

“J. G. A. Pocock and the Idea of the ‘Cambridge School’ in the History of Political Thought”

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The Author

Samuel James has been a Research Fellow in History at Jesus College, Cambridge, since October 2011. He received his MPhil and PhD from the University of Cambridge, and was an undergraduate at the University of St Andrews. His research interests lie in the intellectual history of the academic humanities in twentieth-century Britain (and to some extent the United States), and particularly in the historiography of the history of political thought. He has published in *Modern Intellectual History* and *History of European Ideas*, and is presently completing a monograph which aims to historicise the idea of a “Cambridge School” in the history of political thought by considering its formation between the late 1940s and the early 1980s.

The Paper

Of the various figures associated with the “Cambridge School” in the history of political thought, the New Zealand historian J. G. A. Pocock has been most enthusiastic to embrace the notion of such a school in his own reflections. In this paper, I argue that the resulting autobiographical narrative is misleading with respect to the sources of his own distinctive approach. The main part of the paper thus reconstructs the scholarly itinerary which in 1962 eventuated in Pocock’s celebrated essay “The History of Political Thought: A Methodological Enquiry”. I demonstrate the minimal influence of either linguistic philosophy or the celebrated work of Peter Laslett on this itinerary, and emphasise instead the importance of Pocock’s interest in the history of historiography as encouraged by his doctoral supervisor, Herbert Butterfield. By placing Pocock’s intellectual style in these contexts, I suggest in conclusion, the autonomy of neglected strand in the “Cambridge” approach to the history of political thought can more clearly be perceived.

Preparatory Readings

- (i) Primary sources

Butterfield, Herbert. *The Whig Interpretation of History*. London: G. Bell and Sons, 1931.

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Laslett, Peter, ed. *Philosophy, Politics and Society*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1956.

Pocock, J. G. A. *The Ancient Constitution and the Feudal Law*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957.

Pocock, J. G. A. *Politics, Language and Time: Essays on Political Thought and History*. 1971. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989.

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(ii) Secondary literature on the idea of the “Cambridge School”

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Whatmore, Richard. “Intellectual History and the History of Political Thought”. In *Palgrave Advances in Intellectual History*. Ed. Richard Whatmore and Brian Young. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.

Bevir, Mark. “The Contextual Approach”. In *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Political Thought*. Ed. George Klosko. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

(iii) Secondary literature on Pocock

Hampsher-Monk, Iain. “Political Languages in Time – The Work of J. G. A. Pocock.” *British Journal of Political Science* 14 (January 1984): 89-116.

Boucher, David. “Languages, Politics and Paradigms: Pocock and the Study of Political Thought”. *Polity* 17 (Summer 1985): 761-76.

D. N. DeLuna, ed. *The Political Imagination in History: Essays Concerning J. G. A. Pocock*. Baltimore, MD: Owlworks, 2006.

Bourke, Richard. “Pocock and the Presuppositions of the New British History”. *Historical Journal* 53 (September 2010): 747-70.