Introduction

RETRIEVING THE PAST IN LIGHT OF THE PRESENT

It will be useful to begin by telling you what this book is not.

1. This is not a history of political theory; this is not a history of economics; and this is not a history of political economy.
2. This is not a comprehensive summary of the main ideas of some main thinkers.
3. Nor is this a scorecard or ledger of prominent thinkers on an old debate.

What this aspires to be is a history, an evolutionary account of an ongoing conversation between two narratives or meta-narratives. To see this as a conversation is to dignify both narratives and not to prejudge them; it allows for the recognition of nuances. To see some of these authors and some of their works as part of a conversation is to bring a fresh perspective to the texts.

We are all aware that authors respond to their predecessors and contemporaries, and no account of a specific author can fail to ignore that. Just as important is the fact that some authors become seminal figures. We look back on their work in the light of how later authors have adopted and transformed what the earlier author has done. This enriches our understanding of the earlier author to the point where it is no longer possible to read the author in quite the same way. Original texts and their authors can become part of a larger conversation wherein the ‘conversation’ takes on a life of its own. We think the conversations are worthy of serious attention. We do not contend that these conversations have a teleology such that earlier authors are reduced to being seen as groping toward our favorite present formulation. Different elements in the conversation will wax and wane. We also wish to avoid the temptation to ignore intellectual dissonance. The dissonance may capture something about the human predicament that cannot be camouflaged by smug partisanship.

The other thing upon which we wish to insist is the importance of interdisciplinary work, hence the focus on ‘political economy’. The
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academic world rewards those who know more and more about less and less. This says much about academics and academic institutions, but less about the world. All of the authors we discuss were exemplary multifaceted individuals whose background, work, and engagement with the world of policy spanned a variety of disciplines.

NARRATIVES RATHER THAN ARGUMENTS

We call these narratives for several reasons:

It brings together things that frequently are treated by scholars in isolation, but for the canonical thinkers these elements were seen in relationships: philosophy, economics, political theory, religion, law, and culture.

Narratives tell a story, hence the requisite historical dimension. Narratives are also like paradigms in that they connect the dots, hopefully in a coherent and consistent way, and they structure our thought: what we regard as a serious issue, what constitutes evidence for and against, and how we respond to what does not fit. Narratives, like paradigms, also contain appeals to facts and arguments, but they are both more and less than an argument. They are less by not being as a whole themselves an argument. They are more by reflecting fundamental choices about how we engage the world, and they function rhetorically to try to persuade others to see and interact with the world in a new or different way. As such, they are not subject to routine refutation; they can only be countered or rebutted by a rival narrative.

We maintain that narratives are more important than arguments. However, in the world of scholarship, arguments have assumed a position of prominence. One of the results of that prominence is an endless stream of literature delegitimizing canonical authors. One begins to wonder how these authors achieved such prominence when they committed so many seemingly elementary mistakes. Nor is it clear why they have to be refuted repeatedly. Successful narratives get us to ‘see’ and engage the world in a new way.

Behind the prominence of arguments are several philosophical assumptions. The first is that a rational argument must eschew rhetoric because rhetoric appeals only to emotion. The second is that the structure of a good argument is a deduction from first principles, as in a geometrical proof. Once these principles are discovered and articulated it is further presumed that practice should adhere to the articulated structure. However important conceptual clarification is, such clarification never leads by itself to practical agreement.
This is not how either the human mind or the world works. In the real world, practice always precedes theory, and theory is the attempt to articulate or rearticulate what we take the practice to be in order to improve the practice or to replace one practice with another. Moreover, no one has ever successfully given us a theory of how practice and theory are related so that the final and definitively correct theory dictates all future practice. Admittedly, narratives frequently function as either the first principles, so to speak, or as side-constraints. But this still misses the function of narratives which is to get us to see the world in a new way. What rhetoric appeals to in a narrative is our imagination.

When dealing with canonical authors, arguments are important but of secondary importance to the narratives. Many authors we presume to be canonical were not primarily scholars. Scholars have ‘academized’ the writings of these authors. Many were, and saw themselves as, agents in the world. As such, they often sought to provide a rationale for what they believed or for the policies they were recommending or supporting. In short, they sought to ‘rationalize’ their engagement with the world. The term ‘rationalize’ is not being used here in a pejorative sense. As individuals, we often spend a great deal of time trying to articulate our intuitive grasp of the world. We may even reject or refine our own earlier articulations not because we lack the capacity for self-criticism but because self-criticism takes the form of trying to state self-consciously what we have been doing out of habit. We adjust, modify, or reject a previous conclusion but only because we are holding fast to other conclusions. In retrospect, we would applaud these authors for holding fast to their respective intuitions because they believe that they had fastened onto something very important.

An argument is an expression of an insight. It is not the insight itself. If a particular argument is inadequate, even in the eyes of the author, the author will look for or hope others will find a better argument. This is not necessarily a sign of intransigence but the sense that authors have that they are on to something important. This is a common experience outside of narrow intellectual circles.

Another feature worth noting is that successful narratives evolve. The Lockean Liberty Narrative, for example, evolved – Locke’s articulation and defense of the narrative could not possibly have anticipated all the later responses and permutations. Rousseau’s challenge to Locke became the basis for an ongoing conversation/debate. Hume and Smith responded to Rousseau. We see Smith as restating the original Lockean narrative in response to Rousseau – that is part of the evolution of the conversation. Smith’s articulation differs from Locke’s precisely because he was responding to Rousseau. We think it is important to note how each side
uses the material from the other side, for example, how Marx utilizes material from Locke. We are not surprised that Hegel’s work can give rise to both a ‘left’ and a ‘right’ wing.

Another instance of this evolution is the work of J.S. Mill. Mill has been interpreted, mistakenly we believe, by many as a socialist. This is an error in our view because Mill was trying to incorporate the discussion of the ‘social question’ (the issue of distribution) that the nineteenth century French Socialists had raised. What Mill offered was a new defense of the Liberty Narrative that incorporated both recognition of the criticisms and a new (‘Kantian’) understanding of freedom. Competition was defended not simply on grounds of efficiency (as in Locke and Smith) but because liberty was a means to freedom (Kantian autonomy). This is precisely the kind of thing that is likely to be missed by narrowly focused economists or even political theorists not versed in philosophy.

We do not claim that participation in this conversation is the only important thing in any particular thinker; nor do we deny that there are other authors involved in the conversation – our aim is not to be comprehensive but nuanced – we always ask: “Who adds what to the conversation?” This work is to be a history of the conversation between the two narratives and the contributions made by various thinkers in various disciplines. The focus is on the evolving conversation. As such it will focus on pertinent and relevant contributions and will not go into detail about other works by the participants – as significant as those works may be – if they do not pertain to the topic.

We do not claim that this is the only possible conversation; our claim is that this particular conversation has a long lineage and a continuing vitality that is worth articulating. In the Cambridge History of Twentieth Century Political Thought, Steven Lukes entitled the epilogue “The Grand Dichotomy of the Twentieth Century,” and he rightly traced it back to the French Revolution; we trace it back to Locke, Rousseau, and the American Revolution along the way.

Recognizing the role of these narratives is useful to the public trying to come to terms with public policy debates. We are reminded of the words of Keynes:

The ideas of economists and political philosophers, both when they are right and when they are wrong are more powerful than is commonly understood. Indeed, the world is ruled by little else. Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influences, are usually slaves of some defunct economist. (Keynes 2007, pp. 283–84)
Contemporary discussion takes on new meaning when seen against the background of evolving and competing narratives. We believe that readers as diverse as those who read Krugman in The New York Times or who listen when the Pope speaks about “equality” or who read the editorial page of The Wall Street Journal would benefit from understanding the larger context of those remarks and not simply think they are reading or hearing mere theology or economics or ideology.

Because our intention is to focus on the conversation/debate so construed, we shall keep references to secondary sources to an absolute minimum. Clearly we have benefited from the enormous secondary literature even when we depart from it. However, we wish the focus to be on the primary thinkers, to their engagement with one another, and on our fresh approach to them. On those occasions where we touch on selected themes that have been the focus of the secondary literature (for example, Locke’s position on slavery) what intrigues us is the extent to which even the secondary literature reflects a subtle commitment to one side of the conversation or the other. That is, scholars themselves often reflect a Locke-inclination or Rousseau-inclination. This is not intended to disparage other scholars but to reinforce our claim that the ongoing conversation between Lockean Liberty and Rousseau Equality has become deeply embedded in our discourse.