Jurisprudence', 1938).

The editors of this collection write that 'For Oakeshott, [the] audience was emphatical-

ly one of listeners, not readers': they acknowledge the importance of Oakeshott's persona, style of delivery and comportment (p. 2).<sup>6</sup> Given the now legendary status accorded the *LHPT* becoming 'more or less the centre of gravity in that vast school' (p. 1), there is an expectation that this collection would, as Peter Coleman says, perhaps 'capture the mood or excitement of the original delivery' (p. 29). For the most part, there is something rather lifeless, lacklustre and awkward about these lectures. As words on the page, these lectures have an uneasy existence, cast in a mode of communication for which they were not intended. Rarely do lecture notes capture something of the moment – this would have been an unlikely promissory note, even had Oakeshott countenanced it – and, as the editors of this volume say, Oakeshott for one reason or another did think better of publishing them.

A standard answer to question 1 is that publication meets the demands of public interest and scholarship curiosity (p. 29). This is a perfectly valid reason. But then one might argue that the mere fact of this collection being posthumously published confers an undeserved status upon it; formally bound hard copy somehow gives faux legitimacy to a work. Why not then have these particular lectures available online? This does not undermine the editorial enterprise: an editorial hand would still be needed to identify, interpret and organize, rendering a highly valuable service. While I am pleased to have a conveniently bound volume to hand, the implications for Oakeshott's long-term standing are uncertain. McIntyre's point that posthumous writings 'would be of no particular interest except for the fact that the author is Michael Oakeshott'<sup>7</sup> cuts to the heart of the matter: anyone who appreciates Oakeshott has, in all honesty, to confront this assertion. Unlike the very different cases, say, of Wittgenstein or Kafka, there was every opportunity to publish. Furthermore, it is not clear whether this series is intended as a *Nachlaß* (all unpublished) or a *Gesamtausgabe* (all published and unpublished)? The notion *Selected Writings* does not suggest either.

If these lectures have *any* significance, two rather tangential reasons suggest themselves. Qualitatively, most people conceive of Oakeshott as 'first and foremost a great teacher'.<sup>8</sup> This is no surprise: *LHPT* adds nothing to enhance this well-established perception. A teacher, broadly conceived, refers to the full range of didactic activities: university lecturer, seminar chairmanship, individual tutor, public speaker *and* communicator through published writings. Quantitatively, more people would have come to know of Oakeshott through these lectures rather than through his book sales. The *LHPT* were held annually for almost 20 years: consider the perhaps thousands of students (and others) who passed through the doors of the LSE's Old Theatre. Many of these students did of course go on to read Oakeshott himself.

A writer's unpublished notes are not on an ontological par with the painter's sketchbook. Beyond legitimate research needs, surely an archive should be more than a feeding ground, picking over the discarded debris of a lifetime's ruminations and then *repackaging* them? Should it not be conceded that any *redundancy* of thought that comprises an archive merely reinforces the strength of Oakeshott's *published* work?<sup>9</sup>

## Notes

1. Kenneth B. McIntyre (2005) 'Publication as Polemic: Review of Michael Oakeshott, *What is History? and Other Essays* (2004)', *Collingwood and British Idealism Studies* 11(1): 119–32. Review kindly supplied to me by Keith Sutherland.

2. Michael Oakshott (1975) *On Human Conduct*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
3. *The Politics of Faith and the Politics of Scepticism* (1996), ed. Timothy Fuller. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
4. *Morality and Politics in Modern Europe* (1993), ed. Shirley Letwin. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
5. Michael Oakshott (2004) *What is History? And Other Essays*. Exeter: Imprint Academic.
6. For an additional account of Oakshott's performance see Peter Coleman (2006) 'Escaping Plato's Cave: A Parable for Politicians', *Quadrant* (April): 28–9.
7. McIntyre (n. 1), p. 125.
8. Editorial Introduction to Michael Oakshott (2001) *The Voice of Liberal Learning*, ed. Timothy Fuller, p. xv. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund; originally published 1989. Most people who attended *LHPT*, be they supporter or detractor, are in accord with this view.
9. Given the wave of unpublished material that is in the pipeline it is worth briefly mentioning the background that has made all this possible. Oakshott's literary estate has been subject to some unusual twists of fate. Oakshott's will designated Shirley Letwin as the executor of his literary estate: 'to do with as she thinks best'. On Letwin's death, Oakshott's literary executorship passed, through her will, to her husband, William, and their son, Oliver, who in turn arranged for Oakshott's papers to be deposited at the LSE. The papers thus passed into the public domain with, so far as I can tell, no editorial stewardship in place.