

A rival Enlightenment? Critical international theory in historical mode

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This article proposes an understanding of critical international theory (CIT) as an historical rather than philosophical mode of knowledge. To excavate this historical mode of theorizing it offers an alternative account of CIT's intellectual sources. While most accounts of critical international theory tend to focus on inheritances from Kant, Marx and Gramsci, or allude in general terms to debts to the Frankfurt School and the Enlightenment, this is not always the case. Robert Cox, for example, has repeatedly professed intellectual debts to realism and historicism. The argument advanced here builds on Cox by situating CIT in a longer intellectual heritage that extends from Renaissance humanism and passes through Absolutist historiography before reaching Enlightenment civil histories, including Vico's history of civil institutions. The critical element in this intellectual heritage was the formation of a secular political historicism critically disposed to metaphysical claims based on moral philosophies. By recovering this neglected inheritance of criticism, we can articulate not only a *critical* theory to rival problem-solving theories, but propose a conception of theory as a *historical* mode of knowledge that rivals philosophical modes yet remains critical by questioning prevailing intellectual assumptions in International Relations theory.

Keywords: critical theory; historicism; contextualist; intellectual history; Renaissance humanism; enlightenments; Giambattista Vico

Critical international theory has firmly established itself in the discipline of international relations (IR). Since the early 1980s when scholars such as Richard Ashley (1981), R.W. Cox (1981), Andrew Linklater (1982), John Maclean (1981), and R.B.J. Walker (1981) argued that the study of IR required the activation of a critical and reflective attitude, critical international theory has grown considerably in influence. Arguably, it opened the way for an array of different critical methods and attitudes to surface in IR – including post-structuralism, feminism, post-colonialism, constructivism, and the variety of post-Marxist approaches – which offer alternative

understandings of world politics. While these critical international theories are agreed in their commitment to a post-positivist agenda, no such agreement has been achieved on what makes a theory ‘critical’ or how such a theory ought to be pursued.

A striking feature of the post-positivist intellectual terrain is the heightened interest in philosophy of science, meta-theory, reflexivity, and moral and political philosophy (Neufeld 1995; Fluck 2010; Kurki 2011). Critical international theories have taken flight into abstract theories of epistemology and ontology, recondite rationalities, and deontological and deconstructive discourses.¹ No doubt this has been a valuable exercise. However, this philosophical intensification risks creating the impression that theory is the provenance of philosophy; and that philosophy alone is in a position to decide what counts as ‘theory’, what qualifies as ‘critical’. The aspiration to develop a reflexive, normative social philosophy of IR has increasingly led critical international theorists away from history. Historical research becomes extraneous to arguments framed by the normative distinction between the right and the good (Neufeld 2000), engaged in the reconstruction of Habermas’s theories of communicative action or discourse ethics (Risse 2000), or developed through the application of dialectics or meta-dialectics (Roach 2007; Brincat 2010). In these and other cases philosophy supervenes as a critic tasked with reflecting on and judging the foundations and history of IR (as both a subject and a discipline) from the vantage point of a universal or dialectical reason.

Without denying the value of philosophical reflection in pursuit of critical international theory, this article challenges the supposition that concedes to philosophy a superintendent role. Philosophy is neither the only source of theory nor the only means of determining what makes a theory critical. But if philosophy is not the exclusive provenance of critical theory, how else may critical international theory be conceived? This article proposes reorienting critical international theory in a historical mode. The point is not to dismiss philosophy, but to recover and defend a mode of knowledge that has almost been forgotten from the repertoire of critical international theory. Even when historical modes of knowledge are employed, the contexts of their original emergence are rarely appreciated.

While the article offers an alternative to dominant understandings of critical international theory, it is not altogether alien; Robert Cox’s (1981) disinclination to avow philosophy, for example, is made precisely to

¹ See, for example, the contributions to the ‘Forum on Critical Realism’ in *Review of International Studies* (2012).

accommodate historicist and realist modes of knowledge in his programme of critical international theory. My overriding purpose is neither to provide an exhaustive new reading of Cox nor to dismiss critical international theory in philosophical mode, but to show how the intellectual resources of critical international theory in historical mode may be rehabilitated. This will inevitably raise questions about Cox's relation to conventional sources of critical international theory and afford an opportunity to explore alternative sources.

The article thus starts with Cox as a means of retrieving those alternative intellectual sources. While many first-generation critical IR theorists (including Ashley, Booth, Cox, Linklater, Maclean, and Walker) seemed aware of the insights historicism and realism can contribute to a critical theory of IR, later generations seem oblivious. Cox's enduring appreciation of, and engagement with, these modes of enquiry must therefore come as a surprise to them, if indeed it is noticed at all. In the second part of the article I revisit the reception of Enlightenment thinking, focusing on both conventional and revisionist approaches to historiographies of this intellectual movement commonly portrayed as the founding moment of modern critique. If conventional approaches have tended to characterize the Enlightenment as a more-or-less unified normative philosophical project of critique, revisionist accounts have identified multiple Enlightenments, including more historical modes of knowledge developed to enhance civil government. These latter accounts provide alternative sources for reorienting critical international theory around historically grounded rather than philosophically grounded criticism.

In the third part I provide a more detailed sketch of the intellectual heritage upon which critical theory in a historical mode draws, highlighting the early modern origins of its critical attitude. This will involve a brief discussion of the shadowy origins of political criticism (called *critique* after the eighteenth century French Enlightenment) in early modern historiography. The purpose of the discussion here is to recall an alternate lineage of critical theory – the secularising and historicizing political theories of early modern Europe – that, at variance with conventional narratives of critical international theory, originates in Renaissance humanism, passes through absolutist historiographies, and feeds into Enlightenment civil histories. It is through this line of intellectual descent that an alternative, more historical form of critical international theory may be built. The fourth section of the article then revisits Cox's self-professed debt to the eighteenth century Neapolitan scholar, Giambattista Vico – one of the great, if idiosyncratic, exponents of Enlightenment civil histories. The intention is not so much to explicate how, and whether, Cox faithfully carries out a Vichian approach, still less to hail Vico as a hero, than to

highlight the theoretical openings made by this historical mode of Enlightenment theorizing. The article contends, in the final section, that these openings can make a significant contribution to critical international theory. By reorienting towards more historical modes of reasoning – such as Constructivist IR theory and Cambridge School contextual intellectual history – critical international theory problematizes dominant conceptions of theory, the international, and the critical.

Revisiting the sources of critical international theory

In both his published autobiographical reflections and in a recent interview, Cox (1996, 19; 2012, 17) recalls Susan Strange's description of him as 'an eccentric in the best English sense of the word'. Strange (1988) reached this conclusion because, she believed, Cox remains outside the circles of orthodox theories of IR. Cox himself seems to agree with Strange: 'I don't belong to any school or espouse any doctrine', he said in interview. 'You can see from the people I quote', he continues, 'that they come from different contexts; they are not the ones other people tend to use. How many international relations scholars write about Giambattista Vico, Georges Sorel or R. G. Collingwood?' (Cox 2012, 17–18).

There can be little doubt that few IR scholars, whether critical theorists or not, refer to, let alone, write about, Vico, Sorel, or Collingwood. Their writings are out of fashion, unread and largely forgotten, if ever they were known, among IR theorists of any type, but especially critical international theorists, who, more interested in the radical philosophers and social theorists of Frankfurt and Paris, tend to exclude historiography as a source of critical or political theory.² Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Herbert Marcuse, and Jürgen Habermas from Frankfurt, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Emmanuel Levinas from Paris constitute the central axes of contemporary critical theories. So, as someone who deviates from the usual methods and regnant movements, Cox's programmatic theory statements necessarily appear eccentric in this context. Even his enduring engagement with Antonio Gramsci, who has of course enjoyed an intellectual revival, leaves Cox an eccentric since in IR it was Cox himself who led the Gramsci revival.

But there is more to the story than this. Cox knows something of which many critical IR theorists seem oblivious, that an invaluable source of the critical attitude may be found outside the orbit of the German triumvirate of Kant, Hegel, and Marx and their twentieth century interpreters.

² Cases in point are the collections edited by Jenny Edkins and Nick Vaughan-Williams (2009) and Cerwyn Moore and Chris Farrands (2010).

This article's purpose is not to revert to a purportedly more authentic version of critical theory identified with the purified sources of Horkheimer and Cox (Jahn 1998) or Marx, Gramsci, and Cox (Morton 2006), but to rehabilitate an alternative mode of theorizing which also happens to be an unacknowledged source of Cox's critical international theory. This alternative mode of theory trades more in the idioms of history and historiography than philosophy; and treats philosophical or political propositions as acts performed in history rather than decontextualized responses to perennial political topics. This contextualist form of intellectual history is today most closely associated with the so-called 'Cambridge School' historians of political thought: John Dunne, J. G. A. Pocock, and Quentin Skinner; but in IR Duncan Bell (2002) and Darshan Vigneswaran and Joel Quirk (2010) have outlined the potential of such an approach to contribute to critical international theory.³

Though it deviates from the post-Cartesian, post-Kantian and post-Marxist forms of philosophically informed theory that predominate in IR today, the historical or historiographical approach should be considered a legitimate form of theory. Approached historically we can see that theory was not always the exclusive province of philosophy. Indeed, the exclusion of history and historiography from what counts as 'theory' is best viewed as a historically contingent and partisan intellectual circumscription, not a definitive truth about theory. The point of this article, therefore, is neither to prescribe a definition of 'theory' nor to lay charges of heresy against rival programmes of 'critical theory'. Rival approaches need not be diagnosed as evidence of 'malaise' (Morton 2006, 70), nor dismissed as 'shallow, lifeless, and uncritical caricature[s] of [their] true potential' (Jahn 1998, 613), as if we were in possession of a perfectly realized critical theory against which the purportedly ailing and lifeless versions are to be judged. Rather than identifying critical international theory exclusively with the writings of Cox or Horkheimer or Gramsci or Marx or Kant, as if they wrote the final words on the matter, this article reverses the operation performed by Beate Jahn, Adam David Morton, and others. It seeks to widen our conception of theory by including historiography, to pluralize the intellectual sources out of which critical international theory programmes may be improvized, and to identify and extend Cox's reception of historicism as a means of developing a theory programme via historical methods and modes.

³ Other valuable accounts of this 'historiographical turn' in IR may be found in David Armitage (2004), Bell (2001) and Edward Keene (2005, Ch. 1). For extended theoretical treatments of contextualist methods of intellectual history see Hunter (2006, 2007), Pocock (2009), and Skinner (2002).

Acknowledging and appreciating the fact of rival programmes of critical international theory requires an approach less philosophical than historical, for the concern here is not to interrogate and philosophically or morally judge the competing critical theories, but to emphasize a form of critical thinking that is persistently disregarded. I suggest that in abjuring the hegemonic sources of critical international theory, Cox's approach draws on a long-standing critical attitude attuned to the demands of civil government, albeit one that is virtually forgotten in IR today: an Italian humanist tradition of historiography and political criticism that, beyond Gramsci, may be said to include Benedetto Croce, Giambattista Vico, and Niccolò Machiavelli, to name only the thinkers best known to the Anglophone world. These Italian thinkers articulated a historical mode of knowledge that not only involved the construction of historical narratives, but the postulation of historiography as a form of political theory oriented to civil government rather than, say, the spiritual betterment of 'man', the moral perfection of community, or the emancipation of humanity.⁴ It is this historical mode of knowledge that frames Cox's improvisation of critical theory, giving it an eccentric appearance when juxtaposed to post-Cartesian philosophies of science, post-Kantian moral philosophies, or post-Marxist social theories of IR that, to varying degrees, abjured the objective of civil government.

Cox's disavowal of the Frankfurt school and enlightenment

Cox may have used the term 'critical theory', and may frequently find his name listed alongside other critical international theorists, such as Andrew Linklater, Mark Hoffman, and early Richard Ashley; it is increasingly apparent, however, that Cox is something of an anomaly in this company. While these scholars typically invoke Frankfurt School thinkers such as Habermas, and allude to the Enlightenment as an unfinished project, Cox's professed intellectual debts lie elsewhere. Revisiting Cox's programmatic theory statements not only counters the uniform contextualization of Cox in post-Marxist thinking, but opens up critical international theory to intellectual inheritances and critical attitudes beyond the Frankfurt School and conventional readings of the Enlightenment.

The Frankfurt School

The powerful intellectual legacy left by successive generations of Frankfurt School theorists – from Horkheimer, Adorno, Benjamin, and Marcuse through Habermas to Axel Honneth – needs no accounting here, save

⁴ Here I draw upon J. G. A. Pocock's (2005, 2011) argument that to conceive historiography as political thought is to contextualize political action, ideas, and institutions in history.

two points.⁵ First, from its earliest days it pioneered a form of social philosophy animated by self-reflective thinking drawn from engagement with Kant, Hegel, Marx, Freud, and Weber. The purpose of this philosophy has been to deliver normative theoretical analyses of modern society and culture via the method of immanent critique. It has drawn attention to the intrinsic relationship between knowledge and values, and thereby recast the purpose and method of theory. Second, critical international theory has drawn heavily from the Frankfurt School. This is particularly apparent in the early writings of Ashley (1981), and in the writings of Shannon Brincat (2010), Mark Hoffman (1987), Linklater (1990, 1998), Mark Neufeld (1995), Stephen Roach (2010), and Martin Weber (2005).

Indeed, it is not uncommon for Cox's critical international theory to be associated with the Frankfurt School.⁶ One of the main reasons for this is his well-known distinction between 'critical theory' and 'problem-solving theory', which is thought to be adapted from Horkheimer ([1937] 1972). 'Problem-solving theories', as Cox depicts them, are marked by two main characteristics: by a positivist methodology, and by a tendency to legitimize prevailing social and political structures. Positivists assume that fact and value, subject and object, can be separated (see Smith 1996; Kurki and Wight 2010, 20–21). This results in the view not only that an objective world exists independently of human consciousness, but that objective knowledge of social reality is possible insofar as values are expunged from analysis. Problem-solving theory's method of positivism, on this account, thus tends towards an acceptance of prevailing political structures as the normal condition. As Cox (1981, 128) puts it, problem-solving theory 'takes the world as it finds it, with the prevailing social and power relationships and the institutions into which they are organised, as the given framework for action. It does not question the present order, but has the effect of legitimising and reifying it'.

By contrast, because Cox's critical theory posits an intimate connection between social life and cognitive processes, it rejects the strict positivist distinctions between fact and value, object and subject, world and knowledge. It starts from the conviction that because cognitive processes themselves are contextually situated and subject to political interests, they should be considered an integral part of the social and political world under analysis. Like the social and political world itself, these cognitive processes, and the theories and ideas to which they give rise, have a history, and one of the main tasks of critical theory is to reveal the effects of this history by drawing upon

⁵ See Martin Jay (1973) for the classic and still unsurpassed account of the Frankfurt School.

⁶ I too have assumed the association (Devetak 2009, 163).

interpretive and historical theories opposed not only to problem-solving theory's method of positivism, but also to the assumption that the present political order poses insurmountable constraints on change.

Max Horkheimer's 1937 essay on 'Traditional and Critical Theory' presents a distinction parallel to Cox's distinction between problem solving and critical theories. 'Traditional theory', by analogy with the natural sciences, insists that subject and object be strictly separated; it also aspires to be value-free. This aspiration grows out of an assumption that there is an external world 'out there' susceptible to objective enquiry, unfettered by ideological beliefs, values, or opinions; all of which would invalidate the findings. 'Critical theory', by contrast, eschews this aspiration. Recognizing the unavoidable connection between knowledge and values, between theory and its context, the critical conception of theory outlined by Horkheimer is guided by an interest in emancipation from, rather than legitimation and consolidation of, existing social forms. As articulated by Horkheimer ([1937] 1972, 215), 'critical theory' does not simply present an expression of the 'concrete historical situation', it also acts as 'a force within [that situation] to stimulate change'. It allows for the intervention of humans in the making of their history. Earlier, Horkheimer ([1933] 1993, 38) had characterized the task of humanity as a struggle for the realization in this world of 'Justice in connection with Freedom and Equality'.

Having briefly outlined both Horkheimer's and Cox's distinctions, we can see why IR theorists have arrived at the conclusion that Cox must have had Horkheimer's original distinction in mind when he posited his distinction between problem-solving and critical theories. However, as Anthony Leysens (2008) points out, and Cox (2012, 18) himself confesses in interview, he had never read the works of Frankfurt School scholars; they were never part of his 'intellectual inheritance'. It is thus a mistake to trace Cox's distinction back to Horkheimer. So, despite the apparent similarity between the two distinctions and Cox's championing of 'critical theory', a term indelibly associated with Horkheimer and the Frankfurt School, there seems to be no intellectual debt to the Frankfurt School in Cox's writings. Cox's critical attitude and theory find their source elsewhere.

The Enlightenment

An alternative, more distant source of critical international theory is often said to be the Enlightenment. Indeed, in the interwar years Horkheimer ([1933] 1993, 37) himself had identified closely with the Enlightenment, proclaiming, 'The battle cries of the Enlightenment and of the French Revolution are valid now more than ever'. Despite Horkheimer and Adorno's (1972) apparent abandonment of the Enlightenment after the Second World

War, Habermas (1987) has remained a steadfast defender of the Enlightenment project.⁷

Among critical international theorists Kant stands out as the paradigmatic thinker of the Enlightenment; but Cox again disappoints. There are very few, if any, references to the philosopher of Königsberg in his writings, which contrasts sharply with other leading critical international theorists, Ken Booth and Andrew Linklater. Indeed, as he admits in interview, ‘most of the thinkers I have followed have been critics of the Enlightenment’ (Cox 2012, 25). If his reliance on critics of the Enlightenment were not bad enough, he then admits the influence of the great critic of the French Revolution, Edmund Burke. Cox (2012, 25) confesses that he has always called himself a conservative; not in the American sense, he hastens to add, more in the Burkean sense. Finally, Cox (1981, 131, 1996, 27–30) has repeatedly highlighted the influence of realism and historicism – two other intellectual modes or theories generally construed as hostile to the Enlightenment – giving special mention to Friedrich Meinecke, Ludwig Dehio, and E. H. Carr.

All this begs the question, how can a self-confessed conservative, who not only neglects the Frankfurt School, but draws upon a range of apparently anti-Enlightenment thinkers still be conceived a critical international theorist? It may well be that Cox’s abiding engagement with Gramsci (1891–1937) – the Sardinian Communist Party leader incarcerated by Mussolini for the last nine years of his short life – has been sufficient for fellow-travellers to regard Cox’s admiration of realism and historicism as a minor and unimportant eccentricity, and to accept his credentials as a critical international theorist; this would seem to be the position of Morton (2006). But if we take seriously Cox’s high regard for the realist and historicist writings of Meinecke, Dehio, and Carr, in addition to Machiavelli, Vico, Croce, and Collingwood, we can gain a better appreciation of Cox, and more interestingly, begin to mark out a rival programme of critical international theory.⁸

By approaching his contribution in this way we can see that Cox’s international theory inherits a critical attitude and method that arose in early modern Europe, and has since remained distinct from the tradition

⁷ The same goes for post-structuralism. Though deconstruction has occasionally been counter-posed to the Enlightenment, Derrida (1992, 79) has on several occasions appealed to a ‘new Enlightenment’ as an intellectual and ethical responsibility.

⁸ Michael C. Williams (2012) undertakes a similar enterprise in his illuminating account of Cox’s ambivalent relationship with realism; as does Randall Germain (2000, 323) who, in his critical historiography of E. H. Carr, identifies Cox as a ‘descendent’ of the kind of ‘historical realism’ articulated by the author of *The Twenty Years’ Crisis*.

of critique embodied in popular post-Kantian or post-Marxist political thought. Provoked by religious and imperial universalizing claims, this secular historiographical method and humanist critical attitude was designed to combat metaphysics and to contextualize and detranscendentalize the way people think and write about politics. The defence of civil government by humanists and their successors was thus an intellectual act of resistance guided by emancipation from an array of imperial, ecclesiastical, and Scholastic hegemonies. While distinct from the dominant philosophical interpretations of Enlightenment it would be a mistake to cast this approach as anti-Enlightenment. Rather, it should be understood as one of several Enlightenments.

Rival Enlightenments and alternative sources of critical theory

Early modern attempts to combat metaphysical thinking in politics form an indispensable, if disregarded, source of critical international theory. To demonstrate this claim and recover this intellectual source it will be necessary to suspend the conventional historiographical narratives which trace the sources of critique or political criticism to eighteenth century Enlightenment thought as expressed by French *philosophes* or German *Aufklärer*. These narratives, it appears, are little more than the product of partisan philosophical histories that aim, among other things, to combat historicist political theories. By privileging a monolithic view of the Enlightenment as a normative philosophical project, they obstruct from view an alternative reading of the Enlightenment that furnishes a critical theory in historical mode.

Conventional Enlightenment historiographies: the philosophical interpretations

The Enlightenment has often been treated as a more-or-less unitary phenomenon or movement. Classic accounts, from Ernst Cassirer ([1932] 1951) and Paul Hazard ([1946] 1965) to Norman Hampson (1968) and Peter Gay (1969), for all their diversity, nonetheless find a coherent unity of scientific, secular, and moral philosophical ideals in the Enlightenment. Though critique of received tradition, religion, and government was integral to the project of Enlightenment, *philosophes* sought to go beyond mere negativity; they aspired, positively, and optimistically, to reform the world on the basis of philosophically refined concepts such as reason, freedom, equality, progress, happiness, civility, manners (*moeurs*), and humanity. These formed the ‘spirit of the age’, uniting a range of cosmopolitan thinkers across the ‘long eighteenth-century’ (1680–1815); making John Locke, Pierre Bayle,

David Hume, Voltaire, Diderot, Christian Wolff, Cesare Beccaria, and Immanuel Kant, for all their differences, contributors to the Enlightenment both as a philosophical and normative political project.⁹

The tendency to conceive the Enlightenment as a unitary phenomenon has been perpetuated by recent narratives, both celebratory and critical, which construe it as the source of modernity's radical democratic or critical political ideals. Jürgen Habermas (1989), for instance, constructs a celebratory narrative in which the liberal constitutional and welfare states owe their emergence to eighteenth century Enlightenment transformations in the public sphere. From the social institutions of coffee and ale houses to the Kantian attempt philosophically to convert politics into morality through the principle of publicity, Habermas detects in the eighteenth century Enlightenment, the emergence of a universal public reason capable of holding the state to account, and foreshadowing the progressive development of the modern liberal state. The more recent narrative of Jonathan Israel (2010) is also inclined to celebrate the Enlightenment as the source of modernity's radical and democratic ideals. In the radical, democratic Enlightenment of Spinoza, Bayle, Diderot, Helvetius, and d'Holbach, Israel (2010, 178) says, we find an 'absolute, uncompromising linkage of reason, knowledge, and philosophy with morality (and politics)'. This philosophically grounded reason nourishes the idea of a moral politics capable of 'truly universal' application (Israel 2010, 195). Reinhart Koselleck (1988), in a more critical appraisal, contended that Enlightenment critique embodied a principled rejection of politics in the name of morality, setting itself apart from politics and the sovereign territorial state (Koselleck 1988, 114). This 'moralization of politics' gave rise to a 'Utopian modernism' incapable of stemming the political crises which it triggered.

Despite their radically different appraisals, Habermas, Israel, and Koselleck all interpret the Enlightenment as a normative philosophical project to develop critical, moral, and democratic forms of reason oriented to the subjugation of state reason and the liberation of humankind. On these accounts, the Enlightenment is identified with fostering a critical political attitude underpinned by a philosophy of history that aspires to transform politics into a moral force. Not surprisingly, Kant often features as the exemplary representative of this Enlightenment. His critical philosophy and his engagement with the question, 'what is enlightenment?' (Kant [1784] 1970) have come to dominate what Franco Venturi (1971, 2)

⁹ Even Carl Becker's (1932, 31) polemical assault on the Enlightenment grants it a unity, though as a messianic rather than secular enterprise led by anti-clerical *philosophes* who would demolish 'the Heavenly City of St Augustine only to rebuild it with more up-to-date materials'.

has called ‘the philosophical interpretation of the *Aufklärung*’.¹⁰ There are, however, alternative, less philosophically inclined, Enlightenments for recovery too.

Multiple Enlightenments, revisionist historiographies

Recent historical research suggests that the Enlightenment was less than monolithic; there were multiple Enlightenments, and, as Becker’s (1932) analysis suggests, not all were wholly secular. Rather than emphasize a unitary phenomenon, usually associated with Kantian philosophical history, the rise of the democratic public sphere, and philosophical critique, scholars have begun to delineate and excavate specific strands of Enlightenment thinking; with some emphasizing distinct national Enlightenments (Porter and Teich 1981), English, Scottish, French, Dutch, Swiss, Italian, and so on, and others emphasizing the Enlightenment’s religious and multi-confessional origins (Trevor-Roper 1967; Pocock 1997; Hunter 2001). J. G. A. Pocock (1999, 2007), more than anyone else, has demonstrated why we should speak of Enlightenments in the plural rather than ‘*the Enlightenment*’; identifying conservative, national, clerical, civil, and ‘Utrecht’ Enlightenments, among others. Pocock surveys the Utrecht Enlightenment in *Barbarism and Religion*, his magisterial, multi-volume historiographical attempt to contextualize Edward Gibbon’s *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776). The Utrecht Enlightenment was instrumental in giving rise to historiographies of the secularizing civil state and states-system that were written as part of the Enlightenment programme to extinguish the flames of religious and civil war and to cultivate the shared civilizational practices of manners (*moeurs*) and commerce.

For the moment, there are two points to note. First, as displayed above, the Enlightenment is best viewed as multiple. Second, of methodological importance, is that the rival Enlightenments only come into clear view when the philosophical approach to the history of philosophy and political thought is abandoned and replaced with a historical one, as both Knud Haakonssen (2006) and Ian Hunter (2006) have argued. Such an approach treats the philosophies or theories under investigation as contextualized historical phenomena rather than instantiations or approximations on the way to a culminating moral or political philosophy, whether post-Cartesian, post-Kantian, or post-Marxist. It also allows for contextual understanding of different critical attitudes, showing how the morally and socially grounded

¹⁰ On the intellectual context for understanding Kant’s essay, see the excellent essays by James Schmidt (1992, 2003), and for critical accounts of recent receptions, including Venturi’s, of Kant’s original essay on Enlightenment, see Schmidt (2011).

forms of critique that are so dominant today emerged in history in opposition to historically grounded forms of critique.

Recovering an historical mode of thought: from Renaissance humanism and Absolutist historiography to Enlightenment civil history

This section begins the historical excavation and reconstruction necessary to recover the intellectual sources that sustain and can be deployed in a more historical mode of critical international theory. Without attempting an exhaustive genealogy, the purpose of this section is to sketch the early modern European origins and transmission of a historical mode of political thought. From Renaissance innovations in humanist historical methods through to absolutist historiography and Enlightenment civil narratives, we can see the descent of a historical mode of thought that yields an alternative critical attitude and political theory to those developed by post-Cartesian, post-Kantian, and post-Marxist philosophies. Indeed, drawing upon Pocock (1987), Amos Funkenstein (1986), and Jacob Soll (2005), I argue that at least one strand of eighteenth century Enlightenment thought improvised methods of political criticism out of tools originally honed by humanist and absolutist historiography. By recovering the historical mode of thought this section also serves to contextualize Vico's writings, and, in turn, illuminate historiographical techniques of political criticism issuing from Renaissance humanism and serving Enlightenment civil histories.

Renaissance rivalries: humanist historiographies and the subversion of Scholastic philosophy

In reviving the Ciceronian curriculum of *studia humanitatis* (the humanities), the Renaissance formed an intellectual battlefield between rival curricula. Humanists launched a revolt against the 'great logico-theological systematisations' of the dominant Scholastic curriculum (Garin 1965, 3), viewing it as barbaric and devoid of practical human or civil purpose (Copenhagen and Schmitt 1992, 29). It was in the context of this growing hostility towards Scholasticism that humanism forged its identity as an intellectual movement (Skinner 1978, 104), and began to prize civil and humanist philological methods over recondite natural philosophy and Scholastic metaphysics.

The critique of Scholasticism and philosophy that became emblematic of humanism found forceful expression in Lorenzo Valla (1407–1457), the fifteenth century Italian philologist and rhetorician best known for proving the 'Donation of Constantine' a forgery. He claimed that historians possessed 'more substance, more practical knowledge, more political wisdom ..., more customs, and more learning of every sort than the

precepts of any philosophers' (quoted in Kelley 1970, 19).¹¹ Many humanists held philosophy, especially the Scholastic variety, in contempt. Its 'proliferating abstractions and superfluous distinctions' may promise some kind of intellectual consolation, but, according to humanists, it 'lost contact with concrete reality', thereby cutting philosophers off from their humanity (Kelley 1970, 29).

The humanist curriculum was also a revolt against Scholastic methods of reading texts. The Scholastics, as Anthony Grafton (1999, 181) observes, read the canon 'in a uniform way', considering texts 'components of a single system'. They treated classical texts, 'not as the work of individuals who had lived in a particular time and place but as impersonal bodies of propositions' (Grafton 1999, 182). Read through the intricate ahistorical apparatus of Scholastic learning and commentary, rather than through their historical context, texts were treated as transcendental phenomena and the past as undivided from the present.

One of the great achievements of Renaissance humanism was to reveal the sedimented layers of textual commentary that had been overlaid on authoritative classical texts and been mistaken for the classical texts themselves (Pocock 1987, 2). Another was to insist that the distant past could only be made intelligible by detailed reconstructions of context. Historical study required methods capable of registering the differences between past and present. In the hands of *quattrocento* humanists such as Coluccio Salutati (1331–1406), Leonardo Bruni (1370–1444), and Flavio Biondo (1392–1463), 'the historical past becomes the object of knowledge of a specific kind: historical knowledge' (Ianziti 1991, 80). In the search for historical understanding, philosophy's importance declined considerably. The task was not to assess past thought against ideas presently believed to be timeless or superior, but to grasp the past more accurately and in its own terms.¹² This meant recovering the actual, historical thinker rather than the one who had been passed down through generations of interpretation and glossing. In their quest to recover insights from authoritative classics of antiquity, Renaissance humanists were thus compelled to place those

¹¹ Interestingly, Valla also saw himself as an eccentric standing outside any of the extant schools of thought (Kelley 1970, 28).

¹² For example, Gary Ianziti (1991, 82–83) explains how Biondo deployed a kind of contextualist method in showing how a word like *imperator* took on very different meanings in different historical contexts, and that earlier meanings should not be conflated with later meanings. Eugenio Garin (1965, 5) also notes that Coluccio Salutati, as a good pupil of Petrarch, 'always insisted that one should, when confronted with a philosophical text, refrain from empty discussions and occupy oneself instead with the attempt to understand it in its exact original sense'.

authors in an appropriate historical context and treat their thoughts as historical phenomena (Garin 1965, 6, 14).

This emphatically historical approach required an enquiry into an author's intention and motivation, an account of the circumstances prompting their questions and answers, and an understanding of 'the reason for their actions', as Machiavelli put it in his famous letter to Francesco Vettori of 10 December 1513 (Machiavelli 2004, 264).¹³ The aim of humanist historiography was to dismantle the metaphysical agenda of ecclesiastic and Scholastic theologies and replace them with temporal-political agendas of civil governance. Humanist histories from Bruni to Machiavelli were decidedly political insofar as they were 'not written for the delectation of other scholars and humanists but as a guide for literate statesmen' (Ianziti 2012, 6).¹⁴ Humanist historians made politics and political community the 'font of value' and the point of enquiry (Hankins 1996, 126).

This humanist 'bias toward the political', as Pocock (1975, 63) put it, required intellectual tools and resources unavailable to or disavowed by theologico-metaphysical agendas. It demanded an understanding of politics as a historically situated, contingent activity, where actors and institutions interacted in particular contexts and changeable circumstances.¹⁵ It required also the development of intellectual techniques capable of managing information, both historical and contemporary, considered integral to the maintenance of governments, whether republics or 'states' – Machiavelli's word for principalities, empires, and kingdoms. Finally, it required philological techniques for textual decipherment and for conducting archival research so that humanist historians could consult primary sources and not rely on an ahistorical canonical commentary literature. In other words, the form of political reason associated with the emergent territorial state required new methods of understanding, acquiring, keeping, accessing, managing and interpreting the historical data of politics; methods unavailable to a Scholasticism which, in any case, converted history into an unchanging, eternal present (*nunc stans*), and converted political thought into transcendental propositions answering eternal questions.

The significance of history for politics and statecraft is made plain in Machiavelli's writings. His *Prince* and *Discourses* are both littered with

¹³ I have amended the translation slightly.

¹⁴ See also Constantine Fasolt's (2004, 17) comment: 'Humanists placed history at the service of European princes and republics seeking to emancipate themselves in fierce campaigns from the authority of pope and emperor'.

¹⁵ See Machiavelli's (2004, 134–35) letter to Giovan Battista Soderini of September 1506 and his famous discussion of Fortuna in chapter 25 of *The Prince* (2003) for good examples of his emphasis on the need to adapt political action to the condition of the times.

historical examples meant to offer up political lessons (Viroli 1998, 97–107). Machiavelli, like other humanists, believed that ‘classical antiquity constituted a great reservoir of excellence’ (Hankins 2007, 32). Examples from the ancient world held a general significance whose meaning had to be extracted from the facts (Gilbert 1965, 168). The point was not so much that antiquity could be emulated – as if the past and present remained on an uninterrupted historical continuum – but that it offered exemplary lessons for those willing to interpret and contextualize political action.¹⁶

Most importantly, as Felix Gilbert (1965, 199–200) notes, politics had to be understood in the context of the ever-changing ‘stream of history’. The task of the humanist political thinker, according to Machiavelli, is therefore to understand the effects of time and history on the political art of government. ‘Time sweeps everything along and can bring good as well as evil, evil as well as good’, Machiavelli (2003, 12) wrote, emphasizing that politics is a temporal activity, always subject to the vagaries of time (history) and place (context). Political actors, therefore, must be able to grasp – in both senses of the word, to comprehend and to seize – the times. Politics thus calls for a form of ‘contextual reasoning’, to borrow a phrase from Funkenstein (1986, 206). Without this historical or contextual reasoning, politics risks becoming detached from reality, too abstract, and bereft of practical civil use; or else reverts to a normative political theory of the Scholastic type which deals in idealized ethical constructions of ‘man’ and civil society.

Absolutist historiographies and Enlightenment civil histories

The contextual reasoning introduced by Renaissance humanists gave rise to a more historical and secular understanding of the political world which found a receptive climate in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Defenders of state sovereignty such as Jean Bodin, Paolo Sarpi and Samuel Pufendorf utilized this historical or contextual form of reasoning to combat transcendental claims of morality or justice articulated as part of aggrandizing imperial or religious projects.¹⁷

Absolutist historiography formed the context for a wider European reception of contextual political reasoning associated with Machiavelli and, since the Florentine secretary was still unmentionable in many seventeenth century European chanceries, Tacitus, the Roman senator, and historian

¹⁶ Paradoxically, as Pocock (1987, 4) notes, the more thoroughly humanists resurrected antiquity the more they realized that it could not be emulated in the present.

¹⁷ While Bodin and Pufendorf are best known for *Republic* and *Law of Nature and Nations* respectively, each also developed historical methods designed for sovereign states to handle the interests and reasons of states more effectively. See Bodin ([1566] 1969) and Pufendorf ([1686] 2013).

who clinically narrated Rome's civil wars with an unflinching eye. The impacts of Machiavelli and the subsequent late-Renaissance and absolutist revival of Tacitus were integral to a transformed humanist culture that reaffirmed the privileging of politics and history over morals and philosophy, especially in contexts plagued by civil and religious war or by papal and imperial aggrandizement. It sustained an historical approach to politics which maintained that historical facts – whether a text, an institution, an event or an action – only acquired meaning and significance when situated in their original context (Funkenstein 1986, 11, 206–208). This also proved instrumental in efforts to recover from antiquity examples of political prudence which could be used to establish or restore political order (Soll 2005, 23).¹⁸

Justus Lipsius is perhaps the best-known exponent of this kind of Tacitean-inspired understanding of politics and reason of state, but it is another Italian, the Venetian Paolo Sarpi (1552–1623), who best represents this use of history to fashion a prudential and secular reason of state.¹⁹ The multi-talented Servite friar – credited with the anatomical discovery of valves in veins, and praised by Galileo for his peerless knowledge of mathematics and astronomy – was, by virtue of his appointment as Venice's state theologian and counsellor, deeply involved in the political life of the republic. But, especially in state chanceries and Protestant intellectual circles, he earned Europe-wide fame by vigorously defending the republic's independence from papal interference during the Interdict Crisis of 1606. His *History of the Council of Trent* ([1619] 1640) and other posthumously published writings were Tacitean-inspired, humanist histories, treating the Church and its history like any other earthly actor engaged in IR. Sarpi adopted a distinctly historical approach to the matter of Church and state relations, unmasking the Church's mundane political interests and denying it any transcendental qualities or privileges. In keeping with the anti-metaphysical approaches adopted by Machiavelli before him and Pietro Giannone after him, Sarpi insisted on the strict separation of politics and religion, church and state, 'so that the state must at all times stand on its own, independent of religious support' (Wootton 1983, 30).

The Renaissance and Absolutist attempts to preserve the autonomy of the political realm as a secular domain out of the Church's reach, would be

¹⁸ Soll (2005, 26) adds that 'The practice of prudence, or reason of state, was based on the establishment and analysis of accurate historical and political documents'. For the 'foundational' statement on the matter see chapter 2 of Giovanni Botero's (1956) *The Reason of State*, originally published in 1589.

¹⁹ On Lipsius see Gerhard Oestreich's (1982) classic account and Halvard Leira's (2008) useful account of Lipsius's relevance for IR.

carried forward into the eighteenth century Enlightenment civil histories of the kind Pocock (1999) has explored in volume two of *Barbarism and Religion*, titled *Narratives of Civil Government*. This volume provides an account of eighteenth century ‘Enlightened’ historians, from the Neapolitan jurist Giannone and French *philosophe* Voltaire to figures of the Scottish Enlightenment, David Hume, William Robertson, Adam Smith, and Adam Ferguson. They all wrote histories of Europe’s gradual ascent from the long dark ages of the ‘Christian millennium’ to a modern states-system constituted through common rules, practices and institutions (most especially the balance of power, treaties, commerce, and shared manners and civilization). In the civil history narrated by Robertson ([1769] 1869, 19) – the Scottish historian and Principal of Edinburgh University – the Enlightenment process revealed itself in ‘the history of society among the nations of Europe’, as civility, toleration and order quelled religious conflict.

Theirs is essentially the story of the secularization and civilization of politics, the progressive dismantling of feudal Christendom, and the erection of the European states-system. It is history narrated as the triumph of civil government over the Church, and commerce and civil law over confessional conflict; and it is history narrated with the concepts and methods of secular, humanist, anti-rationalist, and historicist modes of thinking originally forged by Renaissance humanists.²⁰ These civil histories employed contextual forms of reasoning to explain and justify emergent practices of civil government and diplomacy.

Vico’s post-diluvian history of civil institutions outlined in the *New Science* shares with the Enlightened civil historians an assessment of the Middle Ages as a ‘return of barbarism’ (Vico ([1744] 2001, 438) and its eventual overcoming by humane civil institutions (including forms of government) which possess and cultivate reason, civility and moderation (Vico [1744] 2001, Book 4). Moreover, despite its eccentricities, the *New Science* displays something of the same anti-clerical ‘temper of mind’ that Pocock (1999, 21) identifies with the historians of the civil Enlightenment, and results in a similarly humanist and contextualist mode of reasoning about civil institutions.

Giambattista Vico and the historical mode of knowledge

The Renaissance, Absolutist and Enlightenment civil histories share a good deal in common with the one eighteenth century thinker Cox credits as a major intellectual influence: Giambattista Vico (1668–1744). Cox clearly sees his own critical international theory as a continuation of the kind of

²⁰ I have expanded on these historical narratives elsewhere (Devetak forthcoming).

historical approach developed by Vico even if Cox's followers prefer to ignore this in favour of Gramsci.²¹ While this cannot be doubted, doubt can be cast over Cox's casual classification of Vico as a critic of Enlightenment.

It is not entirely clear why Cox arrives at this conclusion, but Vico's historicist scepticism towards universalism seems to have been decisive (Cox 1996, 29). In any event, this is not an uncommon view of Vico; it is one made famous by Sir Isaiah Berlin's study, *Vico and Herder* (1976), and reasserted by Mark Lilla (1994). Vico's thought certainly cannot be seen as a precursor of Kant's Enlightenment project or the genesis of the liberal public sphere or radical democracy, each of which envisages history as the progressive realization of reason and democracy. On this basis it is easy to see why Vico is most commonly linked with Herder's culturalism and with the nineteenth century historicism he is thought to prefigure. This was indeed the considered view of Vico's leading twentieth century Italian reader, Benedetto Croce ([1911] 1913, 243), who concluded his major study of the Neapolitan professor of rhetoric by saying that 'he is neither more nor less than the nineteenth century in germ'.

But, given the fact of multiple Enlightenments and the continuing significance of humanist modes of history writing in the civil Enlightenment, Vico may yet be conceived as an alternative Enlightenment thinker; indeed this is how John Robertson treats him in a fine study of the Scottish and Neapolitan Enlightenments. Vico's humanist insistence on non-transcendental civil history as the most appropriate context for understanding human society is, I suggest, one of the chief reasons Cox finds him so appealing, and why it may be fruitfully requisitioned for critical international theory in a historical mode. Further reasons may be adduced for Cox's attraction to the Neapolitan. First, as Croce ([1911] 1913, 237) remarked, the fact that 'Vico in his own day passed for an eccentric'. As the Neapolitan professor himself remarked in his autobiography, he felt 'a stranger in his own land' (Vico [1731] 1944, 132).²² Second, that Vico's methods deviated from the dominant intellectual fashions of *settecento* Naples. As he reported in his autobiography: 'he had followed the main course of his studies untroubled by sectarian prejudice; for in the city taste in letters changed every two or three years like styles in dress' (Vico [1731] 1944, 133). In all these respects, we can see why Cox would have been attracted to the Neapolitan, for, like Vico, he identifies with being an eccentric, is prepared to swim against the intellectual tide, and, most significantly, subscribes to a historicizing conception of knowledge.

²¹ With the notable exception of Randall Germain (2000).

²² Recent scholarship suggests Vico was less of an outsider than he sometimes claimed.

There can be no question here of providing a full account of Vico, or of Cox's reception of Vichian ideas; the Neapolitan's extraordinary intervention into eighteenth century philosophy and philology is far too complex for that.²³ Instead, I will focus on two key Vichian features that Cox harnesses to his theory programme and which are integral to the historical mode of critical international theory proposed here: first, Vico's withering critique of Cartesian natural philosophy, which informs Cox's critique of positivism; and second, Vico's emphasis on the changing historical forms of 'human civil institutions', which informs Cox's historicist approach to the changing modes of world order. While the first has been a common feature of critical international theory programmes (Linklater 1996, 279), the latter has not. But it is precisely on this point that a programme for critical international theory in historical mode is to be built.²⁴

Neapolitan Enlightenment: Vico's historicist critique of Cartesianism

As a serial province of large composite states (Spanish, Austrian, and Bourbon), Vico's Naples was a long way from Paris or London, but it nonetheless generated a lively intellectual milieu in the early eighteenth century, with the likes of Giannone, Paolo Mattia Doria, Antonio Genovesi, and Gaetano Filangieri making substantial contributions to the fields of civil and ecclesiastical history, political economy, and law.²⁵ Naples, no less than Paris or London, had become increasingly dominated by Cartesian intellectual culture, evidenced by the establishment of the *Accademia delle Scienze* (Academy of the Sciences) which was devoted to the natural philosophies of Descartes, Locke, and Newton. Vico, however, joined his friend Doria in the anti-rationalist *Accademia degli Oziosi* (Academy of the Idle) (Carpanetto and Ricuperati 1987, 99; Robertson 2005, 253), once more confirming his eccentricity.²⁶ It was Vico's refusal to accept Cartesian natural philosophy, indeed, to declare war on it, as Arnaldo Momigliano (1966, 8) says, that led this rather obscure professor of rhetoric to write an extremely ambitious anti-Cartesian history of the post-diluvian world, albeit with 'the invidious' and Cartesian title, *New Science* (Vico [1744] 2001, 480).

²³ For excellent recent studies of Vico in context see Marshall (2010) and Robertson (2005).

²⁴ For an explanation of the different approaches to history evident in Cox and Linklater see Devetak (2012).

²⁵ For fuller treatments of the Neapolitan intellectual context in English, see Carpanetto and Ricuperati (1987), Imbruglia (2007), Robertson (2005), and Venturi (1972, Ch. 9).

²⁶ For all his eccentricity, however, Vico was nonetheless appointed Historiographer Royal by King Charles of Naples and Sicily in 1735 (Robertson 2005, 253).

Vico called his history of the ‘civil world’ or ‘world of nations’ a ‘new science’, but this should not mislead us into thinking that he subscribed to the kind of natural philosophy associated with the Cartesian scientific methods popular in his day. His constant appeal to ‘axioms’ (*assiomi o degnità*) is a playful and ironic use of geometric nomenclature (Goetsch 1995, 286). Even the gnomic structure of Book I, section 2, on ‘Elements’, cannot hide Vico’s overriding insistence that it is the philological tools of erudition and eloquence rather than the philosophical ones of abstract methods and geometric certitude that will elucidate and enliven his discussion of ‘the common nature of nations’ (Vico ([1744] 2001, 75). His ‘new science’ may be an amalgam of philosophy and philology, wherein each supplements and corrects the other;²⁷ but, as he explains, insofar as ‘Philosophy contemplates reason, from which we derive our abstract knowledge of what is true’, philosophy’s purchase on the social world is tenuous without a grasp of ‘the creative authorship and authority of human volition’, which only philological studies can reveal (Vico [1744] 2001, 79). While philosophy addresses universal human reason, Vico’s philological humanism addresses and works on the will. Claims to the contrary notwithstanding, he argues, geometric methods and natural philosophies are not instruments of knowledge that can be applied universally. Their application is especially limited when it comes to the ‘uncertain, unseemly, imperfect, and insubstantial beginnings’ of human civil institutions (Vico [1744] 2001, 39); for this is the contingent realm of human volition where actors’ motives must be discerned in the context of wider institutional dynamics.²⁸ Knowledge of the civil world is thus a product of both the intellect and the will for Vico ([1720–1722] 2009, 45).

The Neapolitan professor of rhetoric reacted to the privileging of philosophy in its Cartesian expression by advocating the humanist and historical concerns of philology. If philosophy, at least in its Cartesian form, is concerned with attaining clear and distinct ideas about objects that exist independently of a conscious subject or observer; philology is concerned with the civil world, which, Vico insisted, as a humanly instituted creation, cannot be understood as something existing independently of conscious subjects. This was the basis of his fierce rejection of Cartesianism, and led him to posit an alternative approach to knowledge based on his famous *verum-factum* doctrine (*verum esse ipsum factum* – ‘the true is precisely

²⁷ In his *Autobiography*, Vico ([1731] 1944, 38–39) speaks of Plato and Tacitus as representative models of philosophy and history, respectively. The influence of Tacitus becomes obvious and explicit in Book 4 of the *New Science* on ‘The Course of Nations’.

²⁸ In his *On the Study Methods of our Time* ([1709] 1990) Vico argues powerfully against the tendency of Cartesian methods of natural philosophy to claim universal applicability.

what is made') in *On the Most Ancient Wisdom of the Italians* ([1710] 1982, 51–56).

This *verum-factum* or 'maker's knowledge' doctrine, as it is sometimes called, provided Vico with grounds for disputing the Cartesian claim to achieve certain knowledge of the natural world through the abstract philosophical reasoning of scientific method. Vico's guiding idea is that, since the maker's ideas are constitutive of what is made, the maker possesses unique insight into what is made, yielding a special cognitive relation between the maker and the thing made. It is this special cognitive relation which requires and enables the kind of knowledge Vico's *New Science* was intended to produce: 'a *history of the ideas, customs, and deeds of humankind*' (Vico [1744] 2001, 139). In other words, Vico provides a historical mode of knowledge that recognizes, and is capable of comprehending, the constitutive role played by ideas, myths, and culture in history, the very things that give history its human and civil form.

The civil world is certainly the creation of humankind. And consequently, the principles of the civil world can and must be discovered *within the modifications of the human mind.* If we reflect on this, we can only wonder why all the philosophers have so earnestly pursued a knowledge of the world of nature, which only God can know as its creator, while they neglected to study the world of nations, or civil world, which people can in fact know because they created it (Vico [1744] 2001, 119–20; emphasis in original).

Full knowledge of the civil world, therefore, requires understanding how and why it came into being, and an understanding of the formative ideas and beliefs with which civil institutions are described and legitimized.

Vico sees ideas and institutions as mutually conditioning aspects of history.²⁹ In his earlier discussion *On the Constancy of the Jurisprudent*, which is the second of the three volumes that make up *Universal Law*, Vico ([1720–22] 2009, 46) 'essays' the key principles of his 'new science' by highlighting philology's conjoined histories of words and things. As the 'study of discourse', Vico's philology denies that the history of things can be recounted independently of the history of the 'ideas of things'.

By emphasizing the constitutive human elements (of ideas and will) in civil history, Vico's historical method, outlined in Book 1 of *New Science* ([1744] 2001), may be considered a continuation and adaptation of the humanist methods improvised by Renaissance, Absolutist and Enlightenment civil

²⁹ Robert Cox (1996, 29) glosses the *verum-factum* doctrine's applicability to history by saying that 'history is the most appropriate form of human knowledge, since history was made by men and therefore men are capable of understanding what they have made'.

historians and historiographers. But it is important to note that when Vico employs the language of ‘making’, he does not mean it in the ‘technical-productive sense of fabrication or manufacture’ associated with *homo faber*, but the practical activity and creativity of humans in society (Ball 1995, 213–17). It is making as acting or doing – *praxis* rather than *poiesis* or *techne*, where the end ‘product’ is the activity itself – that Vico invokes in his notion of institutions as human constructions (Ball 1995, 222).³⁰ Intentions, motives and interests thus become crucial to understanding individual and collective action in the political world, but only if they are understood historically and contextually as the specific responses to actions, events and institutions in particular places and times.

A concern with history also led Vico to criticize ‘modern’ natural law thinkers such as Grotius, Selden, Hobbes, and Pufendorf. Though he admired these thinkers, Vico ([1744] 2001, 117–18) criticized the ‘great proponents of the natural law of nations’ for holding unhistorical views of natural law, committing the error of anachronism. They erred in believing ‘that natural equity in its perfect form was understood by the pagan nations from the very beginning’. Vico’s charge is that these thinkers fix upon a principle or rule they take to be essential to natural law and then inevitably discover it in distant origins, as if natural law were an unchanging system of transcendental principles with universal validity. Vico ([1744] 2001, 77) called this the ‘conceit of scholars, who assert that what they know is as old as the world’. This was part of Vico’s more general assault on anachronism; criticizing scholars who judge past civilizations ‘according to the enlightenment, refinement, and magnificence of their [own] age’ (Vico [1744] 2001, 76). But according to Vico’s contextualist approach, it is a mistake to assume that we can simply employ our own abstract, refined, intellectualized philosophies to enter into the political imaginations of distant societies (Vico [1744] 2001, 147). Vico’s point, as Bruce Haddock (1976, 515) affirms, is that ‘ideas are contextual’. Our approach to these ideas must therefore be historical; to plunder the history of political thought selectively simply to rationalize contemporary theories tells us more about the present than the past.

In attacking anachronism, Vico was denying the ‘presentist’ or ‘transcendentalizing’ tendencies to interpret and judge institutions and customs of former times against our own dominant assumptions. By insisting that natural law, like any human institution, is subject to historical modification, and takes on different content and form over time, Vico was attempting to expunge

³⁰ This distinction has been a subject of major twentieth century thinkers, Hannah Arendt (1958) and Jürgen Habermas (1974). See also the useful treatment of the distinction by Lobkowitz (1977, 18).

vestigial traces of the Scholastic *nunc stans*. For Vico, writing the history of the civil world required a method capable of understanding changing cultural, legal, and political conditions, for these conditions form the contexts within which civil institutions such as nations or states rise and fall. Vico's *New Science* ([1744] 2001), then, should not be seen as an attempt to demolish the natural law of nations, but to historicize and contextualize it by showing how its modifications over time are part of the history of human civil institutions.

Vico resists the temptation to evaluate past forms of civil institution according to the criteria of modern philosophical rationality. In fact, the whole thrust of his argument is that philosophy is incapable of meeting the historical challenge of understanding past thinkers and societies free of anachronism. Against the philosophical tendency to erase historical difference, Vico wants to contextualize the ways in which past thinkers and societies have thought about and practiced politics. As forms of political and legal arrangement that grow out of the particularities of time and place, civil institutions are intelligible, as well as concrete, forms (Fisch 1975, 143). This is why Vico insisted that civil institutions cannot be grasped independently of the ideas that actors of the time held about them ([1744] 2001, 119–20). The philological approach advocated by Vico focuses precisely on the historically different ways in which humans 'have made their world intelligible in terms of certain modes of thought' (Haddock 1978, 165).

Vico rejected Cartesian natural philosophy because its scientific method denigrated history and denied the constitutive role played by ideas in making human civil institutions. Ultimately, it remained incapable of grasping the interplay of ideas and institutions in the shaping of human interactions, and thus could not contribute to an understanding of 'the world of nations in its historical reality' (Vico [1744] 2001, 84). Furthermore, the abstraction of Cartesian natural philosophy did nothing to enrich that 'noble and important branch of studies, the science of the state' (Vico [1709] 1990, 33). As Vico put it in *On the Study Methods of Our Time* (Vico [1709] 1990, 35): 'it is an error to apply to the prudent conduct of life the abstract criterion of reasoning that obtains in the domain of science'. Philology however offered 'a necessary service to the state' by writing 'commentaries on commonwealths, the customs, laws, institutions, branches of learning, and artifacts of nations and peoples' (Vico [1720–1722] 2009, 46). In this regard, Vico not only underscores the importance of an historical method in the study of politics and its institutions, and in understanding the historically different ways that humans have conceived of their civil institutions, he also distances his approach from contemporary modes of knowledge grounded in Cartesian natural philosophy. The latter do not determine what counts as knowledge.

Reorienting critical international theory: towards a historical mode of knowledge

Cox has repeatedly affirmed his abiding interest in history as a mode of knowledge. Indeed, in one interview, he explicitly equates critical theory with a ‘historical mode of thinking’ (Cox 2012, 20). He has also, as noted above, acknowledged Vico’s influence on his approach to IR, at least in programmatic statements about critical international theory. For these reasons Cox provides an invaluable opening for the reorientation of critical international theory towards a historical mode. However, questions have been raised about whether Cox’s narrative of historical structures and world orders are sufficiently historical. This final section outlines some of the ways in which the critical international theory in historical mode relates to and builds upon constructivism and the Cambridge School.

Vico contra Cox

Ryan Walter (2011, 116) has argued that Cox succumbs to the very same ‘ahistorical deficiency’ he perceives in neorealism and problem-solving theory by deducing an abstract philosophical mode of theorizing from the Marxist concept of production. As Walter (2011, 116) puts it, Cox subordinates historical enquiry into concrete world orders to ‘the requirements of an abstract and pre-determined theoretical framework, and as a consequence history acts as mere grist to the theoretical mill’. His approach therefore shifts from a historical mode drawn from realism and historicism to a socio-philosophical mode built on post-Marxist theoretical structuralism as he maps the shifting pattern of relations between pre-determined theoretical elements: social forces of production, states, and world orders (Cox 1981, 136).

If Vico is right to say that the history of the civil world must be found within the modifications of the human mind, it would appear anachronistic of Cox to deploy a conception of structure defined by three fixed levels or spheres of activity across history. Certainly no such structure was available, or occurred, to Vico. Here Cox deviates from Vico in neglecting the changing modes of thought. Where Vico sought to understand the history of civil institutions through changing ideas and contexts of thought, Cox presumes that this history will necessarily consist of patterned relations among forces of production, states, and world orders.³¹ Such an approach would impede a Vichian understanding of ideas as contextual and risk anachronism by

³¹ This is most clearly on display in Cox’s *Production, Power and World Order* (1987), where successive world orders are understood as historical structures determined by changing social relations of production.

imposing our late modern ways of seeing things on their early modern ways. Indeed, Cox's structuralism betrays the 'conceit of scholars' that Vico criticized for being ahistorical; it fixes upon a structural relationship which assumes transcendental qualities in Cox's reversion to post-Marxist international theory.

Constructivism as a historical mode of knowledge

A better example of the kind of historical approach recommended here is to be found in constructivist international theory which has shown how the structures of IR are historically, as well as socially, constituted and are thus susceptible to change over time. Two leading exponents of this approach, John Ruggie (1983) and Christian Reus-Smit (1999), have shown how historical international systems institutionalize different rules and norms to govern the identity and interaction of states. This approach rejects the neorealist assumption of historical continuity; highlighting instead the historically diverse constitutional structures which, among other things, ascribe different moral purposes to the state and develop distinct norms of justice (Reus-Smit 1999, 6–7).

Reus-Smit's study of the emergence of modern international society emphasizes the absolutist interregnum in transition from the medieval to the modern system. It also highlights the distinctive and constitutive role played by theories and practices of dynastic diplomacy and natural jurisprudence as 'fundamental institutions' of early modern European international relations (Reus-Smit 1999, Ch. 5). Most importantly, Reus-Smit shows how the 'fundamental institutions' of international relations change over time as political thinking around the purpose of the state and conceptions of justice changes. For Reus-Smit, as much as for Vico, modifications in the way humans conceptualize states and international societies are intrinsic to the history of international relations and to the larger history of human civil institutions.

On this view, international relations are understood as a human construction; the structures and practices which comprise the stuff of international relations are 'institutional facts', to borrow from John Searle (1995, Ch. 2). That is to say, they do not exist independently of human consciousness. This recalls one of Vico's arguments against Cartesian philosophy: that the civic, as opposed to the natural, world is instituted by human activity and cannot be understood independently of this activity. For both Ruggie and Reus-Smit it is also clear that international relations obtain meaning and are embedded in a context that must be historically reconstructed; the changing institutions of politics and international relations cannot be understood otherwise (Ruggie 1989, 28; Reus-Smit 1999, 5). But what remains underexamined, because less important for the macro-historical stories constructivists wish to tell, are the

fractious and localized intellectual contexts in which arguments are made and legitimations are contested.

From constructivism to contextualism

Constructivism is not the only approach capable of historicizing institutional facts. Another approach, more insistent on adopting a contextual form of historical reasoning, is associated with the Cambridge School.³² This approach is less concerned with identifying what Reus-Smit (1999, 159) calls the ‘ontology of institutional rationality’, than in recovering and explicating the arguments and intentions of historical agents who help to construct the ontologies, rationalities and theories of international institutions.

Constructivism and contextualism are not incompatible approaches, but their emphases are different, as Reus-Smit (2008, 407–11) acknowledges. Where constructivism emphasizes the wider intersubjective consensus underpinning an international institution or norm in macro histories and comparative case-studies, the Cambridge School’s contextualism emphasizes the localized argumentative context in which such institutions or norms are contested. The latter therefore insists on redescribing the localized contexts in which texts are anchored, emphasizing the intellectual debates, discourses, and languages available to the author at the time, and explaining the kind of intervention intended by the author. Constructivism, on the other hand, tends to operate at a higher level of abstraction to identify the intersubjective ideas and values that shape worldviews, *épistèmes* or *mentalités*. Another way of conceiving the difference is that where constructivism seeks to build an historically informed *theory* of international relations, contextualism is more inclined to *historicize* international relations theory building.

The Cambridge School: contextualist intellectual history as critical theory

The so-called ‘historiographical turn’ associated with contextualism is less interested in the truth or otherwise of political doctrines and arguments expressed by past thinkers than in their constitutive effects, that is, their relation to institutional facts. Operating within a historical, as opposed to philosophical, register this approach does not treat political ideas and arguments as disembodied propositions that can be evaluated for their truth content or potential to realize justice or freedom. Rather, like Renaissance humanism, it treats past utterances as historically situated statements made

³² Reus-Smit (2008, 400) argues that constructivism’s engagement with history resonates strongly with the Cambridge School approach of Skinner. He also argues that his constructivist approach contributes to critical international theory (Reus-Smit 1999, 168–70).

by real individuals engaged in intellectual battle. In this respect, it differs from Linklater's (1982) classic of critical international theory, *Men and Citizens in the Theory of International Relations*.³³ Linklater's approach to the history of political thought is informed by a philosophy of history concerned to reconstruct ideas in a narrative of progressive movement towards a normative ideal. In reconstructing the natural-jurisprudence of Pufendorf and Vattel and the socio-political philosophies of Kant, Hegel, and Marx, Linklater is more concerned with the normative philosophical evaluation of the ideas than with situating them in their actual context. Linklater's overriding purpose is less to capture what these thinkers intended than to harness their theoretical insights to the task of rethinking the normative foundations of IR.

Three key features of contextualism's treatment of intellectual history may be identified to help distinguish it from both the constructivism of Reus-Smit and the philosophical history of Linklater. First, by entering political arguments these living, breathing individuals were intending to make a point. The author's words had 'illocutionary' force; that is, beyond conveying meaning or propositional content (the 'locutionary' effect), in writing what they wrote the author's words were intended to *do* something (Skinner 2002, 98–99). Second, working out what the author's point or intention was in penning a particular text requires the marshalling of historical evidence about the ideological and practical political context in which it is situated.³⁴ An argument always arises in a particular 'argumentative context'; that is, it takes up a stance against another argument, positions itself in relation to prevailing conventions (Skinner 2002, 115–16). Third, this contextualist approach disabuses us of the impression that past thinkers, insofar as they were onto something important, were occupied by the same questions that occupy us today. R.G. Collingwood's (1939, 62) realization that 'the history of political theory is not the history of different answers given to the same question, but the history of a problem more or less constantly changing, whose solution was changing with it', epitomizes the contextualist critique of what Vico called the 'conceit of scholars'.

In leading away from the conceit of scholars who anachronistically invoke past thinkers to demonstrate the eternal wisdom of their preferred theory, the historiographical turn leads towards contextual intellectual history. Rather than fix upon unhistorical theoretical frameworks, it strives to

³³ See Devetak and Juliette Gout (2013) for a detailed appraisal of Linklater's *Men and Citizens*.

³⁴ See Dunn (1980) and Skinner (2002, ch. 4) for seminal statements of a contextualist approach to intellectual history. Both essays were originally published in 1969.

understand things (ideas and institutions) in their argumentative context, as they were understood at the time. It would be absurd, for example, to criticize Vico because he failed to deliver an international theory that would satisfy a twenty-first century IR theorist. Vico did not, *per impossibile*, employ a Realist or Waltzian, a Marxist or Coxian theory since these were unavailable to eighteenth century thinkers of the international. To be clear, he did not even employ Constructivist or Cambridge School theories either. He did, however, insist on the constitutive role of ideas in human institutions and on the historicity of ideas and their relationship to institutions. By so doing Vico emphasized that the history of civil institutions could not be separated from the effortful human activity of describing, arguing and legitimating political interests and activities.

Rather than assume that the contours and boundaries of IR as a field of enquiry and as a field of political practice are untouched by time, ‘international intellectual historians’ such as David Armitage (2013), Duncan Bell (2009) and Edward Keene (2005) have demonstrated at length that conceptions of the international and the global are historical products which have helped constitute international relations in different ways at different times.³⁵ Understanding the range of political ideas, concepts, arguments, and norms that were available at any point in history is integral to a historical mode of international theory. An adequate theory of IR thus requires a contextual mode of reasoning if it is to be capable of explaining the relevant institutional facts of a given historical period, and overcoming the parochial presentism of what sometimes passes for critical international theory.

But what does this tell us about critical international theory, and what is it that makes the historical mode of international theory ‘critical’? Of course the sense we ascribe to the word critical is inescapably historical, and for this reason alone, if Nietzsche (1969, 80) is right, cannot be defined. While the word has predominantly taken on a normative socio-philosophical inflection after the Frankfurt School, an alternative sense of what it means to be ‘critical’ emerges out of the historical approach proposed here. Two features may be identified.

First, in its insistence on the historical character of ideas, institutions and on the knowledges that constitute and legitimize them, an alternative form of critical international theory has the ability to make the international historically intelligible (Walter 2011, 6). By tracing and grasping the changing institutions of the civil world through modifications in political thought such a critical international theory can combat theories that treat the international as a pre-given or brute object that exists independently

³⁵ I borrow the label ‘international intellectual historians’ from Armitage (2013), 1.

of human thought and activity. If we take seriously the historical and contextual reasoning of humanists from Valla to Vico, then international theory must understand international relations as thoroughly historical; that is, as something produced in history and something that gains meaning and is constituted in specific historical context even as it is continually interpreted and adapted anew. By revealing that prevailing constructions of the international have a history and are by no means natural or necessary, critical theory in historical mode is critical by virtue of its falsification of ‘presentist’ and ‘continuist’ assumptions often made about the international (Vigneswaran and Quirk 2010, 111).

Second, critical international theory in historical mode is critical by gaining distance from the present; it helps us to reconsider purportedly self-evident assumptions in the light of history, cautioning us against their ‘bewitching’ power (Skinner 1998, 116–17). In particular, intellectual history can disclose the historicity of prevailing assumptions and concepts of IR and of theory more generally. The archaeological ‘acts of excavation’ (Skinner 1998, 112–15) made possible by critical theory in historical mode may help us see that theory was not always conducted in normative socio-philosophical registers, and that our presently dominant theories may obscure the original provenance of key concepts.³⁶ The present dominance of theory in these modes is the outcome, if provisional, of an historic battle waged since at least the fifteenth century. But this battle is often occluded by the apparent triumph of theory in philosophical mode. Rehabilitation of the historical mode of thought can thus ‘uncover the often neglected riches of our intellectual heritage and display them once more to view’ (Skinner 1998, 118–19). By bringing ‘buried intellectual treasure’ (Skinner 1998, 112) back to the surface, in this case the historical mode of knowledge itself, the alternative critical international theory proposed here allows a more historically accurate sense of the present and what makes it distinctive or strange. Critical theory in historical mode is critical here not because it rejects philosophically or normatively grounded theory, which it does not, but because it problematizes the assumption that normative and social philosophy should necessarily govern our conception of theory.

In sum, critical international theory in historical mode enables us to historicize our conceptions of theory, the international, and the critical. None of these terms can be assumed to bear transcendental meaning; all are the contingent product of ongoing, unfinished intellectual battles to impose

³⁶ Elsewhere I have employed contextualist intellectual history to show that the dominant arts of liberal government are contingent historical practices. The balance of power, today often uncritically aligned with realism and maligned by liberalism, was, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, an indispensable practice in maintaining the ‘liberties of Europe’ (Devetak 2013).

meaning. A philosophical or normative vantage point may pass moral or analytical judgement on how we conceptualize theory, how we delineate the international, and how we judge the critical, but cannot tell us about the historical emergence and adaptation of these conceptions, nor can it reveal what has been lost from historical view.

Conclusion

It has been the contention of the present article that intellectual resources for critical international theory may be found outside the dominant post-Cartesian, post-Kantian, and post-Marxist traditions. Whether or not we agree with Cox, that ‘The Vichian approach ... is that of critical theory’ (Cox 1981, 133), there are surely grounds for agreeing that the historical mode of theorizing can make a significant contribution to critical international theory by detranscendentalizing, historicizing and countering the prevailing ways we theorize international relations. This is not to deny the value of normative and socio-philosophical modes of critical international theory, but it is to deflate their pretensions to being the highest forms of theoretical reasoning about international relations. Cox’s invocation of realism and historicism, and his rehabilitation of Vico, are salutary reminders that the methods and objects of critique are as plural and historical as conceptions of theory and the international themselves.

Two and a half centuries after Neapolitan eccentric Giambattista Vico improvised his ‘new form of criticism’ (*nuova arte critica*) (Vico 2001, 5) to undermine the fashionable Cartesian natural philosophy of his day, Robert Cox, another eccentric, set out a programme of critical theory to challenge the positivism of mainstream IR. In both cases, a historical mode of knowledge was deployed to combat scientific pretensions, and to historicize human civil institutions. While Cox may not have been entirely successful in executing a historical form of critical international theory, he has provided a context for the reception and further development in IR of the humanist, civil histories developed in early modern Europe from Bruni, Valla and Machiavelli to Sarpi, Giannone and Vico. This historicist line of thought does not pass through the centre of critical international theory as usually practiced today, but draws upon rival Enlightenments that are centred in historical modes of knowledge originally developed in Renaissance humanism. By virtue of its historical method, it offers a potentially invaluable form of critical international theory – one capable of understanding the changing cultural, legal, and political conditions of states and world orders without imposing ‘presentist’ or ‘continuist’ assumptions, and without presuming that the normative-philosophical imperatives of the presently dominant modes of knowledge are beyond question.

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