

Global possibilities in intellectual history. A note on practice

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Intellectual history has always been a popular object of criticism, by theoreticians for being too historical and by historians for being too theoretical. The intellectual historians who continue to receive most criticism are those who work within the general framework of the so-called ‘Cambridge School’, which is commonly identified by reference to John Pocock, Quentin Skinner, and John Dunn. Whether or not such authors in any useful sense can be called a ‘school’ today, they are at least united through many of the objections raised against them. Much of this goes back to the early work in the ‘Cambridge’ vein, when Pocock and Skinner were variously accused of making the history they were writing irrelevant to the present and overly antiquarian, of writing history based on ‘books talking to books’, of being far too specific or pointilliste in their interests, and of avoiding grand historical questions. Pocock himself complained in 1986 that intellectual history is:

the only branch of historiography which is constantly under attack; constantly under pressure, first to justify its existence in terms satisfactory to historians (and others) engaged in other pursuits, and then to surrender its distinctive character and redefine itself in terms drawn entirely from these other pursuits (whatever these may be).¹

¹ J. G. A. Pocock, ‘A new bark up an old tree,’ *Intellectual History Newsletter*, 8 (1986): 3–9.

Pocock's defence of the subject was needed because he and Skinner, rather than supporting traditional readings of western European political thought, were overhauling them. Skinner had originally given his famous essay 'Meaning and understanding in the history of ideas', the challenging title 'The unimportance of the great texts in the history of political thought.'² In other words, the accepted canon was explicitly rejected as defining the subject itself, both for methodological reasons and in terms of content. Furthermore, the point about a multiplicity of traditions that Pocock had pressed in his collection of essays *Politics, Language and Time* was strongly re-inforced by the implication of his *Machiavellian Moment*, namely that far from there being one 'west', or western tradition of political thought, Europe and the Atlantic were fractured by competing and incompatible political cultures, especially by the later eighteenth century.³ In other words, rather than being traditionalists, Pocock and Skinner were in fact iconoclasts, and it was exactly the ideas that were attacked as mere antiquarianism and conservatism that made them so.

More recently, the range of criticism has been extended, with intellectual historians not being sufficiently global in outlook. Since the notion of globality seems uncommonly flexible, the criticism can be hard to pin down. It is safe, however, to assume that the complaint includes being too Anglocentric or Eurocentric and generally 'Western', with the background assumption that intellectual historians make themselves into apologists for empire and more local forms of domination, in the manner of the Orientalists identified by Edward Said.⁴ Such claims often regurgitate

² Petri Koikkalainen and Sami Syrjämäki, 'Quentin Skinner. On encountering the past', *Finnish Yearbook of Political Thought*, 6 (2002): 34-63.

³ J. G. A. Pocock, *Politics, Language and Time. Essays on Political Thought and History* (London: Methuen & Co., 1971); same, *The Machiavellian Moment. Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975).

⁴ Andrew Sartori, 'Global intellectual history and the history of political economy', and Samuel Moyn, 'On the non-globalization of ideas', in Moyn and Sartori, eds., *Global Intellectual History* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2014), pp. 110-132, 187-204.

past criticisms of intellectual history; in studying the published writings of the prominent and the elite, intellectual historians cannot comprehend the perspective of ‘the other’, where the latter is a variable that can be filled in according to need, being the poor, the indigenous, the oppressed, who by not being studied will be lost to history. By concentrating on the views of those who were sufficiently elite to be historical agents by means of their writings, intellectual historians supposedly cannot avoid justifying the world view of those they study, and thus of alienating themselves from enlightened causes of reform and progress that need to be situated in a different kind of history.⁵ Even in the present issue of *Global Intellectual History*, Sanjay Subrahmanyam notes that Cambridge School intellectual historians have not ‘considered the possibility of exploring an intellectual history outside western Europe and north America, if one leaves aside a brief set of sallies by John Pocock into the question of New Zealand’s Maoris in a colonial context.’⁶

It is not our purpose here to offer a general defence of intellectual history in the Cambridge mode. Rather we want to outline how one historian of this type, John Pocock, as a matter of fact has opened quite specific avenues for the study of past intellectual matters in distinctly non-Western contexts. What is more, we will suggest that these openings spring directly from basic features of the author’s general and well known conception of intellectual history. Pocock’s work beyond the west amounts not incidental sallies, but rather the formulation of and application of an over-all strategy that readily encompasses a globalising agenda. The Turkish novelist Elif Shafak has

⁵ Drew Maciag, 'When ideas had consequences—or, whatever happened to intellectual history?', *Reviews in American History*, 39/4 (2011): 741-751; Sanjay Subrahmanyam, 'Global intellectual history beyond Hegel and Marx', *History and Theory. Studies in the Philosophy of History*, 54/1(2015): 126–137.

⁶ Sanjay Subrahmanyam, ‘Beyond the usual suspects: On intellectual networks in the early modern world, *Global Intellectual History*. See further Subrahmanyam, 'Global intellectual history beyond Hegel and Marx', *History and Theory: Studies in the Philosophy of History*, 54/1 (2015): 126-137.

defined 'a global soul' as one that challenges especially fixed notions of east and west:

We are living in a Manichean world where good/bad, beautiful/ugly, West/East, modern/traditional, masculine/feminine and many other dualities are taken for granted. I want to question these dualities. I want to show the East within the West and the West within the East. I believe that as human beings we can have multiple belongings. We can dream in more than one language.⁷

If global history somehow embodies this aspiration, then Pocock can largely be said to have realised it, and to have been doing so in writings from the 1960s onwards that are often neglected.

We may begin with the centrality of *distance*.⁸ Here it is useful to remember the biographical circumstance that Pocock for most of his long life has been an outsider, first as a New Zealand student and young scholar in Britain, then for decades as an émigré professor in the US. From a different perspective, Pocock has been a theorist in the political science profession and an intellectual historian in the history profession. Pocock has often stressed his outsider status in these respects, and indeed seems frequently to have cultivated it. It has certainly influenced his work and runs as one of the themes through much of his *oeuvre*. It is telling about Pocock's way of presenting his ideas that a point is made in particular episodes rather than general declarations. A striking case of this arose in the discussion of his *Machiavellian Moment*. The book was received and criticised as iconoclastic by numerous political

⁷ Elif Shafak, 'Being an artist in Turkey is a constant struggle', *Irish Times*, 2 June, 2015.

⁸ See further, Mark Salber Phillips, *On Historical Distance* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2013).

philosophers and historians of political ideas, especially for challenging accepted truths about the founding of the North American republic. In asserting that the American Revolution and founding Constitution had had neo-Harringtonian and neo-Machiavellian origins, Pocock was questioning the existence of a liberal tradition of resistance that sought the recovery and permanent establishment of liberty. The implication of his argument was that the role of the canonical figures defining such a tradition, especially John Locke, was doubtful and had to be re-thought. This dramatic revision led to responses that often were vitriolic and dismissive.⁹ Pocock has recently summarised what happened in the following terms:

My suggestion that a neo-Machiavellian critique of Federalist politics persisted was taken...for a claim that it remained fundamental and this was attacked, with a vehemence at times amounting to anger, by those who wished to claim that American political values could never have been other than Lockean (which of course they very importantly *were*). It was at this point that I realised that, in debating the fundamentals of their government, Americans debate who they essentially are; and that since I did not intend to become one, it would be fitting to leave the debate to them.¹⁰

In other words, as a non-American living and working in the United States, while never being a citizen, Pocock saw how a particular theory of politics had become a presupposition for the American understanding of their history, or how political theory masqueraded as history.¹¹

Pocock saw his game as distinctly different. The idea that a theory or philosophy of history – such as those maintained by political ideologies, but not only by these – could or should be a presupposition for the writing of history is perhaps the

⁹ For examples see Joyce Appleby, 'Liberalism and the American Revolution', *The New England Quarterly*, 49/1 (1976): 3-26; 'What is still American in the political philosophy of Thomas Jefferson?', *William and Mary Quarterly*, 39 (1982): 287-309; *Liberalism and Republicanism in the Historical Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992); T. H. Breen, 'Ideology and nationalism on the eve of the American Revolution: Revisions once more in need of revising', *Journal of American History*, 84/1 (1997): 13-39 and *The Lockean Moment: The Language of Rights on the eve of the American Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

¹⁰ Pocock, 'From *The Ancient Constitution to Barbarism and Religion; The Machiavellian Moment*, the history of political thought and the history of historiography', *History of European Ideas*, 2017.

¹¹ Pocock, 'America's foundations, foundationalisms, and fundamentalisms', *Orbis*, 49/1 (2005): 53-60.

most persistent object of criticism across Pocock's sprawling work. His constant concern has been to make such theoretical abstractions the objects of determinedly historical investigation.¹² It is to this purpose that Pocock so assiduously has cultivated and exploited distance. This should of course not be understood as some sort of positivistic neutrality of the historian. To the very contrary, it is Pocock's intense awareness that the historian is coming to the objects of his or her study with a personal history that makes the cultivation of distance so important. It is in this way that we have to understand Pocock's insistence on localising himself in time and space, something that the reader meets not only in such explicit statements as the one quoted above about the American debate but also in the prose style that Pocock has developed. Pocockian prose is strikingly self-referential and self-distancing in various ways. Pocock uses locutions such as 'It seems to have been demonstrated that ...' (in summing up a lengthy and highly intricate argument);¹³ 'the historian of X will here say that ..., but the present author is not an historian of X'; 'we have now reached the point in the argument where ...'; the passive voice, 'it might be said, but it is not being said here'; and many other devices by which he locates himself, considered purely as the current writer in relation to this or that cultural context of relevance to the subject under discussion. One may say that this awareness of one's locality is at the core of the persona of the historiographer that Pocock displays through the practice of his writing.

Pocock's practice of historicising his own work as it is being presented, or of historicising the act of presentation, is a dramatic way of insisting that his work is intended to be empirical in character and without theoretical presuppositions about the

¹² Cf. Ian Hunter, 'The mythos, ethos and pathos of the humanities', *History of European Ideas* 40 (2014): 11-36, at p. 29.

¹³ J. G. A. Pocock, *Political Thought and History. Essays on Theory and Method* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 182.

shape of history, such as one finds in philosophies of history. This practice moves on to a different level in the handling of historical traditions. Broadly speaking, Pocock's approach, greatly indebted to that of Michael Oakeshott, has been to demonstrate the historical specificity of traditions, the most common device being to show that what is commonly taken to be one tradition in fact is a plurality of lines that the historian may relate to each other, and in that sense relativise them. The most well known example of this is probably Pocock's pluralisation of 'the Enlightenment.'¹⁴

The Machiavellian Moment was obviously an outcome of the desire for a methodological paradigm shift in the history of political thought that Pocock shared with Quentin Skinner, a shift that is commonly seen as a revolution in approaches to the subject. *The Machiavellian Moment* was, however, also a study in the history of historiography, and Pocock has in fact described his subsequent work as a turn to historiography. In *The Machiavellian Moment* he was tracing the story of the migration of Renaissance republican ideas into seventeenth-century Britain, under the assumption of a common origin in ancient moral and political theory and historiography, and the transportation again of several of these ideologies and practices into the colonial settler communities in North America, with all the long-term effects this would have on the articulation of a quite different political culture, with its own supporting historiography. At each step in the ideological migration and its constituent part-steps, there was a profound transformation of the intellectual goods received. A prominent feature of such transformation was – then and in general – to find ways of obscuring that it was taking place. As already mentioned, it was the

¹⁴ See classically, J. G. A. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion. The Enlightenments of Edward Gibbon 1737-1764* (Cambridge, New York, and Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1999) and 'Historiography and Enlightenment: A View of their History', *Intellectual History Review*, 5/1 (2008), 83-96.

presentation of an alternative historiography for the North American republic and the associated displacement of Locke in the history of enlightenment thought that generated so much animosity. This supported Pocock's view that a second revolution was necessary in intellectual history, by developing the field of the history of historiography.

The main fruit of this historiographical turn has been Pocock's remarkable series *Barbarism and Religion*, a six-volume study centered on the first three books of Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*.¹⁵ Pocock's volumes reveal the many genres of historiography which Gibbon faced in writing, each with distinctive political or religious implications, and Gibbon's movement between them, fully aware of what he was doing and why:

After 1975 my interests turned increasingly towards the history of historiography, and focussed on the 'philosophical' histories which joined with the slightly older 'philological' histories to transform, without replacing, the rhetorical narrative historiography had inherited from antiquity. I was led to situate Gibbon's *Decline and Fall* in the context formed by the growth of two grand narratives: the first [narrative was] framed by Bruni and Harrington, in which the 'ancient prudence' of Rome was overcome by Gibbon's 'triumph of barbarism and religion', meaning first the challenge of 'modern prudence' formed by the establishment of feudal tenures and second that of the Christian churches, met about 1650 by the formation of the European states system. A further grand narrative was the history of commerce that had made the state possible, and I related the *Decline and Fall* - as far as its character as narrative permitted - to the four stage schemes of 'the history of society' moving through pasture and agriculture towards the growth of commerce, which had made philosophical history possible, without - it should be noted - regarding the invention of credit and paper money as the birth of a new 'stage'.¹⁶

Pocock's reconstruction of eighteenth-century historiography is likely to transform the way we view the enlightenment and after. It needs to be set beside other broad concerns of his which precede his work on Enlightenment historiography and make

¹⁵ J. G. A. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, 6 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999-2015).

¹⁶ Pocock, 'From *The Ancient Constitution* to *Barbarism and Religion*; *The Machiavellian Moment*, the history of political thought and the history of historiography', *History of European Ideas*, 2017.

clear how such historiography may be seen to be historically parochial. This earlier work marks out Pocock as an historian of migration, not – or not only – in the sense of tracing the paths and settlements of people and peoples, but first of all in the sense of the transplantation of forms of ‘self-reflection upon human activity’ across space and time. A central theme in his work has always been to show the many ways in which the transplantation itself becomes part of the self-reflection that is being transposed, and that this again affects the ways in which the migratory event is looked upon from the outside – outside in space and outside in time. In other words, in being transplanted, self-reflection adopts or integrates a history – or several histories – of itself, which again creates an historiography – or historiographies – of such histories. In the process of time, history and historiography will become interleaved in multiple ways.

This pattern of explanation was basic to *The Machiavellian Moment*, as we have indicated. It is also to be found, however, in another field that is perhaps less well known, namely Pocock’s extensive analyses of similar intellectual transplantations in the nineteenth century, from Britain to the settler communities in the Antipodes, and especially Pocock’s New Zealand. The standard nineteenth-century theories of the British constitution, the common law, the Whig history of the mother country and, not least, its literature, was all brought along by British settlers. Inevitably, however, part of the meaning of these intellectual goods became the fact that they were being brought, and transported to a different place, with a distinctive history. The ‘original’ intellectual goods became part of an account of why the people left Britain and where they left for and, very quickly, became part of the immigrants’ attempts to settle socially and intellectually in entirely different circumstances. Immediately such questions arose as, how to write a history of New Zealand or a

history of Australia that is other than a branch of British (and Irish) history? Can there be a theory of politics or, more broadly, a public culture that is not simply provincially British? In other words, questions arose of collective, local and individual identity, and all of the issues that again have relevance for how these matters are seen from the outside, not least from the old country, for example in colonial history and colonial literary theory. More than anywhere else, it is in this antipodean context that Pocock has confronted the difficult issues of settler versus indigenous culture and the associated questions of what this cultural battle mean for intellectual history.

Such concerns played a role in Pocock's discussions of North America, but they become particularly interesting in the Australasian context.¹⁷ Already in the early 1960s Pocock edited a collection derived from a series of public broadcasts on *The Maori and New Zealand Politics*. In the introduction, he called for Maori history as a subject to be established, and with fellow historians demanded the replacement of the term 'Maori wars' with 'land wars' as a description of the conflicts between the New Zealand government and the indigenous tribes. Pocock's rationale was the need to put an end to a white settler 'us' versus the Maori 'them' mentality. And he was convinced that the Maori experience could be related to many other instances of the taking of land by Western states or by European immigrants.¹⁸ The core of the matter is that settler cultures – whose whole identity was dependent upon the kind of historical self-consciousness that we indicated above – here, in the antipodes, encountered and had to find ways of living alongside cultures that were non-literate and which, as Pocock understands them, had nothing like a European conception of

¹⁷ See J. G. A. Pocock, *The Discovery of Islands. Essays in British History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), especially pp. 181-255.

¹⁸ J. G. A. Pocock, 'Introduction', in *The Maoris and New Zealand Politics*, ed. Pocock (Auckland: Hamilton, Blackwood and Janet Paul, 1965).

historical time but whose identity was provided by cosmogenies of various sorts. The settlers had to figure out how to include these people in their own historical time as a prerequisite for any understanding of them at all. But of course, at the same time, the indigenous people had to find a place in their own intellectual universe for the settlers, a fact that in turn acquired greater and greater significance to settler self-awareness, as we see in the role that this dialectic has played and is playing in politics relating to indigenous people.

A common feature in this work of Pocock's is the focus on islands, and he does in fact often talk of archipelagic history and of oceanic history, including the intellectual history of the British Isles, the Atlantic world, New Zealand and Australia. Pocock's concern is with the different sense of identity that is engendered by distance, isolation, relative security, the need to travel by sea, and the need to trade by sea. In short, geographical or spacial identities that are relational in character, shaped by other places and other people, just like their temporal or historical identities, are relational because they relate to the shifting times of their own lives and the lives of other people(s). In developing such a perspective, Pocock was greatly indebted to James Tully's *Strange Multiplicity*.¹⁹

These ideas lie behind Pocock's deep suspicion of over-riding forms of history, notably 'European' history, 'British' history, 'the Enlightenment', 'Protestantism', and 'liberalism'. Such notions are reifications of theoretical abstractions that tend to be put about without awareness of their dependence upon a contemporary – modern – scholarly context and hence without an ability to deal with the multiple relational identities that are hiding behind such labels. Hence Pocock's great efforts at the pluralisation of these subjects. Here one of his early contributions,

¹⁹ James Tully's *Strange Multiplicity. Constitutionalism in the Age of Diversity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

supported by others, was to show just how different the history of Britain looked if it was seen not as one history but as the shifting interrelations of the three very different political cultures of the kingdoms in the British Isles.²⁰ What was more, without an awareness of the multiple historical identities hiding under the old label of British history, it was impossible to understand what it was that was transplanted elsewhere in the Atlantic and Oceanic worlds. And so we got work with titles such as *Three British Revolutions* – of which the third was the one taking place in North America from 1776 onwards.²¹

It is also from this perspective that we must see Pocock's deeply critical attitude to 'Europe' as an entity that can be said to have a history. To his mind, the idea of Europe has never had the kind of stability that would allow people to relate to it in practice, preeminently in politics. The political and ideological needs of politicians, especially those involved in the creation and development of the European Union, have led to the formulation of a spurious historiography. One danger of this historiography is that it obscures the pluralistic histories that always accompany political innovation, and that are especially required in Europe, as a bulwark against further outbreaks of bloody violence. Pocock's treatment of Europe is a prime example of his central theme that historical writing often turns out to be political theory by other means, just as, vice versa, the articulation of political theory is dependent upon historical assumptions.

Although wary of history serving the cause of theory and especially of philosophical history by stealth, Pocock does not shy away from tracing grand themes across temporal and geographic boundaries, as we have indicated by reference to his now classic establishment of a *longue durée* for republicanism from the Renaissance

²⁰ Op. cit., pp. 47-103.

²¹ *Three British Revolutions – 1641, 1688, 1776*, ed. J. G. A. Pocock (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980).

to the late eighteenth century and similarly with the main thoroughfares of his oceanic histories. What characterises his work on these themes as proper historiography is that they emerge from and thus become the framework for a host of particular episodes. In a way, the grandest of these showpieces is Pocock's ongoing historicisation of the very activity of being a historian, an effort towards which he may have turned with especial attention in his later work, as we noted above, but which in fact was present from the beginning. It is an early essay on 'The origins of study of the past' that we want to refer to as being of particular relevance to the possibilities of global intellectual history. This is well indicated by the subtitle of the essay, 'a comparative approach', which refers both to historical periods and to cultural locales.²²

Pocock's essay aimed to do something new, by treating the history of historiography as 'the history of the problems occasioned by men's awareness of the past in different societies, and of their attempts to deal with these problems'. Historiography is only one form of awareness of the past, and the purpose of the essay was to identify what is particular to this form and to do so by analysing historical examples – case studies – of cultures in which past-awareness did *not* take, or did not *quite* take, the form of historiography, and to contrast these instances with others where historiography *did* come about. The former cases are those of ancient Athens, pre-Ch' in China, medieval and Renaissance Europe, and, largely, early-modern England; the latter cases include early-modern Scotland, Naples, Ireland and France. This framework for the discussion may seem to indicate the very proto-type of a Euro-centric progress story, but it is very far from this. First, Pocock's essay is an account of how a variety of quite different forms of past-awareness, which we may simply lump together as traditionalist, as a matter of historical fact have served to

²² J. G. A. Pocock, 'The origins of study of the past: A comparative approach', in *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 4 (1962): 209-246, reprinted in Pocock, *Political Thought and History*, pp. 145-186. We refer to the latter version. The original was written for Michael Oakeshott's festschrift.

underpin the continuity that any society requires. Secondly, Pocock's essay is a demonstration of how a coincidence of some long-term causes, and several particular and to some extent fortuitous factors, brought about modern historiography in the places mentioned. One may thus say that in historical and comparative – ‘global’ – perspective the latter, modern historiography, began as a distinctly parochial phenomenon.²³

The basic precondition for the emergence of a historiography is a disruption of a tradition of continuity of institutions and the society's account of these disruptions. However, this is by no means a sufficient condition, and a great deal of Pocock's analysis is devoted to showing what other conditions, as a matter of historical facts, have been necessary in particular instances. In the case of Athens, it had no historiography in anything like the modern sense, because such interest in history as the Athenians had was not ‘the product of a concern with the past of organised society as explaining or justifying its present’ and there was no ‘sense of organised dependence upon the past.’ The city's ‘various organized activities ... did not provide bodies of material about their pasts, modes of dependence on those pasts, or problems arising out of that dependence, sufficient to necessitate any specialized forms of thought about the past and its relation to the present.’ Thucydides, for example, was interested in the past only to emphasize that past events ‘were less in magnitude than those of the present.’²⁴ Such past-awareness as had to be invoked was provided by ‘pure historization’ or ‘the Hellenic myths’. What is more, ‘it is at least conceivable that such a society might lack specialized custodians of specialized relationships with different pasts.’²⁵

²³ This of course gives rise to a further historical inquiry as to why, how and where this limited occurrence repeated itself, but we leave that alone here.

²⁴ J. G. A. Pocock, *Political Thought and History*, pp. 157-158.

²⁵ P. 157.

Turning to pre-Ch'in China, Pocock outlines how 'a society whose thought was dominated by one set of highly institutionalized past-relationships, those of the *li* or traditional rituals' eventually had its guidance by the past questioned by Taoist and Legalist thinkers on the grounds that the circumstances of society had changed. Here, he suggests, 'we seem to have a succession of ideas that will be repeated at other times and places', of which the central one is that 'historical criticism gives rise to the idea that institutions of the past are appropriate only in the circumstances of the past, which no longer obtain in the present'. The crucial question is whether such historical criticism – the rejection of the normative function of the past – is the result of 'intensive study of the past *an sich*', or whether it is a matter of, for example, 'Taoist metaphysical conviction of the transitory nature of reality ... [so] that what things were now they could not have been then? This might be philosophy of history, but could not be historiography'.²⁶

At this point Pocock's interest in whether or not ancient China saw the emergence of something like historiography crosses with another of the fundamental themes in the intellectual history that he practices, namely the role of language for the maintenance of authority. In China – as elsewhere – this hangs intimately together with the conditions for historiography, and in order to see this we turn briefly to another early essay that may be seen as a companion piece to 'The origins of study of the past', namely 'Ritual, language, power: An essay on the apparent political meanings of ancient Chinese philosophy'.²⁷ The succession of Chinese philosophical theories that interested Pocock both directly and indirectly highlighted the role of

²⁶ P. 172. Pocock adds that he does not know, 'whether historiography in this sense developed in ancient China.'

²⁷ J. G. A. Pocock, 'Ritual, language, power: An essay on the apparent political meanings of ancient Chinese philosophy', first in *Political Science* (New Zealand) 16 (1964), reprinted in Pocock, *Politics, Language and Time*, pp. 42-79. We refer to the latter version. For a third essay that amplifies the two essays discussed here, see 'Time, institutions and actions: an essay on traditions and their understanding', in *Political Thought and History*, pp. 187-216.

language in the exercise of authority. Indirectly, this was done by showing how in pre-Ch'in China the conduct of rituals was the exclusive means of government of the upper echelons of society, while only the lower echelons were kept in order by explicit decrees. In later theorising it was then shown what happened when ritual broke down and had to be replaced by linguistically articulated prescription. The point is that ritual is a fact that either occurs or does not occur, namely a traditional practice whose only concern with the past is the same as that with the future, namely that it is not changing. In contrast, linguistic performances have contraries other than non-occurrence; they can be gainsaid, and the meaning of words is inherently contestable and open to interpretation. Accordingly, rule by means of language has to be backed by enforced interpretations and punishment:

Once words become the main medium of communication between ruler and ruled, the logic, grammar and dialectic with which they are used affects [sic] the character of the power exercised. One extreme heresy denies both the meaning of words and the necessity of power, thus emphasising that power is a consequence of the uncertainty of words; another divorces power alike from norms and their intelligible communication and discussion, thus demonstrating that power may be both non-moral and totalitarian.²⁸

The lessons Pocock drew from Chinese philosophy served, of course, to underscore his central theme, that a society's relationship to its past was inherently related to its political thought and practice, and when that relationship became articulated linguistically, the politics changed profoundly, sometimes dangerously. This

²⁸ 'Ritual, language, power', 79.

applied not least to modern historiography, linguistic in nature, contestable and contested, and, as a consequence, the history of historiography had become a subject in its own right. The upshot so far of Pocock's own cultivation of this history was that historiography is much less modern than often assumed, with roots in the Renaissance and the early-modern period. It is those roots that Pocock pursues through a series of cases where historiography may have been approached but was not fully articulated.

To us [the] thinking [of the Renaissance humanists] appears both historical and unhistorical: the former, because they were undertaking to reconstruct the meanings which documents had possessed for those who had framed and used them; the latter, because in their belief that a document's original meaning could be directly applied ... to modern conditions, we recognize the humanist ideal of imitation, which we consider to have delayed the emergence of historical understanding till the late eighteenth century.²⁹

In England this delay was particularly marked because of the dominance of the common law and the idea of the ancient constitution, so that even in 'the late eighteenth century ... the English (but not the Scottish) awareness of the past was still very largely traditional rather than historical.'³⁰ When an attempt was made in revolutionary times to disrupt the continuity of the reigning tradition, for example by the Levellers, 'they said in effect what Mo Tzu is reported to have said to the Confucian traditionalists of his time, "Your antiquity does not go back far enough", and constructed the myth of a set of ancient liberties more universal than those now obtaining.' The justice of these liberties the Levellers then supported by 'an appeal to

²⁹ *Political Thought and History*, p. 164.

³⁰ *Op. cit.*, p. 175.

“reason” or “nature” which might annihilate [their own] appeal to the past’. And so again, ‘a tradition of continuity, once broken, had to be restored by means of a rationalism which rendered the past unnecessary.’³¹

The situation was very different in the other national cultures mentioned. These were by no means the same, but they had in common that they were not dominated by one coherent tradition that underpinned their central institutions. Historical consciousness and historical research tended to be associated with the acknowledgement of discontinuity between past and present and the plurality of legal traditions within a national history, with historiography emerging when choices had to be made about which continuity with the past would suit the present. This was why historiography in Scotland and in Naples, or in France and in Ireland in early modern times proved so much more fecund than in England, where assumptions about a unified customary law prevailed, leaving historical writing altogether traditional. As Pocock put it, ‘Scotland and Naples furnish cases of historical thought arising from plurality of tradition, when the present has to be explained by reference to a past other than the nation’s own.’ Ireland and France show what ‘happens when a society’s present compels two different conceptions of continuity with the past’. What this means for Pocock's over-all thesis is well explained by the contrast between England and France:

Instead of a single body of customary law in all parts of the kingdom, there were [in France] several distinct bodies of *coutumes* in different regions ...

Since there were several laws, there were several modes of continuity with the

³¹ Pp. 171-172.

past, and since French past-relationships were plural, they presented problems.³²

The problems in question were essentially that there was no unitary account of how several pasts could relate to posterity, and ultimately to the present itself (whenever that was thought to be). Accordingly, there was a need for a set of overriding universally normative principles that would connect past and present *or* for a historiography that could reconstruct the complex interaction between the historically given elements, ‘the monarchy and the courts, the bureaucracy and the seigneurs.’ France enjoyed both – ‘the extremes of unhistorical rationalism and an efflorescence of constitutional historiography ... different products of the same situation ... [and with the] common antithesis of traditionalism that lasted longer in England’.³³ Other cases of historiographical moments worthy of investigation, Pocock was certain, included Tokugawa Japan, when samurai scholars ‘sought to disentangle original forms of Shinto from Buddhist accretions and the original powers of the emperor from encroachments by the shogunate’³⁴; Vico's rejection of Renaissance humanism's philology; and Ibn Khaldun's development of historical forms of sociology.

It is against the background of the wide-ranging history of historiography indicated here that Pocock's ideas of the much more recent, and much more ‘Western’, philosophical history of the Enlightenment and the historiography of commercial society must be seen. The latter arguments are much the most well known sides of his work, not least because of their intertwining with his history of early-modern political thought, but it is worth reminding ourselves that there is a sense in which he has made significant efforts to localise, if not parochialise, these main works

³² Op. cit., 178.

³³ Op. cit., 182

³⁴ Op. cit., 183.

by placing their themes in much wider temporal and geographical perspectives – and to do so by employing the same methodological ideas across the board.

So, is Pocock's work a case of global intellectual history in one or another of the senses currently being proffered? We think the conclusion to be drawn from the preceding considerations is that this question is misplaced. If intellectual phenomena are being studied in the pluralistic manner briefly indicated here, then the extent – spacial and temporal – of the relations that have to be invoked to identify a given subject for a particular study is not a theoretical issue but a question of ad hoc argumentative strategy and decision making by the historian in question.