



Review of Political Philosophy versus History? Contextualism and Real Politics in Contemporary Political Thought, edited by Floyd Jonathan and Stears Marc.

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Political Philosophy versus History? Contextualism and Real Politics in Contemporary Political Thought. Edited by Jonathan Floyd and Marc Stears. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011. 238 pp. \$103.00 hardback. \$33.99 paper.

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The best edited volumes in political theory capture some of the excitement of attending a great conference on the subject. Often, they emerge from precisely such conferences. The volume under review grew out of two workshops at Oxford (in 2007 and 2009) and a panel at the 2008 meeting of the APSA. I had the pleasure of attending the last of these, and can say it was one of the liveliest APSA panels I have witnessed. I was happy to see the two best papers from that panel—those by Melissa Lane and Andrew Sabl—included in the book, alongside six other generally excellent essays, as well as a substantive introduction from both editors and an equally substantive conclusion by Floyd. Together, they are a diverse and stimulating collection of pieces loosely tied together around the theme of political philosophy’s relationship to history.

I should emphasize the word “loosely.” On this point, the editors and I disagree. Like the discussant at a grab-bag conference panel determined to find connections between the papers being presented, Floyd and Stears insist that “what is really striking” about their collection “is that a clear set of shared concerns have emerged from their work.” Although the editors merely solicited essays on the general theme of political philosophy versus history, they insist that “without exception, and without further prompting,” the authors “each homed in on one of two themes: the first of which concerns the place of *universalism* [versus *contextualism*] in political philosophy, and the second of which concerns the place of *realism*” (p. 2). The book is therefore structured around these two themes, with four essays collected in a section entitled “The Challenge of Contextualism” and four more in a section on “The Challenge of Realism.”

It may seem a mere quibble to take issue with exaggerated claims of coherence in an edited volume. The apparent commonalities, however, are the result of a equivocations which can get in the way of our understanding of the topic supposedly under discussion: political philosophy's relationship to history.

The term history itself is famously equivocal. It can refer either to the course of events themselves or to a certain literary genre which claims to record these events; it can be reality as such, or it can be historical writing, historiography in the original sense. Nor does historiography have any monopoly on claims to depict reality accurately; the sciences (be they natural or social) claim to do the same, as do most species of philosophy. Recent moral and political philosophers who sharply segregate what is from what ought to be, and then focus exclusively on the latter, are perhaps the only scholars who do not see their work as tied to actual existence in this way. Realists, in Floyd and Stears's sense, suggest that this form of philosophical utopianism is a mistake.

In their contribution to section two, co-editor Stears and Bonnie Honig provide an evaluative taxonomy of the various forms that this "new realism" has taken over the past two decades or so. Sabl, in turn, presents the new realism as originating in an older conflict between Harvard's government department (once home to Judith Shklar and Michael Walzer) and its philosophy department (once home to Rawls and Robert Nozick). The history department plays no role in his story; the turn to reality can draw on political science and a host of other disciplines in addition to (or even in lieu of) historiography. The question of what relationship political philosophers should have with their historiographical colleagues (discussed elsewhere in the volume, such as in Paul Kelly's and Iain Hampsher-Monk's contributions) is an entirely different question from what relationship they should have with reality as such.

Contextualism, too, is an equivocal term. In discussions of the Cambridge school of intellectual history, the term “contextualism” is generally used to identify a theory of interpretation: the claim that a text cannot be understood in isolation, but only in the context of the other surviving literary products of its time. Such interpretive contextualism is opposed to “textualism,” the claim that careful, open-minded readers can find something to learn from philosophical texts from any time and place, with no additional archival research required. Throughout the volume, however, Floyd uses “contextualism” to identify a form of moral relativism: the claim that we must search for intimations within our contingent cultural context, and the history of its development, in order to find the resources to make moral claims. This moral contextualism is opposed to “universalism,” the view that certain moral principles are justified for all human beings (perhaps even all rational beings as such) independent of their historically contingent contexts.

There may be an elective affinity between the two contextualisms. The moral contextualists Raymond Geuss and James Tully explicitly laud the interpretive contextualists Quentin Skinner and J. G. Pocock as their inspirations; Bernard Williams, although less likely to be identified with “the Cambridge school,” was also part of the contextualist spirit taking hold of that ancient university in the second half of the twentieth century. From the Oxford point of view, all these Cambridge contextualisms may look the same. Yet there is no necessary connection between them. If anything, Skinner’s version of interpretive contextualism might count against moral contextualism. A categorical imperative to situate each text in its particular moment could make it impossible for the likes of Charles Taylor or Alasdair MacIntyre to place them in grand, quasi-Hegelian narratives of cultural development or decline intended to make sense of our current moral and political situation. Gordon Graham’s stirring call to reclaim the political-

philosophical canon from “the dead hand of its history” (p. 84) is thus responding to a very different “challenge of contextualism” than is Floyd’s own anti-relativist contribution to the same section.

Due to these equivocations, a volume on history, realism and contextualism in political philosophy is actually nothing less than a volume on the discipline of political philosophy as a whole. Far from addressing, as the editors claim, “one of the least scrutinized” subjects the field (p. 1), this volume is a welcome contribution to a broad set of discussions which get at the heart of how and why we study politics. Even as we must reject their claim to be tilling previously unbroken ground, however, we can heartily agree that the matters their book addresses “are far from trivial, far from being merely of ‘methodological interest’ and far from being tied irrevocably to the future of the Cambridge School” (p. 9). Indeed, the relationship of political philosophy to historiography—and the relationship of each to the underlying realities that they are both trying to capture—have been central issues since Plato and Aristotle were inaugurating the former discipline while Herodotus and Thucydides were inaugurating the latter. This volume will therefore be of interest, not only to those working at the intersection of political philosophy and historiography, but to all scholars in either field wishing to reflect on the nature and purpose of their intellectual pursuits.