

How (Not) to Draw Contemporary Insights from the History of Political Thought

Dr Adrian Blau
King's College London

The author:

Dr Adrian Blau is Senior Lecturer in Politics in the Department of Political Economy, King's College London. He read for his undergraduate degree at Cambridge, and did his Masters and PhD at Oxford. He has worked at Oxford, Queen Mary, University of London, and Manchester. He has published on methodological questions in the history of political thought, and on Hobbes and early-modern concepts of corruption. He is also interested in democratic theory and practice. He is currently working on a book called *Hobbes's Failed Science of Politics and Ethics*.

The paper:

We lack methodological principles for how to draw contemporary insights from historical texts. As a result, many efforts to do so have failed - more than most people realise. One key principle is to get historical authors right, by reading them accurately, and by improving their ideas if needs be. This can help us challenge false claims to historical authority, debunk parochial contemporary explanations, ask new questions, or suggest new answers. The second main principle is to get contemporary authors and issues right. This is where scholars err most. Some scholars fail to demonstrate a gap in the literature, over-generalise, misread contemporary authors, underestimate the complexity of contemporary issues, or use outmoded ideas: just as history of political thought can liberate us, so too it can constrain us. Overall, I suggest, some of the boldest claims for the contemporary value of history of political thought come from scholars whose own contemporary insights are not as convincing as they think. Far from highlighting the contemporary relevance of history of political thought, this risks making it look irrelevant. A less disdainful approach to contemporary political theory and philosophy is vital.