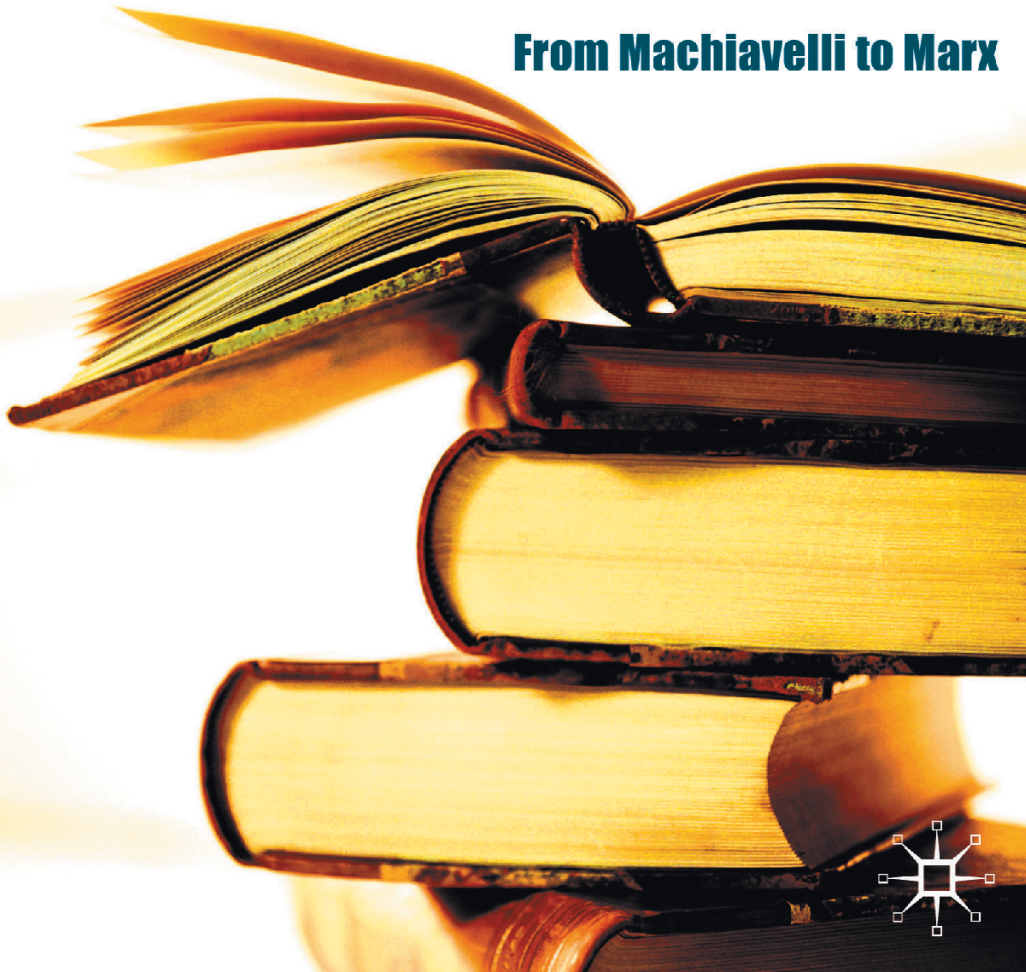


Edited by Alistair Edwards
and Jules Townshend

INTERPRETING MODERN POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

From Machiavelli to Marx



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Alistair Edwards

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ALISTAIR EDWARDS
JULES TOWNSHEND

Introduction

ALISTAIR EDWARDS AND JULES TOWNSHEND

This book aims to meet a pressing need for students of modern political philosophy: the need to access an ever increasing, sophisticated and diverse range of interpretations of the great modern political philosophers – from Machiavelli to Marx. The remarkable flowering of commentary over the past thirty years or so is in part attributable to the way academic life has become somewhat industrialised: production is encouraged, specialisation and the division of labour become intensified. But it is also evidence of something else. All these thinkers remain obstinately relevant. They have provided much of the language and concepts – the building blocks – of contemporary political discourse. And they all offer deep insights into the nature of political life as well as supplying arguments justifying or criticising political action, state institutions and public policy. Even where their vision is limited by their inherited assumptions and theoretical frameworks, as well as by the particular worlds they inhabited, often their ideas can be adapted to shed light on current concerns. These philosophers form a living presence in our own ideological universe, upholding the values of individual liberty, democracy, tradition, property, order, community, equality, and so on. They continue to provoke awe, inspiration, sometimes hostility, but hardly ever contempt.

Yet the perennial fascination with these great thinkers in producing an abundance of commentary also has a downside, particularly for undergraduate students coming fresh to the texts and debates. The problem is not just the exponential growth in the volume of material. It lies more in its increasingly specialised nature. Until fairly recently, the study of political thought required no copious introduction. Papers published in the journals were accessible even to undergraduate students just beginning their engagement with the great writers. Indeed, the titles of the essays written by undergraduates would be similar to the titles of the papers they were expected to use. If a student had asked then, ‘Why does everyone ask these questions of the texts?’ the answer would have been, ‘Because those are the questions that leap from the page, and they are central questions of politics.’ The same

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question asked today would receive a much more guarded response, largely because the questions have become increasingly refined and specialised, narrower in their focus, and more demanding of background knowledge. The response might now be, 'Because a host of different questions have been pursued over the last thirty years and we'll consider the particulars of those developments when you've read up enough on the various paths travelled.'

This book – the first of its kind – is intended to make that response less daunting by summarising and evaluating the key differences between interpretive responses.

Developments in Interpretation

Whatever the institutional and professional demands put on academics, there is little doubt that this blossoming in the study of the history of modern political thought owes much to the enthusiasm of the so-called 'Cambridge School' of Quentin Skinner, Peter Laslett, John Dunn, John Pocock and others, who set new standards in methodological sophistication in attempting a truly *historical* understanding of a thinker. More than thirty years ago, Quentin Skinner claimed to have identified common assumptions that had resulted in the implicit acceptance of false 'mythological' views about political philosophers (Skinner, 1969). Most notably, it was tacitly assumed that all the great writers were dealing with the same range of perennial problems and that each would have their own distinctive ideas about them. In addition, the study of these writers was insufficiently informed by historical understanding. Often the historical context would be ignored completely and the text would be assumed to speak timelessly for itself or, where the historical context was invoked, it would be in terms of broad socio-economic developments without much attention paid to whether these developments were the subject of actual political concern and debate.

Skinner's early pronouncements did not go unchallenged. They may have been stated too sweepingly, or misunderstood as more damning than they were intended to be. But they did carry weight and identified shortcomings. It appears with hindsight that the field lacked clearly stated interpretive frameworks, let alone an agreed methodological orientation to the history of political thought. The dominance, in the Anglophone world at least, of analytical philosophy had hindered this. Texts were picked over in painstaking detail. In most cases, far more time was given to the reformulation of the arguments than the authors had ever devoted to their original versions. Certainly, more time was given to the words written on the page than was given to the study of the historical context in which those words

were written. The principle methodological position appeared to be that these were great authors and that their texts must therefore make, or be forced to make, full and consistent sense. As Oakeshott commented, this presumes consistency to have had the same value in the past as it has in current philosophical work (Oakeshott, 1960, p. li and p. lviii).

Of course, the field was not utterly bereft of methodological positions or historical concerns. Arthur Lovejoy proposed that the history of thought be constructed from 'unit ideas': recurrent images or assumptions that combine and recombine in various forms over the ages (Lovejoy, 1956, pp. 3–23). Leo Strauss suggested a hidden layer of meaning to be found in great philosophical writing, a layer deliberately hidden by authors fearful both of their own vulnerability to persecution and of the dangers of vulgar use of the truth: the great writers hid their true meaning by employing an esoteric code (Strauss, 1952 chapters 1 and 11; Strauss, 1953, pp. 206–11, pp. 246–7). C. B. Macpherson became a chief target for later criticism but had himself made a serious attempt to contextualise great writers within the submerged assumptions of their epochs (Macpherson, 1962, pp. 4–8). More broadly, Michael Oakeshott located writers within traditions that transcended the mundane ideological boundaries and made some progress towards a proper historical contextualisation (Oakeshott, 1960). But the major leap forward came in beguilingly simple form. Peter Laslett traced Locke's *Two Treatises of Government* back from their publication in 1690 to their composition at least ten years earlier (Laslett, 1960, 1998).

At a stroke, the reading of a central but always troublesome text was transformed; it had been mistaken by interpreters in a fundamental sense. A text of this kind, written post-1688, after the Glorious Revolution, was a cosy justification of the status quo. The same text, now identified as written much earlier, became a revolutionary call to arms. This most basic assertion of historical fact helped to turn the study of political thought towards a more contextualist focus. Although it took some time for this message to make itself fully felt, its importance for later contextualist developments cannot be overstated.

It was clear that our knowledge of the conditions under which a text was written must have impact on our understanding, not least in the sense that 'language' can be unstable and varies over time. The growing feeling that there was much to be gained from reading these texts more as time-bound, and as offering answers to specific historically pressing questions, entailed a rethinking of the mode of inquiry. Two major contributions to the study of thought wrought a rapid transformation of the field.

John Pocock suggested that political thought should be viewed as a 'continuum of discourse' containing a number of paradigmatic languages or

idioms. Each paradigm provides the linguistic tools for the expression of political views but it does so selectively. Different paradigmatic languages will offer different perspectives on political life and will lend themselves more easily to the expression of some issues than others (Pocock, 1985, pp. 1–34). This sounds distressingly abstract. But, like most of the progenitors of such ideas, Pocock had more concrete ideas of the actual processes. Modern thought has been dominated by two major paradigms: natural law and classical republicanism (or ‘civic humanism’). Each has its own distinctive language and concerns. Natural law has provided the main vehicle for modern political discourse with its concern for the protection of private rights and liberties and in its focus on the individual. Civic humanism displays different values: citizenship; the liberty of the free man to participate in the public sphere; and the cultivation of civic virtue through participation (Pocock, 1985, pp. 37–50).

Skinner, perhaps more closely influenced by the example of Laslett, put the matter slightly differently: the first task should be to identify ‘authorial intentions’. This suggestion has been widely misunderstood. It sounds like an instruction to make positive engagement with the subjective mental state of the individual author. In fact, it is closer to Pocock’s position than this. Skinner is asking us to identify the ‘illocutionary’ force intended by the author. This requires us to identify what the author was doing in writing the text, not what the author intended to achieve by writing that text (the perlocutionary force). I might, for instance, recount a fanciful tale about a particularly self-important and cruel monarch. I might have all sorts of intentions to achieve effects on my readers. I might want them to react with repugnance to authoritarian rule, or I might just want them to laugh. But what I want is not the first or main concern of the historian of ideas. The primary concern is to identify the act I am performing in writing this tale. Am I recounting fact? Or am I engaging in satire? (Back to Laslett for a moment: am I reassuring people about the acceptability of existing arrangements or am I challenging the present power structure?) I am attempting to communicate with readers, so my writing should bear the imprint of the different ways in which linguistic conventions govern the expression of these two quite different endeavours. Thus the primary focus goes beyond the individual author to the wider linguistic context, within which we find the conventions that allow us to distinguish between straightforward story telling and satire. We also find ourselves engaged in a much more negative process, eliminating what the author could not have been doing, where the text may fail to fit any identifiable conventional expression of that kind of act. The example of Laslett is too simple in that there a simple redating changes our view of the kind of expression embodied in the text. Most alternatives will be less easily resolved. In most

cases we must study the language of the period to weed out those interpretations that could not have been intended by the author since no such meaning could have been attributed to the text by contemporary readers.

These contextualist moves proved of great value. Although their claims to confront 'the meaning' of texts had a sectarian ring, suggesting the exclusion of the other traditional concerns of political theory, their main exponents were usually careful to limit their own claims to the historical dimension of interpretation, leaving the way clear for other interests and concerns, for other flowers to bloom. Many gaps were filled: Skinner on the development of the idea of 'state' in Renaissance Italy; Pocock on the *Ancient Constitution* and the *Machiavellian Moment*; the locating of the more immediate political, intellectual and religious concerns of Hobbes and Locke by Skinner, Tully, Tuck and Dunn. This positive effect was most radically felt in the field of eighteenth-century thought where the deeper interrogation of writers like David Hume and Adam Smith, not at first sight enthusiasts for classical republican values, revealed them to be (in part) users of that language, sharing in some of its concerns but mainly offering a defence of modern commercial society against criticism.

Moves such as these are generally accepted to have solved problems. But they have created others. One problem is that a single writer has to be taken to be moving between linguistic paradigms. Getting the paradigm straight has proved an impossible task in many cases. This is a problem to be reflected on at a high level. But the more immediate problem is that these moves made access to the debates about the texts much more difficult. Not only were the arguments resting upon tricky notions of meaning and appropriate method, they were also demanding of extensive historical knowledge in their application to concrete interpretive questions. We should also note that whatever the 'Cambridge School's' importance has been (and is) for the study of the history of political thought, the reader will soon discover as they move through this book that other sophisticated interpretive frameworks are on offer, some focusing more readily on political, economic and social context, others on psychological motivation, or more exclusively on the text itself. These diverse approaches therefore raised daunting questions, and invite a book like this to ease newcomers to the subject into a lively, worthwhile and rewarding field of debate.

The Structure of the Book

We have used a uniform scheme in the presentation of the material. Each thinker will be dealt with under five headings: introduction; problems and

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issues; why conflicting interpretations? conflicting interpretations; evaluation. Each *introduction* will explain the importance of the writer in terms of his immediate preoccupations and interests, indicating the various contexts in which his ideas arose and giving a flavour of the main ideas without attempting to offer anything like a full or balanced summary of those ideas (the reader should consult other works for such summaries). The section on *problems and issues* will outline the main difficulties that arise from the texts, difficulties that create the space for differing interpretations. No piece of political theory can hope to achieve complete transparency or avoid all ambiguity in its treatment of problems. Indeed, as the foregoing has suggested, many of the difficulties encountered in understanding texts, particularly texts written in a context different from our own, arise from the gap that exists between different sets of expectations. We all approach the world with different questions in mind, so different aspects of the world appear salient in answering these questions.

Why Conflicting Interpretations?

Some of the answers to this question stem immediately from the preceding section. Ambiguity begets difference. But there are other sources of disagreement. All readers are interpreters: you, me and the authors of the books and articles with which we are concerned. Interpreters always bring some agenda of their own to the work they examine. We don't just read the texts; we are reading them for a purpose, with some particular points in mind. Think about this. You are, as a student, directed in your reading in so far as you are given essay questions, tutorial topics, key questions, and so on. You further bring to bear your own interests. It is in these terms that you explore the text. Like the writers of the original texts, their interpreters will bring the same kind of interests to bear. Foremost of these, we suspect, are their own political leanings. Interpreters sometimes seem to be fighting ideological battles by proxy. We can, for instance, see the effects of the reaction against totalitarianism in western scholarship. Some commentators, most famously Karl Popper, divided political philosophers into 'good guys' and 'bad guys'. The 'good guys' (especially Locke, Hume, Burke, Kant and J. S. Mill) contributed to the development of liberalism, either directly or through their opposition to radical change inspired by abstract plans. The 'bad guys' sowed the seeds of dictatorship and repression, beginning with Plato and continuing into the modern world through Rousseau, Hegel and Marx.

Commentators have also realised that their hero might be flawed in some way, and have therefore come to their aid with a theoretical 'makeover'

rendering their argument more robust. This is particularly so for liberals in the case of Mill and, to a lesser extent, Locke. Those who wanted radical heroes engaged in a similar activity when analysing Rousseau and Marx. Less heroically, some of the ideas of these thinkers were borrowed in order to resolve or analyse contemporary political issues. This has obviously been the case with Marx, as a critic of liberal capitalist democracy. Mill's *On Liberty* has been invoked to deal with issues of public policy relating to various kinds of individual self-expression, whether in the media, culture or sexual relations. And Machiavelli's *The Prince* is never far away when it comes to questions concerning the connection between power (including violence) and ethics, whilst his *Discourses* embodies the civic humanism explored by Quentin Skinner. Just as significantly, contemporary American liberal political philosophy rests heavily on two thinkers in this volume. Locke's *Second Treatise of Government* provides the basis for Nozick's property owning libertarian utopia outlined in his provocative *Anarchy, State and Utopia*. Perhaps more importantly, Kant supplied the framework for Rawls's welfare liberalism in his magisterial *Theory of Justice*. Kant also informs contemporary thinking on cosmopolitan justice. And we should not forget Hegel. Communitarians such as Charles Taylor have used his ideas, and he has more than just a walk-on part in Fukuyama's widely read *The End of History and the Last Man*, which celebrated the victory of liberal democratic capitalism over its Communist (and Fascist) adversaries.

Other considerations might also motivate scholars, especially the use of novel interpretive frameworks referred to above. In this regard a far more historical approach has often been adopted. By stressing the intellectual/linguistic tradition within which a thinker wittingly or unwittingly works, we can see just how the natural law tradition impacted on a number of political thinkers, especially Locke, but less obviously, and perhaps more controversially, Hobbes, Hume, Rousseau, Burke, Kant and Hegel. The civic humanist or classical republican tradition has also been recognised as a significant current within the history of political thought, particularly in the case of Machiavelli, Rousseau and the Scottish Enlightenment, of which Hume was a part. Locating a thinker within a certain intellectual or linguistic context, much favoured by Quentin Skinner and the 'Cambridge school' referred to above, helps us to avoid the trap of anachronism, of assuming in timeless fashion that what they meant and intended can be gained from reading only the raw text. Political contextualisation may also enrich our understanding of the circumstances in which a text was written, adding to our knowledge of the author's intention and meaning. Machiavelli and Locke in particular have been the subjects of this line of interrogation.

Adopting such an approach may help to resolve disagreement; all may become clear once the context is properly understood. But it can also create disagreement of its own. There are many contexts and traditions that can be used in this way. It will seldom be clear which of these is appropriate, if any single one ever is. Conflict will therefore arise between contextualist interpretations. Equally, knowledge of the political context can reinforce interpretive difficulty if the author was possibly seeking to gain, or keep favour with, a patron, as with Machiavelli and possibly Burke. Or, more speculatively, the writer might have feared persecution or loss of a job, as with Hobbes, Locke and Hegel, leading them to write in a coded way so as not to give offence. Here Strauss's influence has been important.

Another form of contextualist approach might add less to our comprehension of an author's self-understanding but could help in appreciating the problems with which they were consciously or unconsciously attempting to grapple. Here the socio-economic context, favoured especially by Marxist-influenced commentators such as C. B. Macpherson, is seen as relevant in terms of viewing a particular thinker in relation to underlying socio-economic changes. An equally and potentially conjectural approach is psychoanalysis, the search for hidden motivations. Here Rousseau and Burke have been obvious candidates, although Marx too has been put on the psychiatrist's couch. Thus, conscious, authorial intention can become a less important focus of inquiry. Indeed, different kinds of historical approach may be adopted for another reason: to comprehend more fully the significance of a thinker for understanding present political philosophies and ideologies, which may have little or nothing to do with an author's intention or self-understanding. So for example we may want to understand Hobbes's or Locke's significance for the later liberal tradition, with the subsequent meaning of the term 'liberal' totally obscure from their point of view. In much broader terms we may wish to explore a particular thinker's contribution to modernity, characterised by secularism, science and different forms of individualism, all the product of a post-agrarian and post-theocentric society.

Finally, we may note that the problem of textual interpretation may have little to do with the interpretive agendas of the commentators themselves. These political philosophers may be just plain inconsistent. They can change their mind as their thought develops, so we get the 'young' and 'old' Marx. And of course they may have just forgotten what they said previously, mindful that consistency can be an overrated virtue and valued differently at different times. More specifically, interpretive differences may also arise because thinkers offer inconsistent or ambiguous meanings of key terms, as with Machiavelli's '*virtù*' and '*fortuna*', Locke's definition of 'property', or

Marx's 'forces' and 'relations of production'. Equally prosaic: commentators may be unaware of the existence of key texts. Machiavelli's *The Discourses* did not become widely known until the eighteenth century, and Marx's early works were not readily available until the 1950s in the Anglophone world.

Conflicting Interpretations

This speaks for itself. Here you will find the main body of each chapter, summarising the main points of contention as they have arisen. This summary is necessarily selective. It picks out the main points of contention in a way that should be accessible to the reader who has some knowledge of the immediate appearance of the argument in the original text. Having read a text for the first time, you may find yourself thinking 'OK. But what do I have to say about this?' This section will introduce you to the kinds of things that commentators have said. More pointedly, you might react to your first reading by wondering why you're being told this. This section will give you a number of alternative answers to your question by showing how different interpreters had different ideas about the motives prompting the ideas expressed. We all have our own ideas about which answers are the better ones, so the final section allows each of our authors to express this as an *evaluation* of the interpretations on offer.

The Treatments Offered

To give a flavour of what you will encounter in the following chapters, we will briefly outline the key interpretive issues that have arisen in relation to each thinker. Although commentators could agree, as Maureen Ramsay indicates, that *Machiavelli* aimed to establish a strong and independent state in a corrupt Renaissance Italy, different textual interpretations can in part be put down to Machiavelli himself, if inadvertently. He seemed to advocate different forms of government in *The Prince* (rule by a single individual) and *The Discourses* (rule by the few and the many) and compounded this inconsistency by neither signing nor dating his manuscripts, making the exact context in which he wrote these pieces uncertain. Moreover, he was not intent on writing a formal treatise for contemporary academics to sink their teeth into; he wanted to move his reader, often through rhetoric. As a consequence, he never settled on precise and stable meanings of '*virtù*' and '*fortuna*', the two fundamental, organising concepts in his work. In truth, Machiavelli spoke with many voices, and many interpreters wanted to listen to only one of them.

This unwillingness to listen to all his voices may be attributable to the different interests and passions of the interpreters themselves. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries his writings upset the Catholic Church which was then embattled in the Reformation and Counter Reformation and having to face the rise of the secular state. The Church was outraged by his explicit notion that the Ten Commandments could not be used as a ready-reckoner for political calculation. Yet Italian nationalists warmly embraced him in the nineteenth century. And from the mid-twentieth century he became the focus of scholarly attention. In apparently adopting a value-free, empirical, inductive method in order to uncover the laws governing political behaviour he was heralded as a forerunner of modern political science. Yet scholars began to take textual and contextual matters more seriously, attempting to make sense of Machiavelli's seeming inconsistencies in his discussions of *virtù* and *fortuna*, and between the *Prince* and the *Discourses*. Interpreters were fascinated by Machiavelli, because he posed in starkest terms one of the most fundamental problems of political life: the problem of 'dirty hands', the way in which the principles informing political conduct were far removed from those governing individual, day-to-day dealings. Did Machiavelli divorce politics from ethics? Was he immoral or amoral, holding that the end justified the means, the champion of *realpolitik*? Or was he saying that politics demanded an ethics of a new type (utilitarianism), that looked towards the beneficial consequences (the common good) of a political act, irrespective of the morality of the act itself? Perhaps the jury is still out on this question, if only because the problem of Machiavelli is the problem of politics. Not much better resolved is the issue that loomed behind many of the interpretive agendas: Machiavelli's modernity. Do we see him as a thinker looking backwards to ancient republican *virtù* and mystical notions of *fortuna*, or forwards as one of the first truly secular thinkers attempting to ground politics on the observable facts of human behaviour?

With *Hobbes*, interpreters could agree about his purposes and the broad outline of his argument – he seemed to articulate a disarmingly simple theory – yet differences emerge partly because he offered different presentations of the same argument, and also because of tensions within texts, especially with respect to the power of the sovereign and extent of individual rights. As Alistair Edwards suggests, his argument 'creaks'. (2:44) And then there are the research agendas of the different commentators, with some at least wanting to cast him in a favourable (liberal) light. Others, explicitly or implicitly concerned with Hobbes's historical significance, pose an intriguing question because he stood on the 'cusp of modernity', in the early modern period of political, intellectual and economic transition,

which saw him looking forwards and backwards, a modernist and a traditionalist. His modernism stemmed from his individualism, his attempt to ground his theory of obligation primarily on observable human traits and his self-conscious effort to employ scientific methods, with theological justification taking a back seat. Nevertheless, Hobbes sought to defend the traditional social and political order and its values, and he often spoke in the language of natural law. Yet, some commentators – both left and right wing – have detected in his theory of human nature evidence of bourgeois individualism, although others have been keen to stress that his individualism should be given no preconceived class content. And whilst Hobbes was clear that the individual had the right to resist the sovereign, based upon the right of self-preservation, there still remained the question of whether Hobbes wanted the power of the sovereign to be self-limiting, as a ruler through law, which seemed to propel him in a liberal direction. The question of a self-limiting sovereign in turn rests on the larger issue of the status of his laws of nature. Were they merely prudential and therefore modern, or were they Christian? Depending on that answer is whether Hobbes consistently held to a psychological egoist view of human nature. Also at stake in grappling with Hobbes' conception of the sovereign's power is the tension between Hobbes' own personal preferences in wanting an enlightened sovereign and the logic of his own theory. Yet whatever these textual tensions we have to look closely at his understanding of an evolving English political tradition and of seventeenth-century conflicts if we are to get an informed view of his intentions.

Given his foundational role in transatlantic liberal political culture, controversies over *Locke* inevitably have a currently relevant ideological inflection. Whilst most commentators could agree that Locke was a liberal, consensus evaporated as soon as the question sharpened to, 'a liberal of what stripe?' And this question in part hinged on what precisely Locke meant by the 'preservation of property', who and/or what is Locke seeking to preserve, for what reason and by which means? Conclusive answers to these questions were difficult because the texts were 'messy' (3:62), not merely in relation to the meaning of property. What Locke's priorities were in the *Two Treatises of Government* are not clear, oscillating between a political manifesto and a philosophical inquiry into the nature of government in general, as well as between natural law arguments and more detailed constitutional proposals. Equally, whether the *Two Treatises of Government* should be understood as part of a broader philosophical project is not clear. Then we also have to appreciate that, as Timothy Kenyon indicates, Locke was influenced by a range of interwoven contexts. (3:78–9) Commentators focusing on one context in order to explain his intentions,

often mistook the part for the whole, and unsurprisingly came up with different interpretations that were vulnerable to the charge of attributing a false position to him. Most challenged the standard view of him as simply a constitutional Whig and celebrator of the 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688. From the 1960s onwards interpreters looked more closely at Locke within various contexts. Those who took the political context as important emphasised Locke's radicalism, and even went so far as to lodge him within the Leveller tradition, politically a liberal democrat. Those who stressed the socio-economic backdrop painted him as a bourgeois liberal ideologue, combining Christianity and capitalism, economically a neo-liberal. Scholars underlining the intellectual environment portrayed him as a Christian natural law thinker, for whom property ownership carried social obligations, rendering him in effect a welfare liberal.

Others, in attempting to uncover the meaning of the *Two Treatises* and other works, preferred to move into decontextualised waters, being quite happy with textual analysis and examining the extent to which Locke was a coherent thinker. For example, could his empiricist epistemology which pointed towards scepticism be reconciled with his natural law affiliation which presupposed a high degree of certainty? Some commentators were concerned to show how Locke's inconsistencies revealed liberalism's inherent tensions, while others acknowledged his inconsistencies and proceeded to reconstruct his argument in order to develop a coherent and politically relevant theory of property, whether of a neo-liberal or welfare liberal variety.

Until recently *Hume*, whose scepticism owed much to Locke's empiricist epistemology, was known principally as an opponent of social contract theory. Since the 1970s, however, interest in other aspects of his political philosophy have developed as a result of neo-liberal theorists' enthusiasm for unintended consequence theory and its origins in the Scottish Enlightenment, with which Hume was closely associated. As John Salter shows, interpreters have in effect demonstrated that Hume's political philosophy was far from simple. There were clear textual differences between his *Treatise on Human Nature* and his *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* over his understanding of the origins of justice. The traditional view of Hume's epistemological scepticism was that it reflected his attempt to undermine the natural law tradition, based upon reason. Rather, he argued, social rules stemmed from convention. This position seemed to flow from his desire to limit the right of resistance to rulers by denying natural rights arguments that could easily take a revolutionary turn. More recent accounts, however, argue that his prime intention was the modernisation of natural law and that his explanation of the origins of justice rested upon a secularised version of natural law. He was influenced by a secular reading of Grotius, who, along with

Pufendorf and others, propounded a theory of limited resistance to government in contrast with more popular versions of natural law theory. And the rights of possession, for example, originated ‘naturally’, from within the family. More generally, Hume was concerned to establish the ‘natural’ psychological bases of moral sentiment. An implication of this interpretation was that Hume’s real target of criticism was not natural law as such, but its theological underpinnings. Yet commentators who stressed his natural law affinity also wanted to underline his commitment to ‘convention’ as well. In combining both ‘nature’ and ‘convention’ he was a true moderate within the political context of the Hanoverian regime in the early eighteenth century. Hence he upheld both ‘political’ liberty unique to the British constitution, as well as a more universalistic liberty provided by absolutist regimes, which consisted of freedom under law.

Another interpretive framework viewed Hume’s ambiguities from a different angle. This standpoint associated him with the civic humanist tradition, which saw active citizenship – ‘political virtue’ – as essential in establishing a militarily strong state. He seemed uncertain as to whether the advent of a commercial society would corrupt the political process or enhance it. The growth of public credit could generate social instability in the form of fostering a powerful financial/stockholder class with no particular loyalty to the state. On the other hand, commercial society brought to the fore a public-spirited middle class, as well as more moderate conduct in political life. And the development of the industrial ‘arts’ would increase the nation’s military strength.

In stark contrast to Hume, *Rousseau* has little reputation as a political moderate. In helping to inspire the French Revolution of 1789 and the Reign of Terror that followed, he was perceived as a dangerous thinker, and to this day his thought has the capacity to inflame the passions. As Alan Apperly shows, Rousseau provided plenty of ammunition for radicals to criticise capitalist liberal democracy, as if he were a kind of proto-Marxist. Rousseau also supplied a well-stocked arsenal for liberals and conservatives to damn radicals as incipient totalitarians, as enemies of the ‘open society’. Yet somewhere above the fray could be found sympathetic liberals who saw Rousseau as a forerunner of Kant, the most intellectually sophisticated liberal of all. That Rousseau was open to such diverse interpretations was partly down to Rousseau himself who, in seeking to reconcile individual liberty and order, had a fondness for paradox. This was best exemplified in his idea that good laws were needed to socialise citizens into virtue, but virtue itself was required to make good laws. The ‘effect’ would have to become the ‘cause’. Perhaps (in)famously connected to this promotion of virtue is the paradoxical notion of ‘forcing’ a citizen to be

'free'. And although he championed direct democracy he maintained that the general will could differ from the majority of actual wills as expressed in the 'will of all'. At his most pessimistic he held democracy as an unattainable ideal, whilst in his more optimistic moments he maintained that some form of lawgiver could manipulate the people into democratic virtue. Those hostile to Rousseau held that these paradoxes concealed inconsistencies, whilst those sympathetic to him tried to make sense of, or explain them. Nevertheless, in historical terms his effect has been paradoxical, his individualism inspiring the French revolutionaries' defence of the Rights of Man in 1789, and his republican collectivism used to justify the subsequent Jacobin reign of Terror.

His *Social Contract* provided much of the data for a totalitarian interpretation of his position. His notion of moral liberty implied the 'politicisation of private life' (5:106) and therefore the abandonment of 'negative liberty'. On the one hand, Berlin, whose views exemplified the Cold War liberal response to Rousseau, saw him as an upholder of 'positive liberty', which assumed a 'real' or 'rational will' to which an elite had privileged access. Radicals, on the other hand, were inspired not merely by his argument for direct democracy, but by his *Second Discourse*. In this, Rousseau criticised modern society, with its competitiveness leading to a loss of personal authenticity, and its socio-economic inequality that diminished personal freedom through the loss of autonomy. Certain kinds of liberal were sympathetic to Rousseau, seeing in him a deep preference for individual liberty and the rule of law, as well as upholding the liberal distinction between freedom and licence. His liberalism was of a perfectionist kind, with the general will, although moralising, always open to question. The general will therefore required traditional liberal freedoms of speech, thought, the press and so on. Not surprisingly, given the politically motivated nature of the discussion, much of Rousseau got left on the 'cutting room floor' (5:119), telling us more about commentators' preoccupations than about Rousseau.

If Rousseau is famous for his radicalism, *Burke* is well known as one of conservative thought's main inspirations. Yet, as with Rousseau, David Shugarman indicates that a simple portrait of him is not possible. We do not have to spend much time to tease out his inconsistencies. His contemporaries were astonished by his instant transformation from a progressive Whig politician into a raging opponent of the French Revolution. Not only do we have the 'young' and 'old' Burke, but even his most famous text *Reflections on the Revolution in France* is hardly written from the viewpoint of considered reflection with carefully thought out lines of argument. Not surprisingly, some analysts of Burke see him as an inconsistent dualist, whose economic and political ideas seem grounded upon opposed liberal

and conservative principles. He seemed both a critic and supporter of the existing social, economic and political order, a critic and supporter of both the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie. This left commentators undecided as to whether he was a liberal conservative or a conservative liberal. However, other Burke interpreters whose analysis took a more contextualist inflection maintained that the two Burkes were after all one, especially if the market economy was seen as part and parcel of the traditional order. A more unified Burke is offered by those who stress his liberal credentials in opposing the abuses of power. This constituted the mainspring of his politics, even if at times he had to conceal his true beliefs. Yet this perspective has been contested by those who see Burke as illiberal insofar as he was anti-democratic and intolerant of the 'swinish multitude', Jews and atheists.

Burke's commentators attempting to comprehend the nature of Burke's conservatism have been undecided about his attitude towards abstract theory. Some have viewed him as an archetypal sceptic when it came to the problem-solving powers of reason in human affairs, whilst others have regarded him as a natural law conservative whose position was grounded on metaphysical principles derived from Aristotle and Aquinas. This viewpoint has been rejected by those who, apart from indicating his anti-theoreticism, point to his emphasis, firstly on the way constitutions evolve spontaneously as unintended consequences and, secondly, on the role of pragmatic leadership. Moreover, he often adopted a utilitarian criterion in assessing the goodness of a constitution. Finally, there are interpreters, perhaps under the influence of literary theory, who prefer not to take any of Burke's political positions seriously. He was in their eyes merely a rhetorician or a dramatist, for whom the whole world was a stage. Yet whatever different images of Burke there are on offer, the contemporary political concerns of many of these commentators, especially those who wanted to recruit him to the anti-radical Cold War cause, were not far away.

Interest in *Kant's* political writings and its complexities is a relatively recent phenomenon. This has been prompted by John Rawls's indebtedness to him, as well as by the current need to think about the normative implications of globalisation, especially in terms of transnational justice and other forms of cosmopolitanism. Although Kant was a rigorous thinker, as Katrin Flikschuh demonstrates, he provided fertile grounds for interpretive difference, depending on which elements of his philosophy are emphasised – his epistemological or moral theory, or his theory of history. So far there have been at least five different schools of interpretation. The first suggests that Kant separated politics from ethics in such a way as to offer a quasi-Hobbesian account of political motivation, that is, one based upon rational self-interest. The state's sanctions gave everyone an interest in upholding the

moral requirements of justice, with a social contract necessary to guarantee each other's freedom. And the centrality of self-interest in political life ultimately led to his call for a 'federation of free republics' at the international level, rather than a world government. A second interpretation stresses the moral dimension of motivation. Although Kant's political theory is portrayed as contractualist and the ethics/politics distinction is endorsed, this distinction was internal to morality. Thus obligation was based upon the state's moral authority in upholding the universal principle of justice as the 'principle of self-legislation'. Property rights rested upon the mutual recognition of all citizens that they were needed for external freedom. His cosmopolitan idea of lasting peace also rested on the moral motivation necessary to maintain the institutions of peace.

The third, 'teleological' interpretation was also grounded upon the ethics/politics distinction, with politics as the 'helpmate' of Kant's ethical, end-in-themselves doctrine. The state enabled individuals to realise freedom, and as such was founded not on a self-interested social contract, but as a consequence of objective capacity for individual self-realisation. The teleological imprint was also apparent at the international level, with cosmopolitanism an historical product of the human race searching for peace, the evolving, collective reflection upon the consequences of war and competition. Another interpretation saw Kant running with two theories of obligation, his 'real' one articulated in terms of natural law rather than social contract. Political obligation stemmed from the idea of property as the product of a mutual recognition of everyone's survival needs, forming a 'natural will' upon which the general will is grounded. Survival needs also formed the basis of a state's territorial rights in relation to other states, as well as the property rights of foreigners who passed through a state's territories. Nevertheless, peaceful interstate dealings had to be based upon a voluntaristic acceptance of the principles of justice, according to the requirements of natural law, and only republics were equipped to do this. The final, 'constructivist' perspective on Kant developed a cosmopolitan approach, applying his categorical imperative to interstate relations. This is, in a sense, the grounds for what may be called an 'ethical foreign policy', in which lying and coercion entail logical contradiction.

Traditionally *Hegel* is perceived, in contrast to Kant, as a deeply illiberal thinker, as an apologist for early nineteenth-century Prussian absolutism, as a critic of the French Revolution of 1789 and by the Cold War period as an enemy of the 'open society'. As Tony Burns illustrates, this view of Hegel could be supported in different ways. At the level of his metaphysics his philosophical idealism suggested that he was uncritical of reality and therefore a conservative; this was expressed most graphically in his famous

assertion that 'what is rational is actual and what is actual is rational'. The corollary for Hegel was that the political and ethical principles that underlay the Prussian state marked the 'end of history'. In the *Philosophy of Right* he opposed democracy and its ignorant self-interested 'rabble' that had led to the French revolutionary terror, in favour of the bureaucracy's legislative wisdom. Although he vigorously defended private property as the basis of individual freedom and 'personality', he could be seen as illiberal in the sense that he opposed liberal social contract theory and the idea of freedom as doing what one wants, in favour of liberty as doing one's duty, effectively subordinating the individual to the state.

Over the last thirty years, however, some interpreters have portrayed Hegel as a liberal thinker. According to this reading Hegel is viewed as proponent of constitutional government and the rule of law, of a 'rational' state grounded in natural law and natural rights, and as close to Locke. Here he at least supports the French Revolution insofar as it upheld the Rights of Man. In the last twenty years some commentators have gone even further and portrayed him as a radical democrat, a secret supporter of the French revolution even in his maturity. They also took their cue from Marx's and Engels's interpretation of Hegel, distinguishing between his dialectical method and his metaphysical system, which, as an idealist, suggested that from the point of view of his method, history had not come to a full stop. The description in the *Philosophy of Right* was of a provisional sketch of the best state that had evolved so far in the process of world history. At least one commentator, in detaching Hegel's metaphysical idealism from his seemingly materialist account of politics and history, has suggested that, unknown to Marx, Hegel was a crypto-communist, who criticised capitalist private property relations.

These diverse interpretive positions were not solely attributable to the concerns and dispositions of the commentators themselves, but arise from Hegel's 'often ambiguous and obscure' use of language, (8:163) as when he says 'what is rational is actual, and what is actual is rational'. Second, this dialectical method of synthesising opposed positions means that he never seems to endorse or condemn one position outright, allowing interpreters to adopt different positions depending upon choice of emphasis. Finally, Hegel's meaning does not automatically spring from the page, in that the historical and political context of Prussian absolutism may have prompted him to communicate to his readers in a coded form.

With *Mill* the ambiguities do not have to be teased out of the text. Most accounts have noted the critical tension in *On Liberty* between his utilitarian affiliation to the greatest happiness principle, the product of loyalty to his father's teachings, and his heartfelt plea for individual liberty and toleration