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**TEXT AND CONTEXT:
METHODOLOGICAL DEBATES
IN THE STUDY OF POLITICAL
THOUGHT**

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Preface

We are happy to bring out Dr. Mangesh Kulkarni's paper on 'Text and Context: Methodological Debates in the Study of Political Thought' as part of the series of Occasional Papers published under the auspices of the Department's Center for Advanced Studies (CAS). The series largely features research work done by the faculty members of the Department. Its purpose is to make available to students, researchers, college teachers and colleagues the 'work-in-progress' that has benefited from the resources of the CAS.

The Department is currently running the first phase of the CAS after successful completion of three phases of the Special Assistance Programme of the UGC from 1991 onwards. During those fifteen years, the Department initiated the practice of publishing Occasional Papers, and many of them have been subsequently revised and published in journals or books. This practice has been continued after the CAS was granted to the Department by the University Grants Commission (New Delhi) for the period 2008-13. We have also introduced the practice of getting the papers peer-reviewed and revised prior to publication.

This paper by Dr Mangesh Kulkarni is based on his ongoing work. We are thankful to him for giving us the draft paper for publication and for revising it in the light of the reviewer's comments. We are also thankful to the expert who peer-reviewed the first draft.

Coordinator,
Centre for Advanced Studies

**TEXT AND CONTEXT:
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- Mangesh Kulkarni

A historically informed, systematic study of key political thinkers, concepts and theoretical traditions has been recognized for long as a distinctive sub-field of Political Science.¹ This paper attempts an overview of the methodological debates in the sub-field so as to draw some useful lessons for scholars desirous of specializing in it. The term ‘methodology’ is used to designate a general investigation of the aims, concepts and principles of reasoning appropriate to a given field of investigation, in this case, the history of political thought. While the survey does not claim to be exhaustive, it does, nevertheless, aim at presenting a critical account of a wide range of methodological positions from an eclectic viewpoint.

Positivism : A protean metatheoretical position, positivism has many connotations. Central to the positivist credo is a valorisation

¹ For recent surveys of the sub-field, see James Farr, “The History of Political Thought as Disciplinary Genre” in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Theory* (eds.) John Dryzek, Bonnie Honig and Anne Phillips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp.225-242; and Terence Ball, ‘History and the Interpretation of Texts’ in *Handbook of Political Theory* (eds.) Gerald Gaus and Chandran Kukathas (London: Sage, 2004), pp. 18-30. The overview offered in my paper goes well beyond the ambit of these surveys.

of scientific as opposed to theological, metaphysical or moral theorisation. Science itself is viewed as an objective study of observable phenomena, aiming at the formulation of verifiable explanatory laws and theories. Of particular importance to the present discussion is the positivist insistence on a rigid separation of facts and values in conducting social inquiry and the consequent relegation of values to a purely subjective domain thought to be unworthy of scientific scrutiny.

The seminal text in the sub-field, George Sabine’s *A History of Political Theory* (1937), shows strong traces of the positivist orthodoxy. The seminal character of Sabine’s book stems from its conception of the history of political thought not merely as a branch of intellectual history, but as a distinct and integral part of the study of politics. As Sabine (1880-1961) puts it:

This history of political theory is written in the light of the hypothesis that theories of politics are themselves a part of politics...Reflection upon the ends of political action, upon the means of achieving them, upon the possibilities and necessities of political situations, and upon the obligations that political purposes impose is an intrinsic element of the whole political process. Such thought evolves along with the institutions, the agencies of government, the moral and physical stresses to which it refers and, which one likes at least to believe, it in some degree controls.²

The positivist thrust of Sabine’s methodological framework becomes apparent in the following statement:

² George Sabine, *A History of Political Theory* (London: George G. Harrop & Co. Ltd., 1949), p. 7.

Taken as a whole a political theory can hardly be said to be true. It contains among its elements certain judgements of fact, or estimates of probability, which time proves perhaps to be objectively right or wrong. It involves also certain questions of logical compatibility respecting the elements which it tries to combine. Invariably, however, it includes valuations and predilections, personal or collective, which distort the perception of fact, the estimate of probability, and the weighing of compatibilities. The most that criticism can do is to keep these three factors as much as possible distinct: to prevent preferences from claiming the inevitableness of logic or the certainty of fact.³

Sabine recognised that the historian of political thought cannot step out of the relationship in which he stands to the problems, valuations, habits and even prejudices of his age. Nevertheless, he held that the latter can and should avoid the egoism that makes every generation presume that it is the heir of all the ages. Moreover, the historian can attain a measure of impartiality by maintaining fidelity to his sources and through an honest admission of his conscious preferences.

The terrain of political thought was generously mapped out by Sabine to include the intellectual and critical apparatus available to the political theorist being studied, as also the relevant elements in the historical and institutional matrix of his thought. Chief among such elements are government, law, economics, morals and religion. The task of the scholar is to clearly present and study the interaction between the intellectual apparatus and the institutional elements: "...political theory in action ought to receive equal treatment with political theory in books."⁴

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

The positivist methodology gained a prominent place in the research programme of behaviouralism which greatly influenced Political Science in the 1950s. Consequently, the history of political thought came to be seen as a diversion, and David Easton (b. 1917), the arch-priest of behaviouralism, sought to establish the autonomy of political theory as an empirical science by rescuing it from too close an identification with this type of inquiry which he saw as a parasitical activity.⁵

By now it is abundantly clear that the fact-value dichotomy on which positivism is predicated is neither philosophically valid nor politically desirable. In effect, it led to a tunnel-vision and an impoverishment of the discipline which acquired a narrow, empiricist, ahistorical orientation. However, the hegemony of behaviouralism did not go unchallenged even in its heyday. Theorists like Leo Strauss and Sheldon Wolin severely criticised it and underscored the importance of studying the history of political thought within a robustly normative framework.

The Normative Approach: The texts and thinkers included in Sabine's history were seen by him as exemplars of past political thought. But their messages were treated primarily as expressions of particular political circumstances. The work of Leo Strauss (1899-1973) and Sheldon Wolin (b. 1922) stood in stark contrast to this approach. Despite their differing political visions, both emphasised the continuing relevance of the normative insights generated by certain canonical political thinkers.

⁵ See David Easton, "Decline of Modern Political Theory", *Journal of Politics*, XIII (1), Feb. 1951, pp. 36-58.

The Straussian viewpoint finds a clear expression in the following remark: "...the teachings of the great political philosophers are important not only historically...the questions raised by the political philosophers of the past are alive in our own society."⁶ Strauss saw the classics of political thought not merely as responses to specific historical conditions, but as repositories of profound truths about political life—its goals, possibilities and limits. If properly studied, they not only illuminate the political situation in which they were produced, but can shed light on our own times. In particular, they have much to tell us about contemporary politics which is bedevilled by self-doubt, historicism and relativism.

To Strauss, the classics also perform a vital moral and educative role by teaching us how to think about the political world. Commentary on the classics is a way of exploring the truth, allowing for reflection on the text to raise questions and suggest

6. Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey, *History of Political Philosophy* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1987), p. xiii. For a succinct account of Strauss's understanding of political philosophy, see Steven Smith, "Philosophy as a Way of Life: The Case of Leo Strauss" in *Political Philosophy in the Twentieth Century* (ed.) Catherine H. Zuckert (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). Some of the observations in this section are drawn from Arlene W. Saxonhouse, "Texts and Canons: The Status of the "Great Books" in Political Theory" in *Political Science: The State of the Discipline* (ed.) Ada Finifter (Washington D.C.: The American Political Science Association, 1993).

possible answers, neither of which had previously occurred to the reader. Strauss saw this activity as a part of liberal education in its noblest sense: "We cannot be philosophers, but we can love philosophy; we can try to philosophize [by]...listening to conversations between the great philosophers...the greatest minds, and therefore [by] studying the great books".⁷

Sheldon Wolin too provides a nuanced conception of the current relevance of past political thought:

...most formal political speculation has operated simultaneously at two different levels. At one level every political philosopher has concerned himself with what he thinks to be a vital problem of his day. At another level, however...many political writings...have been meant as a contribution to the continuing dialogue of Western political philosophy.⁸

Wolin uses the term 'epic tradition' to convey the extraordinary significance of the writings of the great political theorists. He emphasises the need to view the history of political thought from the standpoint of the epic theorists' 'structure of intentions': "...from Plato to modern times an epic tradition of political theory has existed...a type of political theory which is inspired mainly by the hope of achieving a great and memorable deed through

7 Leo Strauss, "What is Liberal Education?" in *Liberalism: Ancient and Modern* (ed.) Leo Strauss (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), p. 7.

8 Sheldon Wolin, *Politics and Vision* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1960), p. 25.

the medium of thought.”⁹ This ‘thought deed’ aims at a radical restructuring of the current polity by producing a theory which sets new cognitive and normative standards and creates a novel symbolic universe with its own notion of the empirically significant ‘facts’.

Thus, both Strauss and Wolin see the study of past political thought as a predominantly normative activity. They seek enlightenment from it about our contemporary condition. Viewed thus, it can aid us in making the moral choices that we confront in the domain of politics, in deciphering our actual and potential political identity, and in discerning the very meaning of political life.

With the demise of positivism and the return of evaluative questions to the centre of both social and intellectual agenda, the normative approach acquired a renewed relevance. However, the champions of this approach seemed to project an empyrean and heroic conception of political thought somewhat to the detriment of its organic connections with a wide range of other discourses in a given historical context. A group of scholars informally known as the ‘Cambridge School of political thought’ began to address this shortcoming in the 1960s. Drawing on a variety of intellectual sources such as the philosophy of history propounded by Robin G. Collingwood (1889-1943) and speech act theory which was developed by John Austin (1911-1960), they came to advocate a ‘linguistic approach’ to the history of

9 Cited in Peter Baehr and Mike O’Brien, “Founders, Classics and the Concept of a Canon”, *Current Sociology*, 42(1), Spring 1994, p. 22.

political thought.¹⁰ The Cambridge School sought to sink the ideas of early modern thinkers in the political and linguistic landscape of the period during which they were produced.

The Linguistic Approach: The members of the Cambridge School comprised John Dunn (b. 1940), Quentin Skinner (b. 1940) and John Pocock (b. 1924). They adumbrated an alternative approach to the history of political thought by publishing both theoretical essays as well as historical studies. They demanded that we undertake the history of political thought through a study of the foundations of our political language. This would involve tracing the emergence of texts and concepts from political and linguistic practices which govern our understanding of political life.

In his celebrated essay – ‘The Identity of the History of Ideas’ (1968) – John Dunn complained that “[t]he history of thought as it is characteristically written is not a history of men battling to achieve a coherent ordering of their experience. It is, rather, a history of fictions—of rationalist constructs out of the thought processes of individuals, not of plausible abridgements of these thought processes.”¹¹ He argued that a properly historical understanding of the activity of thinking becomes possible only if we view it in terms of statements made at a particular date by a particular person in a certain context.

10 See R. G. Collingwood, *An Autobiography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939), and J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962).

11 John Dunn, “The Identity of the History of Ideas”, in *Political Obligation in Its Historical Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 15.

The meaning of a statement considered in a fully open context may be any lexically possible set of colligations of the uttered propositions. The problem of interpretation is thus one of closing the context, and what closes the context is the intention of the speaker. Discovery of the intention inspiring the statements of a political thinker involves grasping the point of his original enterprise. Such an investigation would require a reconstitution of this enterprise in terms of the identification of the problem and of why it was a problem for its proponent, as also a critical judgment of the solution.¹² Dunn contended that a procedure of this kind was the only valid way of subjecting a past intellectual enterprise to an interpretative scrutiny in the present without sacrificing historical accuracy. His approach is best exemplified by his reading of Locke, which foregrounds ‘trust’ as a key concept in the latter’s political thought as well as the most fundamental conceptual truth relevant to political theory in the present.¹³

Though Dunn broached many issues which form the core of the linguistic approach, it was Quentin Skinner who provided the most forceful and combative statement of this approach in his essay, ‘Meaning and Identity in the History of Ideas’ (1969). Dismissing studies seeking to recover the seemingly timeless questions and answers posed in the great books, Skinner insisted on the need to anchor such texts in the discursive context of their respective eras. A text can be properly understood not

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 27.

¹³ See John Dunn, *Rethinking Modern Political Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 34-54.

simply by reading it ‘over and over again’ as suggested by orthodox scholars like J. P. Plamenatz (1912-1975), but by detecting what John Austin termed its ‘illocutionary force’ or the intention of its author.¹⁴ Authorial intention can be recovered from an examination of the entire range of communication, which could have been conventionally performed on the given occasion by the utterance. This would lead not to the illumination of ‘perennial truths’, but to a realisation of the essential variety of tenable moral assumptions and political commitments across historical epochs.

Skinner has since developed and revised his ideas in a series of essays.¹⁵ He has come to acknowledge the problems involved in attributing intentions on the basis of words and has shifted the emphasis on the need to examine the spectrum of speech acts that can be performed by a particular author in using a set of concepts and terms. He has denied the charge of conservatism by admitting the possibility of change and of the transformative potential of the texts. He now acknowledges an interest in the classic texts as intrinsically worthy of study and refutes the accusation of relativism, while reasserting his key insight that the history of thought “should be viewed not as a series of attempts to answer a canonical set of questions, but as a sequence of

¹⁴ See Quentin Skinner, “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas”, *History and Theory*, 8(1), 1969, pp. 3-53.

¹⁵ These are available in James Tully (ed.) *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and His Critics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), and Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics: Volume I: Regarding Method* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

episodes in which the questions as well as the answers have frequently changed.”¹⁶

Skinner views his insistence on historical specificity not as a form of antiquarianism, but as a plea for a mode of inquiry which alone can enable us to test our current beliefs against alternative possibilities. An application of Skinner’s methodology may be found in his *Foundations of Modern Political Thought* (1978) which traces the origins of the modern concept of the State by surrounding the relevant classic texts in their ideological context.¹⁷ He has been involved in editing two related series of texts: ‘Ideas in Context’ and ‘Cambridge Texts in the History of Politics’. The former seeks to immerse the texts chosen for scrutiny in their linguistic context, while the latter makes available a variety of texts which are of key importance for a proper understanding of the history of political thought.¹⁸

John Pocock’s contribution to the linguistic approach has also involved a combination of historical studies¹⁹ and theoretical formulations emphasising the need to study political thought in the framework of a politics of language defined as “...a series of devices for envisaging the varieties of the political functions

16 See Tully, *ibid.*, p. 234.

17 See Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought* Vols. I & II (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978).

18 See Arlene Saxonhouse, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

19 See for example, J. G. A. Pocock, *The Ancient Constitution and the Feudal Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957).

which language can perform and of the types of political utterances that can be made, and the ways in which these utterances may transform one another as they interact under the stress of political conversation and dialectic.”²⁰ Through a modified usage of Thomas Kuhn’s notion of a ‘paradigm’, Pocock argues that political language consists of the paradigms of the political community and that the history of political thought is a history of change in the employment and exploration of these paradigms.²¹ A paradigm is defined as a language system used by men to think and to communicate. Language systems help constitute both the conceptual worlds of men as well as the authority structures or social worlds related to these. This scheme has the advantage of giving the history of political thought methodological autonomy, while aligning it with a study of the history of political society.

Melvin Richter has pointed out that a research programme complementary to that of the Cambridge School may be found in a contemporary German enterprise in conceptual history (*Begriffsgeschichte*) carried out by Reinhart Koselleck (1923-

20 J. G. A. Pocock, *Politics, Language and Time* (London: Methuen, 1972), p. 19. Also see his article, “The History of Political Thought: A Methodological Enquiry” in *Philosophy, Politics and Society* (Second Series) (eds.) Peter Laslett and W.G. Runciman (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1969). For a recent articulation of his position, see the essay “Theory in History: Problems of Context and Narrative” in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Theory* (eds.) John Dryzek, Bonnie Honig and Anne Phillips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 163-174.

21 Pocock (1972), p. 23.

2006) and his colleagues.²² It involves a study of the formation of as also continuity and alteration in political vocabularies over a period of time. The focus of the inquiry is on the linguistic practices and social history of the relevant period. The textual sources used in this enterprise are quite diverse and include dictionaries, encyclopaedias, handbooks and thesauri. The guiding thread of the inquiry is summed up by Koselleck as follows: “It is only concepts that demonstrate persistence, repeated applicability, and empirical validity...which indicate that a once ‘real’ history can today appear generally possible.”²³

While the Cambridge School and *Begriffsgeschichte* are useful correctives to the temptation to see past political thought *sub specie aeternitatis*, they may lack philosophical depth. This lacuna is redressed by hermeneutics—an older, broader and more reflective tradition of textual analysis to which European thinkers have made a major contribution. It has many important lessons to offer to the historian of ideas.

Hermeneutics: The term ‘hermeneutics’ derives from the Greek verb *hermeneuein* which means to make something clear, to announce or to unveil a message.²⁴ The hermeneutic tradition

22 Melvin Richter, “Conceptual History (*Begriffsgeschichte*) and Political Theory”, *Political Theory* 14 (4), Nov. 1986, pp. 604-37.

23 Cited in Arlene Saxonhouse, *op.cit.*, p. 14.

24 John Thompson, “Hermeneutics” in *The Social Science Encyclopedia* (eds.) Adam Kuper and Jessica Kuper (London: Routledge, 1989), pp. 354-55, is the source of this and some of the subsequent observations in the section.

can be traced to the interpretation of Homer and other poets during the Greek Enlightenment. Since then, it has been closely linked with textual criticism. It acquired a renewed vitality during the Reformation through its association with biblical exegesis. Modern hermeneutics originated in the 19th century when Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911) defined it more comprehensively as the study of texts and of cultural phenomena more generally. The distinguishing feature of these phenomena is that they are purposive expressions of human life. Viewed in this perspective, understanding texts involves grasping them as objectified expressions of life. To interpret a text is ultimately to imaginatively enter the process of its creation.

In the twentieth century, Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) assimilated hermeneutics to an ontological exploration of man’s ‘being-in-the-world’. He stressed the anticipatory character of understanding as a matter of projecting what we are capable of, akin to the way we understand part of a text by anticipating the structure of the whole. Thus, all understanding involves a ‘pre-understanding’. His pupil Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002) linked this notion to the interlinked ideas of prejudice, authority and tradition. Gadamer argues that understanding always presupposes ‘prejudice’ in the sense of pre-judgement, and that there are legitimate prejudices anchored in the acknowledgment of authority. All interpretation is prejudiced and it is not possible to appeal to guarantees of objective understanding such as an author’s intentions or scientific method since the understanding of all these is itself rooted in prejudice.

This does not mean that interpretation is a matter of purely subjective opinion. We must grant a measure of normative

authority to the text in order to attain a distance from our prejudices. Tradition is a valuable form of authority. It is only our immersion in traditions, which furnishes us with prejudices that make our understanding possible. An adequate understanding of a text involves appropriating a tradition of interpretation as a general normative framework. The tradition can thus provide some kind of normative limit to the free range of interpretation. Hence the past is not merely a precursor to present inquiries, but a tradition that ought to be treated as a partner in the dialogical understanding of a text: “Modern historical research is...the mediation of tradition. We do not see it only under the law of progress or of secured results; in it, as well, we have historical experiences, as it were, since each time in it a new voice is heard in which the past echoes.”²⁵ Hermeneutic understanding thus involves a ‘fusion of horizons’.

Gadamer’s younger contemporary Juergen Habermas (b. 1929) has criticised his linking of understanding and tradition. Habermas argues that tradition could be a source of power serving to warp the process of communication. Hence, he calls for a critical hermeneutics geared to the project of emancipation. To him, psychoanalysis provides the model of such a hermeneutic practice. It is a dialogic method premised on an undistorted mode of

²⁵ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), pp. 252-3. Juergen Habermas’s critique of Gadamer is available in *Understanding and Social Inquiry* (eds.) Fred R. Dallmayr and Thomas McCarthy (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977), pp. 335-363. Also see Jack Mendelson, “The Habermas-Gadamer Debate”, *New German Critique*, No. 18, Autumn, 1979, pp. 44-73.

communication bringing together an analyst devoid of personal interest in the outcome and an analysand willing to treat his own concerns objectively. Thus, a common interest in furthering the autonomy of the subject presents itself through self-reflection.

The French philosopher Paul Ricoeur (1913-2005) seeks to mediate between Gadamer and Habermas by highlighting a concept of the text, which involves a distanciation from the socio-psychological and historical matrix of its production. To him, the interpretation of a text requires the structural excavation of its ‘sense’ as also the creative exploration of its ‘reference’, facilitating the generation of a critical relation vis-à-vis both the world and the self. As Ricoeur puts it, hermeneutics places “...at the very heart of self-understanding that dialectic of objectification and understanding which we first perceived at the level of the text, its structures, its sense and its reference. At all these levels of analysis, distanciation is the condition of understanding”.²⁶

As we have seen, the hermeneutic approach links the study of texts to broader philosophical and cultural concerns. However, it often tends to slur over the social contradictions that shape and are shaped by political thought. We may now turn to the consideration of an approach which foregrounds such contradictions.

The Marxist Approach: The tendency to examine ideas in terms of ideologies rooted in a particular mode of production and in relation to their imbrication with class politics may be said

²⁶ Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 144.

to be a defining feature of the Marxian approach. In the history of political thought this approach finds a clear and forceful expression in the writings of C. B. Macpherson (1911-1987)—an eminent Canadian political scientist of the last century. Macpherson’s application of this approach is best illustrated by his very influential study of seventeenth-century English political thinkers where he tries to track the development of ideas which legitimised capitalist economic relations and the State structures conducive to the maintenance of these relations.²⁷ His inquiry focuses on the set of social assumptions informing these ideas, which he describes in the now famous phrase, ‘possessive individualism’. Essentially an ideological manifestation of capitalism, possessive individualism defines man’s freedom and humanity in terms of his exclusive ‘proprietaryship of his own person’ and views human society as ‘a series of market relations’. These postulates underlie seventeenth-century liberal thought.

Thus, when liberalism first appeared, it stood for the supremacy of individual choice. In the economic domain it argued in favour of a competitive market system, while in political life it advocated a form of government based on individual choices expressed through periodic elections and freedom of association and speech. The liberal State was not initially democratic as it rested on a narrow franchise; but the very logic of liberalism eventually gave rise to a demand for democracy. To compete freely in the political market, every man had to have the right to vote. This resulted in the extension of the franchise and the emergence of liberal democracy.

27 C. B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1962).

However, democracy could not find full expression within the constraints of liberalism. It did not lead to complete political and economic equality which would have threatened the unequal class structure of liberal society. Democracy was reduced to the granting of an equal right to compete with others within the existing socio-economic framework. The newly enfranchised strata were only allowed to participate in the competitive market society, not to question its sanctity. As Macpherson puts it: “The liberal state fulfilled its own logic. In so doing, it neither destroyed nor weakened itself; it strengthened both itself and the market society. It liberalised democracy while democratizing liberalism”.²⁸

Macpherson concedes that the assumptions of possessive individualism were not explicitly stated by the liberal theorists. How does one prove that these unstated assumptions were in fact used by them? It is not enough to show that they are required to produce the conclusions of their theory. What needs to be and can be demonstrated is that these assumptions had arisen from the theorists’ experience of their own society, and that they were repeatedly implied in their incidental arguments. Such assumptions can be detected through some real or supposed inconsistency in a theoretical structure. Macpherson’s analysis of the seventeenth-century natural rights doctrines is a good example of such a critique.²⁹

28 C. B. Macpherson, *The Real World of Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 11.

29 See Mangesh Kulkarni, “The Universal Declaration of Human Rights: A Macphersonian Perspective”, *The Radical Humanist* 55 (9), Dec. 1991, pp. 6-8.

He points out that the ideology of possessive individualism facilitated the assertion of fundamental individual rights; but it also necessitated their effective circumscription in certain ways. Hobbes's advocacy of the surrender of originally unlimited natural rights to the sovereign power for the maintenance of durable peace and security can be traced to his equation of 'man' with 'bourgeois man' and of 'society' with 'market society' which are alike driven by the forces of competition and aggrandisement requiring strong restraints if they are not to tear the social fabric to pieces. The ideology also explains the growing centrality of the right to property. Thus, the Levellers, who were eager to protect their rights against upper-class hegemony, refused to grant them to the lower classes by arguing that only property owners could legitimately enjoy political rights. Similarly, Locke initially stated the right to property as an equal right to subsistence, but eventually turned it into an unequal right to unlimited private appropriation.

As a general methodological dictum for studying past as well as contemporary political theories, Macpherson urges us to examine their 'economic penetration', that is the extent to which economic ideas may be said to enter into them.³⁰ Economic ideas are defined as ideas or assumptions about the necessary or possible relations between people in their capacity as producers of the material means of life. These relations include relations between classes, distinguished by their function in the productive system.

30 See C. B. Macpherson, "The Economic Penetration of Political Theory" in *The Rise and Fall of Economic Justice and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 101-19.

As these relations become congealed in some institutions of property, the relevant economic ideas also include ideas about the relation of property to other political rights and obligations.

The economic penetration of political theory can be measured by examining the extent to which economic relations are seen as setting the problem of the best possible political order and determining the inescapable requirements of the political system. The amount or centrality of attention given to property or to class may be treated as signals of such penetration. Another dimension that needs to be considered is the extent to which the economic assumptions are conscious and explicit. But it must be borne in mind that these assumptions may get into a political theory only indirectly, but nonetheless powerfully, at the level of a generalised model of man or of society which then determines the theory. When this happens, the theorist cannot be expected to be conscious of these assumptions.

The deeper the penetration of a theory into the economic structure of the society in which it is produced, the greater is its power to explain it and the more persuasive are its prescriptions. When it is first articulated, the assumptions underlying such a theory correspond to reality and are to that extent valid. As the social structure changes, the assumptions cease to have this kind of validity. If a social order emerges at a later stage which resembles the one in which the theory was produced, it may acquire renewed relevance. Thus, Hobbes's political theory rests on assumptions which correspond to the structure of the society in which it was produced—a society in transition to mercantilism. With the advent of neo-mercantilism in the twentieth century, his

insights regained their relevance. In this perspective, the proverbial, *permanent* significance of a great political theory is at best only a *recurrent* significance.

A mode of interpretation which pays closer attention to the subtleties of textual discourse was developed by the French Marxist Louis Althusser (1918-1990). This involves deciphering the *problématique* governing a text, which can be defined as ‘the objective internal reference system of its particular themes, the system of questions commanding the answers given.’³¹ It determines what is included within its field and also what is excluded from it. Hence the concepts which are not included (absences), and the problems which are posed partially (lapses) or not at all (silences) are a part of the *problématique* as much as the concepts and problems that are present. Therefore it cannot be deciphered by a straightforward reading of the explicit discourse of a text.

To excavate the *problématique*, Althusser advocates a strategy of ‘symptomatic reading’. This requires a conjoint reading of the explicit discourse of the text together with the absences, lapses and silences which form a second subterranean discourse, and are symptoms of the text’s unconscious. This quasi-Freudian strategy was used by him to discover two different

31 For this definition by Althusser and his views on interpretation, see David McLellan, *Marxism after Marx* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1979), p. 299. His exegetical practice is best exemplified by *For Marx* (London: Allen Lane, 1969), and (with Etienne Balibar), *Reading Capital* (London: New Left Books, 1970).

problématiques in the early and late writings of Marx. The first is dominated by Hegelian concepts and is trapped in the ideology of the subject; it is only the second which generates the science of historical materialism.

Fredric Jameson (b. 1934)—a leading contemporary Marxist scholar—has greatly extended the Althusserian notion of a textual unconscious by formulating the concept of a ‘political unconscious’ as a potent tool of interpretation.³² The political unconscious of a text can be fathomed through a threefold process of interpretation. The first phase involves a focus on the individual text grasped essentially as a symbolic act—an ideological act with the function of inventing imaginary solutions to real social contradictions which are irresolvable in their own terms. In the second phase, the text is no longer seen as an individual work in the narrow sense, but is reconstituted as little more than an utterance of the great collective and class discourse within a given social order. The central analytical category in this phase is the ‘ideologeme’, that is, the smallest intelligible unit of the fundamentally antagonistic class discourse. Finally, both the individual text and its ideologemes are placed in the perspective of human history as a whole with its complex sequence of the modes of production. They are read in terms of the ‘ideology of form’, or the symbolic messages transmitted by the co-existence of sign systems which are traces or anticipations of modes of production.

32 See Fredric Jameson, “On Interpretation” in *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Methuen, 1986), pp. 17-102.

While Marxism rightly problematises political thought by deploying the category of class, it often tends to occlude other axes of social asymmetry, such as gender. Hence the importance of taking on board feminism which interrogates the mainstream (which it describes as ‘malestream’) tradition of political thought from the perspective of gender. We now turn to the feminist perspective which has come to the fore in recent decades.

The Feminist Approach: The feminist critique has exposed the misogynist assumptions underlying the thought of great male political theorists from Plato to Marx. The feminists claim that most of the canonical theorists have justified the exclusion of women from the political sphere on the one hand and their confinement to the private domain of the family on the other. Thus, Carole Pateman (b. 1940) probes the writings of Hobbes, Pufendorf, Locke and Rousseau to uncover the patriarchal assumptions lurking beneath the egalitarian surface of liberal contractarianism.³³ She points out that women were not considered as participants in the ‘social contract’ which was preceded by an unspoken ‘conjugal contract’ subordinating women to men. Consequently these theorists failed to provide for a genuinely free and equal community.

Other feminist scholars have examined mainstream political thought from a broader perspective to gain novel insights. Arlene

33 See Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988). For a pioneering feminist critique of canonical political thinkers, see Susan Okin, *Women in Western Political Thought* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1979).

Saxonhouse (b. 1944) has analysed the arguments of authors from the Greek playwrights to Machiavelli through the lens of gender to discover “...the dangers of exclusion, of demands for uniformity, and the dismissal of the private as relevant for analyses of political life.”³⁴ Wendy Brown (b. 1955) discerns in the great texts an invidious separation of the head (male) which is equated with intellect and reason, from the body (female) which is seen as dirty necessity. She advocates the integration of the body into the political sphere.³⁵

Radical feminists like Jennifer Ring and Linda Zerilli have carried the questioning of mainstream thought into the domain of epistemology: Are there gender-based differences in the way each sex perceives the world and thus ‘gendered’ understandings of political life? If such is the case, women can truly liberate themselves only by totally rejecting the masculine texts and discourses that imprison them in a traditional world-view. Taken to an extreme, such a position can be parochial and even self-defeating. But on the whole, it remains a minority position. Most feminist scholars recognise the need to engage the male authors and are not haunted by the fear of cooptation. The radical feminists’ emphasis on the importance of introducing female voices into the political discourse has, nevertheless, generated an indubitably salutary effect, leading to the inclusion of women

34 Arlene Saxonhouse, op. cit. p. 16. I have drawn on Saxonhouse’s article while writing this section.

35 See Wendy Brown, *Manhood and Politics* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Littlefield, 1988).

theorists like Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797), Hannah Arendt (1906-1975), Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986) and Simone Weil (1909-1943) in the galaxy of great political thinkers. Besides, recent years have witnessed attempts to re-examine the history of political thought through the lens of men and masculinities.³⁶

As the foregoing discussion testifies, feminism has questioned certain deeply rooted premises of political thought. Another contemporary intellectual current—or rather an ensemble of such currents—has problematised some of the profoundest assumptions of traditional exegesis. Labelled here for the sake of convenience as ‘postmodernism’, it targets such hoary notions as the unitary character of the text and the exegetic centrality of authorial intention. A somewhat condensed and simplified account of this current is presented below.

Postmodernism: Much of the novelty of the postmodernist approach derives from its distinctive conception of language, which in turn has its origin in the writings of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913).³⁷ Saussure viewed language as a system of signs which are arbitrary in the sense that there is no intrinsic link between the signifier (word) and the signified (meaning). Any language unit can be defined only in

36 See Terrell Carver, *Men in Political Theory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004).

37 Many observations in this section are drawn from Anthony Giddens, “Structuralism, Post-structuralism and the Production of Culture” in *Social Theory Today* (eds.) Anthony Giddens and Jonathan Turner (Delhi: Disha, 1989), pp. 195-223.

relation to other units in the system. A word acquires meaning primarily from the differences between it and other words. Therefore words do not ‘mean’ their objects in a transparent manner. Thus, language is best seen as ‘form’ rather than as ‘substance’. It can generate meaning only through the interplay of differences.

In the perspective outlined above, the text is viewed not as an expression of authorial intention, but as a kaleidoscope of signifiers. What its originator/s intended it to mean is of little importance in the process of interpretation. The ‘I’ of the author is seen not as singular human agent but as only a grammatical convention. In this sense a text has a multiplicity of authors. As Roland Barthes (1915-1980) puts it, “a text is...a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash.”³⁸ Interpretation thus becomes only a provisional stabilisation of the open-ended chain of meanings unleashed by the processes of writing.

Even as postmodernists challenge the privileging of the author in modern culture, they question the distinction commonly found in this culture between literary, philosophical and scientific texts. The emphasis on the arbitrary nature of the sign results in an elision of the difference between fictional texts and those claiming to provide a veridical account of the world. Such an elision opens up the possibility of deciphering the figurative devices even in purportedly scientific or philosophical texts.

38 Roland Barthes, *Image-Music-Text* (Glasgow: Fontana, 1977), p. 146.

Postmodernism also blurs the boundaries between one text and another through the concept of intertextuality. Formulated by Julia Kristeva (b. 1941), the concept underscores the fact that no text is an isolated phenomenon. Every text is constructed from a mosaic of quotations, from the absorption and transformation of other texts.³⁹ As texts refer only to other texts, the network of intertextuality forms an infinite universe. An element of undecidability is thus introduced into the process of interpretation.

Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) takes the notion of undecidability even further in his theory and practice of deconstruction.⁴⁰ He deploys the concept of *différance* to join together Saussure's characterisation of language as a system constituted through differences in its units and his own insight that language works by the chain of expectations set up by the writer, which require the reader to defer the moment of definitive understanding. By exposing the implicit propositions, gaps and self-contradictions in a text, it can be shown to be saying something quite different

39 See Alan Bullock et. al. (eds.) *The Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought* (London: Fontana, 1990), p. 436. One of Kristeva's works relevant to this discussion is *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980).

40 See Alan Bullock and R. B. Woodings (eds.) *The Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thinkers* (London: Fontana, 1990), p. 178, and Alan Bullock et. al. (eds.) *The Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought* (London: Fontana, 1990), pp. 205-206. One of Derrida's key works on the subject is *Writing and Difference* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978).

from what the author consciously intended, or what it appears to be saying. Thus, a new text seems to be emerging, which in turn can be similarly deconstructed in an infinite exegetical regress. The text, thus, has no definitive meaning that can be deciphered through a correct process of interpretation. Meaning does not lie in some mystical interior of the text as non-linguistic essence, but is co-extensive with the free play of language.

Michel Foucault (1926-1984) provides a corrective to Derrida's extreme textualism and radical undecidability by locating texts in larger discursive formations of power/knowledge and by critically scrutinising their socio-political effectivity. The concept of power/knowledge points to the fact that systems of knowledge or disciplines constitute fields for the operation of power through which human beings are made subjects.⁴¹ Subjection proceeds via 'dividing practices' (e.g., the confinement of the insane), 'scientific classification' (e.g., the objectification of the body in modern medicine) and 'technologies of the self' (e.g., confessional practices like psychoanalysis) to produce normalised and docile individuals. According to Foucault critique (or 'genealogy' as he terms it) must recover and aid the struggle against subjection by unmasking the operation of power and empowering subjugated knowledges. As texts both shape and are shaped by discourses of power, exegesis can be meaningful only if it participates in the emancipatory project of genealogy.

41 See Paul Rabinow (ed.) *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), and Mangesh Kulkarni, "Michel Foucault's Analytics of Power", *Socialist Perspective*, Dec. 1994-March 1995.

A major discourse of power, which has had global ramifications in the modern period, is the discourse of colonialism. Edward Said (1935-2003) subjected an important strand of this discourse to a searching critique in his book *Orientalism* (1979). His pioneering interpretation of a variety of Western texts from the perspective of colonial cultural politics has spawned a novel exegetical enterprise in the form of Colonial Discourse Analysis. Said argues that Orientalism emerged in the West during the late eighteenth century as a corporate institution for dealing with the Orient by making statements about it, authorising views of it, describing, teaching and settling it, as also by ruling over it. It was in other words, a Western style for dominating, restructuring and exercising authority over the Orient. Said explicitly acknowledges his debt to Foucault:

I have found it useful here to employ Michel Foucault's notion of a discourse...without examining Orientalism as a discourse one cannot possibly understand the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage—and even produce—the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period.⁴²

From this perspective it becomes both possible and necessary to detect the ways in which Western texts—including those of political theory—participate in the exoticisation, inferiorisation and subjugation of non-Western societies and cultures. Thus, in a controversial reading of Marx's writings on the impact of British

42 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), p. 3.

colonialism on Asia, Said argues that even the great radical thinker could not resist the temptation of Orientalism. Marx callously treated the suffering imposed by colonialism on Asian societies as an unavoidable precondition of a real social revolution in that part of the world. This was because he subscribed to the Orientalist notions that Asia was an inert mass waiting to be regenerated and that the Orientals did not suffer.

The postmodernist approaches often teeter perilously on the brink of relativism and epistemological anarchism. Especially in their post-colonial avatar, they may also lead to a tendentious 'overinterpretation' (à la Umberto Eco) of certain canonical texts and thinkers.⁴³ However, there is no gainsaying the fact that they have opened up new horizons of exegesis.

Concluding Remarks: Almost every perspective outlined above has something worthwhile to contribute to the study of political thought. While Sabine's positivist legacy must be rejected, his insistence on the need to treat theories of politics as constituting a part of politics is well taken. The most important insight offered by the normative approach is the notion of a continuing dialogue to which great political philosophers have contributed and from which we can and ought to seek enlightenment about the moral dilemmas arising out of our contemporary political condition.

43 For a critique of Said's tendency to lapse into such politically motivated overinterpretation of a canonical literary text, see Mangesh Kulkarni, 'The Ambiguous Fate of a Pied-Noir: Albert Camus and Colonialism', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 32 (26), June 28 - July 4, 1997, pp. 1528-1530.

The Cambridge School's point that one can learn from past political philosophers only by grasping their communicative intent becomes relevant in this context, and so does its advice to embed the latter's writings in their original discursive setting as a way of recovering the intent.

The value of the hermeneutic approach lies in its recognition of the autonomy of the text which is seen as an objectified expression of life. Its emphasis on a dialogical understanding of the text leading to a fusion of horizons is particularly valuable. The Marxist approach introduces a significant element of critique in the study of political thought by alerting us to its ideological dimension. It also provides useful analytical tools such as the concept of 'the economic penetration of political theory' and the notion of 'the political unconscious'.

The critical edge of exegesis is sharpened by feminism through its remorseless exposure of the gender bias encoded in mainstream political thought. Moreover, it highlights the significance of themes like the relationship between the private and the public spheres, as also between the intellect and the body for a fuller understanding of the pitfalls and possibilities of political theorising. Postmodernist approaches too provide critical concepts like the notion of a discourse of power; but above all they greatly enhance the scope and creativity of interpretation through their insistence on textual polysemy, rhetoric, intertextuality and *différance*.

Taken individually, none of the above-mentioned approaches is adequate for grasping the many subtleties of political thought. At

the same time it is fruitless to blend them in an overarching framework by whittling down their distinctive contours. A selective appropriation of their insights at appropriate junctures seems to be the *via media*.
