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Review of Political Discourse in Early Modern Britain

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Political Discourse in Early Modern Britain. Edited by Nicholas Phillipson and Quentin Skinner. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993. 444p. \$59.95.

This is a *festschrift* for the indefatigable J. G. A. Pocock (indefatigable indeed: the volume closes with a daunting nine-page bibliography of Pocock's work to date, a veritable flood of erudition that shows no signs of ebbing). The essays are better than what usually end up stuck in such volumes: better as a simple matter of scholarly quality, but better too as exemplary models of what is distinctive in Pocock's approach. I suppose that at this price, no one will consider asking impoverished graduate students to purchase the volume. But there are always reserve desks, not to mention xerox machines and copyright violation.

The finicky among us might want to insist on several distinctions between Pocock's conception of the history of political thought and that of what is sometimes labelled the Cambridge school, associated especially with Quentin Skinner and John Dunn. Any such distinctions are generously elided here. The history of political thought, we are instructed, is centrally a history of *discourse*, a labor-intensive study of how particular languages of politics, or conceptual frameworks, are shaped and reshaped by successive writers. Pocock and his followers have wanted to abandon the struggle of titans, the dubious spectacle sometimes exhibited to hapless undergraduates in which Plato and Hobbes, Locke and Marx take their crack at a set of putatively timeless questions. They want instead a more genuinely historical history of political thought, in which chronology matters, questions change, and dozens of desperately obscure pamphleteers appear right alongside—and sometimes instead of—the honored dead.

So this is not scholarship to be produced by theorists who want to cozy up with their favorite text for a year or two and write an internal textual commentary on it. Here, for instance, J. H. Burns writes about "George Buchanan and the anti-monarchomachs"; Michael Mendle comments in passing that "Some elements of Henry Parker's thought . . . are reminiscent of Johannes Althusius's populist reversal of Bodinian absolutism" (p. 110); and Richard Tuck refers to Henry Hammond, Matthew Wren, Thomas White, Pierre Charron, Denis

Petau, Henry Holden, John Sargent, Kenelm Digby, and more. It is sobering to realize how very few theorists, even those describing themselves as working on early modern Britain, will have a clue what such titles and comments and references refer to. Here too we find some remarkable—some will say alarming—recontextualizations. Quentin Skinner situates Hobbes's *Leviathan* in the context of a Latin dispute about rhetoric, unearthing an elaborate conceptual inheritance underlying Hobbes's own sizzling rhetoric and his notorious diffidence about his own eloquence.

Skeptics will think that this is not even scholarship to be *consumed* by those without reasonably extensive historical learning of their own, that the density of references to arcane sources is high enough to make any underlying arguments opaque. Maybe, though I suspect that is just special pleading for the lazy. Whatever else one might say about it, Pocock's concluding essay, a critical review of the preceding essays, offers a perfectly straightforward vision of the period, one in which the concept of sovereignty and all its vicissitudes are front and center.

Indeed, for all its contributions, the real problem with this sort of scholarship seems to me to lie in precisely the opposite direction. It needs to become more extensively historical, not less: that is, to pull in more sustained accounts of social and political change, instead of brief stage-setting references that get the contested discourses up and running. Pocock describes the enterprise as "the exploration of Anglo-British history as presented in its political literature and the history of its political discourse" (p. 377). But surely, then, we need to be interested in the possibility that that discourse is opaque, confused, meretricious, shot through with pretexts and sinister interests, ideologically loaded in offering too complacent a vision of political possibilities and problems, happily oblivious to what seem on reflection the most pressing political developments of the day, and so on.

Or again: the very thought of writing a history of discourse depends, for all of Pocock's antimarxism, on the cogency of some deep distinction between the ideal and the material. In this light, it is not surprising that Pocock would refer to the "intellectual and material forces" (p. 428) transforming England after the French Revolution. But if we take seriously the claim that society is partly constituted by concepts and categories, any such distinction is confounding or worse. For then, as Pocock has sometimes recognized, social change is always already conceptual change—and vice versa. (Well, not always: think about demographic shifts or currency inflation.) And then we can sharpen the senses in which all those pamphleteers are creative agents engaged in political struggle—and victims along for the ride in large-scale social changes intended by nobody.

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