
THE MARXIST TRADITION AND CONCEPTUAL HISTORY OF POLITICAL THEORY*

WOOD, Ellen M.: *Citizens to Lords. A Social History of Western Political Thought from Antiquity to the Middle Ages*, London/New York, Verso, 2008, 245 pp.

WOOD, Ellen M.: *Liberty and Property. A Social History of Western Political Thought from Renaissance to Enlightenment*, London, Verso, 2012, 336 pp.

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After being an academic trend reaching into a real fashion, in the last couple of decades essays or studies entitled “A Social History of” have become rare, if not inappropriate. With the decline of social history as the overarching paradigm in historiography, the subgenre sounded pretentious and outmoded, risking the reader a deceptive experience. Ellen Meiksins Wood’s endeavour may accordingly be approached with a degree of initial diffidence; but even an insensitive reader should at least acknowledge the boldness involved in offering a social history of something as ambitious and encompassing as “Western political thought”. This two-volume social history of political thought is not, in any case, written against the current academic trends; quite on the contrary, it shows from its start to be well familiarized with the ongoing “post-classical” intellectual history influenced by the linguistic turn, as practiced by the Cambridge School.

Ellen Wood shows the extent to which Marxist intellectual history has successfully made its own settlement with the kind of intellectual history practised in the 1950s and 1960s following Leo Strauss assumption, which presented “the ‘greats’ as pure minds floating free above the political fry” (*Citizens to Warriors*, p. 6), dismissed contextualization as producing trivialization and was only interested in transhistorical questions and answers. Yet this does not mean that we are in front of just another

* Una versión de este texto en castellano se encuentra disponible en la siguiente dirección de internet: <https://ehu.academia.edu/PabloSánchezLeón/>

research on ideas sensitive to context but with what appears as a challenging and critical approach to the recent evolutions in the field.

Actually Wood makes her way into the realm of post-Straussian intellectual history by criticizing the Cambridge school usage of the concept of “context” as the “social and intellectual matrix” of ideas: for in practice for the followers of this line “it turns out that the ‘social’ matrix has little to do with ‘society’, the economy or even the polity. The social context is itself intellectual, or at least the ‘social’ is defined by, and only by, existing vocabularies” (p. 8). True enough, for reputed representatives of the Cambridge school such as Quentin Skinner or John Pocock, to contextualize a text is just to situate it among other texts, inside a vocabulary, and in discourses or paradigms. Accordingly, all the great developments and conflicts in economy or society are not taken into consideration. By contrast, Wood’s social history of political theory “starts from the premise that great political thinkers of the past were passionately engaged in the issues of their time and space” (p. 11). Political thinkers did not stick themselves to engaging in traditions or vocabularies “but also in the context of the social and political processes that shaped their immediate world”, often in the form of partisan adherence to a political cause, to the extent that sometimes their works were “fairly transparent expressions of particular interests, the interests of a particular party or class” (p. 12).

Wood’s argument is not, however, a restatement of the typical base-superstructure dichotomic hierarchy of the Marxist tradition, but rather an argument in favour of radical historical contextuality: in her view, assessing the partisanship of authors “is certainly not to say that a theorist’s ideas can be predicted or ‘read off’ from his or her social position or class” but a chance of underwriting that the questions answered by great political philosophers are posed to them in specific historical forms: not only, as for the followers of the Cambridge school, “by explicit political controversies” but also “by the social pressures and tensions that shape human interactions outside the political arena and beyond the world of texts”.

As already mentioned, Ellen Wood is a conscious practitioner of historical materialism, and so reflects on the past from the premise that there are given property relations that set the conditions of production and reproduction, the knowledge of which is essential for understanding the establishment of political domination and the outbreak of social struggles and other forms of resistance. Her social history of political thought is actually founded on an understanding of long term developments in social

relations, property forms and processes of state formation that episodically erupt into political-ideological controversies. The various patterns of property relations and state developments are regarded as producing different patterns of theoretical interrogation which ultimately shape the traditions of thought isolated by intellectual historians.

Ellen Wood is however also a reputed historian actively involved in debates on the character of society and political relations in the Ancient world. In this sense her *Peasant-Citizen and Slave* offers probably the most radical alternative to the “mode of production” Marxist orthodoxy that regards personal slavery as the precondition of ancient political self-government and democracy. Against the tide of an appealing to common sense—but logically simplistic and chronologically inaccurate—literature that derives classical freedom from the private control of manpower and the emancipation by (male) household owners, Wood offers an explanation for the semantics of *eleutheria*—defined as “freedom from the necessity to work for another” either individually or collectively (p. 19)—embedded in a culture of economic self-sufficiency and political autonomy developed by ancient Greek peasants and craftsmen through a long process of successful breakage with the predominance of personal bonds, a singular outcome given that elsewhere in precapitalist societies direct producers tended to be politically subjugated to landed aristocracies, military groups and/or hierocracies. Part of the first volume of this social history is devoted to describing the effects of such collective emancipation both in the creation of the polis—which instituted inclusive citizenship instead of the usual ruler-ruled cleavage—and in the rise of a political culture centered around legal disputation and argumentation for collective deliberation. Wood’s perspective goes here beyond Marx and Weber and regards the Greek city-state not just as a political system but “a unique organization of social relations” (p. 18) in which producers—other than slaves, who were on the other hand initially reduced to the performance of domestic activities—were not forced to transfer economic surplus to ruling classes, a structural feature that deeply reshaped the contours and contents of political society.

Such a singular social fabric eventually resulted in a democracy that far exceeded modern versions of self-government by citizens, and included regular participation in assemblies and popular juries. From the perspective of conceptual history, it is noticeable how, in describing the historical specificity of Ancient Greek culture, the author outlines the semantics of basic concepts such as *isonomia*—

equality of law— or *isegoria* —equality of speech, “the most distinctive idea to come out of democracy” (p. 39)— ; more relevant for conceptual historians is Wood’s argument on the embeddedness of conceptual contestability, which she relates to the endurance of traditional definitions in the face of institutional and cultural changes, as in the case of *diké* —justice conceived as natural decorum vs. standard of correct behaviour subject to collective judgement— or *nomos* —law conceived as essential, unwritten rules from the customary in kinship vs. the formal rules of the new political order—; conceptual contestability in its turn arose in the context epistemological debates on whether institutions were natural or man-made, objective or conventional.

Wood’s thesis is that it was out of the embedded disputability of these concepts that political theorization was actually born. The rise of disputation leading to abstraction and generalization was however part of a wider historical process marked by the struggles for curtailing the collective capacity of the poor —being the most widespread social category in ancient city-states— vis-à-vis the power of entrenched oligarchies. What makes of the first volume of this social history a thoughtful essay is that Wood offers an originally sound explanation as to why the great founding fathers of philosophy —from Socrates to Aristotle and beyond, but especially Plato— were so blatantly anti-democratic. On this issue —subject to recurrent reflection in modern literature— she neglects the long-term tradition of downplaying the moral standards of the demotic phase in the city-states, and rather presents Plato as an active militant in favour of aristocratic political solutions who deployed his arguments as a means of displacing the authority of common citizens as thinkers. She does so by interpreting Plato’s work as framed in a language of household economy and popular practical wisdom which he could use for his own purposes —though neither circumvent it nor overpass it— by reorienting the ethics of craftsmanship —revolving around the concept of *tejné*, which encompassed a mixture of the modern semantics of arts and technology— against democracy. Through an elegant contrast with Protagoras’ pro-democratic discourse, Plato is thus portrayed as “appealing to the familiar experience and values of the labouring citizen” and “constructing his definition of political virtue and justice on the analogy of the practical arts” (p. 63), but for the sake of excluding the producer from politics.

The relevance of Wood's definition of context can be seen at work here when she underlines that Protagoras and Plato drew their arguments from the democratic experience of Athens: both placed "the practical arts of the labouring citizen at the heart of their political arguments, though to antithetical purposes" (p. 64). This frame of interpretation allows her also to vindicate pre-Socratic sophists as the real inventors of political thinking by means of their adversarial argumentation based on judicial empowerment and education of the commoners, and their emphasis on *nomos* or convention against *physis*; and praises their discourse as a kind of practical universalism which, against the convention after Socrates, was not relativist but rather motivated by the conviction that virtue is a universal capacity.

Wood's analysis also allows for an assessment of the contribution by Aristotle that stresses even more the degree to which "historical contexts and political commitments present themselves not as ready-made answers but as complex questions" (p. 83), so that the thinker's solutions were unpredictable and can only be illuminated *ex post* by shedding light on those contextual questions: Aristotle, although favouring aristocratic solutions for the city-state and regarding order and inequality as natural, was well aware of the conflictive nature of a self-governed political system based on the collective participation of the many—which embedded the tension between equality and inequality—, and so devoted his work to study political cycles and the devising of constitutional combinations that secured the incorporation of the *demos* and the recognition of the labouring poor as political agents, albeit subordinated to the prevalence of natural aristocracies.

With the historical sequence started by Socrates and his emphasis on the autonomy of moral education, and following up to Aristotle and his naturalization of political order, popular apprenticeship was ultimately degraded in favour of scholarship, and knowledge became strongly identified with unveiling the hierarchy of the general over the particular. Wood does not linger on the suppression of historical alternatives this process entailed but rather focuses on its resulting effect: the birth of what she takes as "one very particular mode of political thinking" that, after emerging in the very particular historical conditions of ancient Greece, "developed over two millennia in what we now call Europe and its colonial supports" (p. 1). That particular mode is defined as theory, meaning the systematic analytical interrogation of political principles, which involved definitions, counterarguments, adversarial discourse and

other rhetorical techniques that presuppose the application of critical reason to the issue of “what constitutes the right and proper ordering of society and government”. This social history is then not of political thought widely speaking, but rather of “political thinking” as a historical product, and of the conditions that have made of political theory a tradition.

This latter question, according to Wood, owes much to the Roman experience as a city-state eventually expanding into a fully-fledged empire, a process that curtailed from early-on the evolution towards democracy, though anyway embedding in the political system the tension between the wealthy landowner aristocracy and the subordinated classes. In a context where —more so after the defeat of the struggles for land reform— the patricians of the Italic peninsula were never challenged to the degree of their earlier counterparts from the Peloponnese, the heritage of Greek political thinking was received and refined, only to be partially reoriented in order to adapt it to the requirements of a singular political community in which property was the main resource for political agency and where a “hierarchical citizenship” —founded on the premise of a massive slavery by conquest and trade— was constantly recreated together with military expansion.

In the wider picture, the Roman contribution to a history of political thinking was not so impressive. Following the trend towards “the introversion of the active citizen” (p. 105) developed in the Hellenistic period, the political culture of the Republic was much shaped by issues relating to ethics and the accommodation of inequality into the political system; thus, authors like Cicero embodied more a synthesis of old topics from classical Greece oriented towards the pursuit of order and the morals of public service. Wood is anyway able to present Cicero’s work as both framed in the inherited language of popular citizenship and moved by his perception of the decline of republican aristocracy, and so able to “combine what appear to be democratic principles of aristocratic equality with an aristocratic notion of “proportionate” equality” (p. 142). Other authors like Polybius would on their turn draw from Aristotle in order to distil the ideal of the mixed constitution, which functioned as the backbone from where political theory would continue to flourish for centuries onwards.

Even if the political thought of the Roman Empire remained haunted by the weight of Greek philosophy, it was to bring about a crucial epistemological, theoretical

and juridical distinction for the future of a tradition of political thinking: that between private and public, contextually referred to by the semantic fields of *dominium* and *imperium*. This path-breaking cleavage actually hid the overwhelming centrality of property in the Roman world: as opposed to the Greeks, who had no clear conception of it, property shaped not just the political life and juridical production of Rome but its whole “cultural formation” (p. 120). This is certainly not an original reflection; however, aside from tracing it to the structure of social relations of exploitation, Wood draws from it a conclusion that functions as the underlying thesis in the rest of this social history: that the social and cultural experience of classical times embedded the relative autonomy of political systems from property relations. In other words, property and state separated from Antiquity onwards, so that the tension between appropriators and producers has never since been synonymous with that between rulers and subjects.

It should already be clear that Ellen Wood’s social history is far away from the flat and simplistic cliché with which academic historians usually dispense of self-assumed practitioners of historical materialism. Wood not only offers a perspective detached from base/superstructure assumptions but even challenges usual “history-from-above” accounts: as she summarizes, “[t]he democratic polis represented a case perhaps unique in pre-capitalist history in which a propertied class for various historic reasons had neither the military nor the political predominance required to sustain its property and powers of appropriation” (p. 194). This is all the more interesting, not just given Wood’s affiliation with the Marxist tradition, but because many intellectual historians of today are much more deterministic when accounting for the supply of language, discourse and meaning in the historical contexts they study.

For the purposes of this review, the relative autonomy of the economic was to have radical effects on the production of theory over the long-term: as appropriators and producers started confronting each other “not primarily as rulers and subjects”, “an unprecedented juxtaposition of, and new tensions between, economic inequality and civic equality” were created and became eventually embedded, reaching a degree of complexity that made of political thinking a social need. This was the legacy that the Middle Ages received from Antiquity, and that was to be prolonged and extended, though in a different context in which Christianity introduced its own issues, starting with a tension between the spiritual and temporal dimensions of power, while trying to keep the distinction between *imperium* and *dominium* inherited from Latin Antiquity.

In this sense, Wood's social history of political thought does not regard the end of the Roman Empire as a historical cleavage but as an experience of "transformation" in which certain social and intellectual trends even more clearly did actually stand out. This was so due to the centrality of feudalism, a kind of social order in which producers did not face property owners as a collective entity backed by the state but in a rather more directly personal relation, as individual landowners in rivalry with other owners or the state. In a world like this, "economic relations of appropriation were inextricably bound up with political relations" (p. 167), but as sovereignty fragmented itself and power had to be exercised by lords and their military retainers there took hold a "politically constituted" type of property, which presupposed the heritage of Roman property. Again, this might be a conventional way of qualifying the Middle Ages, but Wood goes on to discern that, compared to previous empires in history, fragmentation coincided here with an unprecedented strengthening of property, and this gave the medieval nobility of the West a degree of autonomy vis-à-vis the monarchy that was crucial for understanding the dynamics of political theorizing in the coming centuries.

According to these conditions, the dominant discourse in the medieval period was to stem out of the need to negotiate jurisdictions in theory and practice. Such orientation was a response not just to further complexity in the relations between imperium and dominium, but to the fact that both the political and the economic dimensions were becoming more difficult to isolate at the juridical or the analytical levels: as the line between property and possession could not be so easily drawn, the distinction between public power and property was also blurring. Yet here we are not offered a story of rupture with the past: Wood's argument is that during the Middle Ages the outlining of new and radical conceptions of property —i.e. as common or natural— ultimately referred to the inherited resources from Roman private law. Departures from tradition were certainly more marked at the discursive level, for this complex polity suited better disputation through canon and civil law rather than by philosophical works. In a world that so starkly instituted juridical inequality, the issue of social relations as classes ceased to be the central subject of political discourse, which instead "revolved around the nature and location of rule itself, together with relations among the various and overlapping claims to rule" (p. 195).

In all, this was both a reflection and a factor of the thorough transformation in the contents of civic identity. "The constitutive social relations of feudalism precluded

the kind of civic accommodation that underlay the ancient polis and political theory” (p. 195), declares Wood, while offering an interesting comparison between the medieval Western and ancient Greek notions of active citizenship (pp. 194-195). In a world presided by privilege, the principal subject of political philosophy could not anymore be “the civic life of citizens in a self-governing community” (p. 199). This is not to deny that sometimes the civic commune might assert itself against lordly rule, as in the case of the Italian city-states, but even there the core of reflection was initially on authority and jurisdiction in the absence of a clearly defined political sphere.

In this interpretation there is space for accounting for semantic and intellectual innovation: drawing on Janet Coleman, Wood refers to the transformation of the *quod omnes tangit* formula, now assuming a deliberative body consenting the laws—a possibility that was not explored in Antiquity (p. 193)—. The interpretation is used as a means to defend that—even after the reception of the classical tradition of the mixed constitution— medieval political thought was not the precursor of modern republicanism. By revisiting the works by Aquinas, John of Paris, Marsilius of Padua and William of Ockham, Wood synthesizes the innovations produced from within a conceptual frame that gave “overwhelming importance [to] law in general” (p. 210): the exercise of rule in accordance to the common good, the relevance of consent and representation and the share of collective subjects in sovereignty, but also the right to disobedience and a notion of justice more concerned with legal coherence than social egalitarianism. Following the scheme devised for the study of classical Antiquity, the argument is presented not as a general trend but adopting different shapes and dynamics in the various regions and principalities depending on the relations of the nobility and their princes between themselves and with other social constituencies which, in the case of urban communes, were to be even more specific and complex. In this sense, Wood’s account of medieval history stands out among political historians in stressing the singularity and diversity of historical processes, not only in time but also in space.

This inception is followed more systematically in the second volume of this social history of Western political thought. Having stated that, already by the Middle Ages Western Europe had established and defined property “as a distinct locus of power” with “an unusual degree of autonomy from the state” (*Liberty and Property*, p. 3) compared to other traditional cultures—like the Chinese—, Wood devotes another

study to the kind of political thinking set forth from the 14th-century onwards, “as revenues from peasants became more precarious and the competition with landlords for access to peasant labour became more intense” (p. 7). With the rise of more centralized monarchies, the conditions of subjection and domination changed —as would eventually those of economic exploitation in a particular area in the West—.

If in the first volume Wood draws on debates on the dominant social relations in classical Greece, in the second she profits from the contributions but what can still today be deemed as the best-quality Marxist explanation and analysis of the transition from feudalism to capitalism. The to-date insuperable works by Robert Brenner are here the leading thesis which pave the way for Wood’s interpretation of the “different paths of state formation” in Europe. It is out of Brenner’s overall interpretation of the diverging paths followed by England and France that Wood is able to dispute Quentin Skinner’s assumption that there was something like a clear-cut and generalized distinction in the early modern period between the power of the ruler and the power of the state, which is conventionally considered the precondition for conceptualizing the state in modern terms.

Wood’s contention is that England came out of the Middle Ages with a “more or less unified ruling class” and a rather high degree of cooperation between landlords and kings which fostered a “division of labour between the central state and private property” (p. 10-11). Although the nobles lacked coercive power over tenants, they controlled the state through parliament and so were able to acquire the best lands and organize production through “purely economic exploitation”. This process, which eventually established “an economy uniquely driven by compulsions of competitive production, increasing labour productivity, profit-maximization and constant capital accumulation” (p. 8) —namely, agrarian capitalism— made England markedly distinctive from its continental counterparts in that extra-economic coercion or politically constituted forms of private property made out of privilege, seigneurial rights and jurisdiction were not anymore at the core of its functioning and reproduction. Conversely, in France the initial parcellization of sovereignty was eventually overcome by monarchical centralization but at the cost of transferring to peasants and urban producers the juridical conditions for their economic survival, which left the monarchy the only option of building up a centralized tax system that eventually uprooted the nobility of land control but also kept the whole structure of

overlapping jurisdictions untouched. The monarchy strove for centralization, but “the dominant class continued to depend to a great extent on politically constituted property [...] deriving from political, military and judicial powers” —usually in the form of office-holding— which reproduced “extra-economic status and privilege” (p. 14). Thus, even as centralization fostered commercial activities, France witnessed the rise of a prominent bourgeoisie but not the dominance of capitalist social relations.

Once again, what matters from this historical materialist account of two diverging paths is that the great differences between the two countries were in the nature of their states “and the forms of ‘discourse’ they engendered” (p. 9). But Wood takes the issue even further. These diverging early modern trends are illustrative of a wider phenomenon: that “there was not just one overarching historical trajectory but several ‘transitions’ in the Western European passage to ‘modernity’ which have shaped divergent traditions of political thought” (p. 27). Accordingly, political philosophy in the early modern period was shaped not always in the context of modern state formation but “in very different, and not conspicuously modern, social and political forms” such as city-states, empires and kingdoms with very distinctive structural features. Wood suggests that a different, prospective approach should be adopted which does not assume the teleology of modernity: the title of the introductory chapter of this second volume is actually “Transitions”, in plural, and without adding “...to modernity”.

With this framework in mind the book tries to show that “[t]he inherited languages of western political theory have been remarkably flexible in their adaptation to varying contextual circumstances” to the extent that not only “each specific historical form has posed its own distinctive problems” but also that “the same traditions of discourse have been mobilized not only to give different answers but in response to different questions” (p. 4). In practice, the perspective performs differently depending on the strategy deployed for accounting for the various cases under consideration and the choice of authors from each case, which span from the Italian Humanists to the French Enlightenment classics like Montesquieu and Rousseau through the Neo-Scholastic figures School of Salamanca from the Habsburg Hispanic Empire, the leading theologians of the Reform and the Dutch moral philosophers like Grotius and Spinoza, and last but not least the main intellectuals writing in the context

of the English Revolution and its sequels, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke and even up to David Hume and Adam Ferguson.

In a general way Wood's stance is to underline the continuity and endurance of the pre-modern and its effects over the limits of semantic transformation albeit discursive innovations. This is much the case when dealing with Italian Humanists, who are presented as embodying the continuity between medieval and early power relations and structural features in Italian city-states. Wood states that the greater changes in political discourse between authors from the 13th and the 16th century "have to do with their differing relations to the social conflicts of their day" (p. 38) rather than with a significant transformation in the language of politics. This is not to deny that between the times of Marsilius of Padua and those of Machiavelli there had not occurred important changes in the composition of urban political systems and that contextual orientations in political thought greatly differed, but both authors wrote from the same language "deeply rooted in the Italian city-state", which was more an inheritance from the medieval world than a precursor of a modern state: Machiavelli's idea of the state *-lo stato-* was indeed rooted in the very corporate body of the medieval world, and from that point of view cannot be equated with the modern concept of the state as a impersonal and legal political order but rather with traditional dominium.

Urban Italy reproduced forms of parceled sovereignty, the organization of which favored oligarchic control of institutions and commercial activities that did not mark a significant departure from feudal economic patterns: economic competition was framed in political rivalry, and even guild organization followed corporate principles of protecting the interests of their members. As Wood reminds, when the artisans from then *popolo minuto* were able to take power —as in the *Ciompi* rebellions of late 14th century— what they strived for was privileges for accessing the political domain otherwise monopolized by the families of the *popolo grasso*. There took place changes in this overall setting, though, and so whereas for Marsilius the ideal of a single unitary jurisdiction overcoming the fragmentation of sovereignty was a moving leit-motiv, by the time of Machiavelli what was at stake was the very survival of the urban commune as an independent entity in the face of the rising monarchical states.

This latter situation fostered Humanists to reflect on military power in tension with traditional perceptions of virtue. Reflection on this view allows Wood to take position in debates on the so-called "Civic Humanist" political culture nurtured in

Italian urban communes, which she does to begin with by reminding the preference for topics and issues from Roman —and not Greek— Antiquity, with its stress on the moral dimension of citizenship but also its obsession with militaristic concerns, which were not on the contrary a core feature of Athenian democracy. Since their very beginning urban communes had to rely on armed force, and not only to control their hinterland but because conflicts between rich and poor had “the character of power struggles always on the verge of violence” (p. 43). From this tradition, Machiavelli’s preference for republican liberty stemmed out from his conviction that it produced better armies, since soldiers were given part in political organization and that assured their loyalty to both their military leaders and the urban institutions of self-government. The urban militia model thus envisaged was, however, to be overcome by the new monarchic machineries staffed with mercenary troops: as Wood concludes, “it is then his commitment to a practically defunct political form that produced what many commentators have interpreted as Machiavelli’s most ‘modern’ political ideas” (p. 53). On the other hand, however, his advocacy for a Roman middle way between aristocracy and democracy was an alternative to reflection in the tradition of a mixed constitution and the cyclical transitions between forms of government in favor a more subtle understanding of the functional effects of frictions between rich and poor for guaranteeing peace and good government. As a whole, however, it was rather the survival of the state against external military threats what motivated Machiavelli’s theoretical innovations, which Wood —by means of an apt comparison with the classical work by Sun Tzu (p. 51)— summarizes as the adaption of traditional reflection on military strategy to the realm of politics.

In other cases reflections are not so insightful, and the account risks reiteration and flatness. When dealing with political thinking in the Dutch Republic, Wood seems to be more enthusiastic about stressing the degree to which entrepreneurial Holland was still a “politically constituted commercial society” (p. 119) than to single out the specificity of Dutch political culture in the early modern period, which she reduces to an amalgam of civic traditions over-determined by the centrality of merchant’s corporate interests as embodied in the East India Company. True enough, her interpretation of Hugo Grotius’s reliance on his own expertise as spokesman of the stadtholder regime in the early 17th century —where issues of religious tolerance, limits to political authority and international commercial gain intertwined— helps

understand the context in which he built on the inherited notions of natural rights and produced a new understanding that left aside theological considerations. But Wood is reluctant to concede that this entailed a thorough transformation into a modern definition of individual rights but rather a conception still framed in collective interest and agency, behind which laid “an ideology well suited for ‘extra-economic’ strategies for establishing commercial supremacy” (p. 121). Grotius appears then not as innovating so much in notions of property but of jurisdiction — including the legitimation of the seizing of foreign ships— yet this is less derived from a refined hermeneutics than predicated from the assumption that the highly commercialized Dutch economy was founded not on capitalist relations but on a mixture of family-based independent production and the entrenched corporate interests of the commercial companies. By contrast, his account of Spinoza’s complex relation to the notion of “democracy” is rooted in a more refined historical semantics which isolates the changes of the usages of the concept in the specific Dutch political setting. This allows Wood to debate with recent reappraisals of Spinoza both by Marxist authors like Tony Negri and academic challengers like Jonathan Israel, who are criticized for having taken for granted the specific context in which Spinoza’s appellation to popular sovereignty took place.

This social history of political thinking seems to be more open when dealing with original moral and philosophical questions posed by challenging processes of cultural change, such as the Protestant Reformation. Wood’s assessment of Luther and Calvin’s theological and political argumentations focuses on probing that “the scale and consequences of the break had less to do with the originality and revolutionary import or intent of Luther’s ideas than with the geopolitical and social conflicts into which they were drawn” (p. 59). It was the specificity of context what allowed the doctrine of obedience to princes be launched into its opposite direction. This was certainly preconditioned by Luther’s path-breaking moral and theological reflection, but it was the peasant rebellion in the region of Munster what ultimately allowed the attacks on the authority of the Church to be reoriented towards the secular authorities, by making use of the available theological language but presenting them as “ungodly” rulers (p. 71). The counter example is that the doctrine of rebellion later developed by monarchomachs was not drawn from these radical discourses but from assertions of religious power by secular authorities.

On the other hand, however, Wood's social history does not seem to be so renovating and convincing when dealing with the type of political theorization developed in more generalized social and political contexts. This is the case with her assessment of French political thought as framed in the endurance of Ancien R gime and absolutism throughout the early modern period. One finds here the most straightforward application of the concept of "politically constituted forms of property" to a quite well-known historical case, the point of departure being that in France state development or "political accumulation" was certainly not "a mark of its strength or of modern 'rationalization' (p. 147): the Monarchy lived out the sales of offices and high levels of taxation that set limits to its legitimacy and put into motion cycles of social and political unrest ending up in the bargaining of social peace for privileges. From this overall framework Woods is right in pointing out that political-philosophical concerns were shaped by the tension between the private and public dimensions of agency and legitimacy and by the need to secure a balance between the privileged estates and territorial corporations with a degree of recognition in the institutional order. Profiting from a tradition of organic images of the body politic, French political thinkers would thus on one side produce a whole tradition of constitutional reflection that suited "a polity still organized on feudal, corporatist principles" (p. 164); and on the other, they would reflect after the Aristotelian tradition of political economy in order to bring to terms the tension between the "corporatist roots" of private interest and "an increasing national economy" (p. 166). However, this overall interpretation inspires a reflection of relevant authors, from Jean Bodin to Montesquieu and Rousseau, that insists on the degree to which their work reflect more the fabric of the traditional body politic and the limits of a clear cut distinction between public and private rather than the universal claim to modern constitutionalism that they have been credited for.

Part of this problem stems out from the very choice of authors of this social history of political thought. Ellen Wood presents herself as a stubborn vindicator of a canon of authors for the historical study of western political theory. She actually criticizes the Cambridge School for "eschewing the very idea of a 'canon' and replacing it with discursive contexts that include a host of not-so-canonical writers who have in their various ways contributed to language "situations" (p. 19). In trying to distinguish canonical authors from the rest, it is argued that "[g]reat thinkers, indeed, are likely to be those who shed light on their historical setting by thinking at an unpredictable

angle from it, often as uncongenial to their friends as to their enemies” (p. 27-28). It is not, however, so much originality or polemic what her social history really values in their work but their fitting into the overall picture of social and political continuities and transformations. In fact the interpretation and evaluation of authors varies greatly depending on the way they serve the purpose of grounding the core interpretation of a long-term growing autonomy of the economic from the political sphere.

The implicit assumption is that canonical authors are those capable of penetrating the social reality of their time and in a way that can be recovered and apprehended by a good hermeneutics inspired in historical materialism. But the very notion of context as offered by Wood becomes problematic here: it leaves out the fact that if certain authors have become classics it has been by means of their posterity, that is, by the way they have been used by other authors, in contexts different from that in which they lived and wrote. In fact, authors considered by Wood as “not modern” have entered the canon as having contributed to the philosophical foundations of modernity.

The whole issue of time inter-contextuality is as much taken for granted as barely reflected on in this social history. On the other hand, Wood’s re-assertion of canon is not particularly revolutionary. Without an explicit theory of the formation of the canon as a historical process, the choice of authors ends up upholding and underpinning a most conventional selection of reputed figures as distilled from a traditional intellectual history perspective. As a matter of fact, Wood recognizes at the beginning of his second volume to be dealing with “major thinkers whose status in the canon of political thought has been accepted by convention” (p. 27). In practice, the combination of convention and perspective favours a focus on most reactionary figures: in the first volume, Plato is given much more relevance than Aristotle; in the second one, all those who suit better Wood’s overall interpretation of the limits to modernity in the early modern period.

This selection within the canon is governed by what appears to be a rigid classification of a variety of pre-modern polities —certainly leading to a picture of politically multicultural Early Modern Western Europe— and the “modern” one. This interpretive and narrative strategy goes against one other methodological assumption of this social history of political thought which claims that, aside from a different understanding of context, attention is given to “apprehend historical processes” (p. 29). In fact, however, all those argued-for “transitions” not necessarily to modernity end up

as failed paths towards nowhere. This greatly originates in the outstanding status given to the historical trajectory of England in Western history.

Wood final chapter on the early modern tension between liberty and property is devoted to the English performance. Here we find a dynamic account which on the other hand synthesizes the long-term overall trajectories of social evolution and political developments elsewhere only to produce a deeply singular and path-breaking settlement. After profiting from a long history of royal centralization and unification of the landowning nobility, England entered the early modern period having overcome the structure of parceled out, corporate jurisdictions that defined its continental counterparts: “a fundamental unity of purpose and practice between monarchy and landed classes as partners in a distinctively centralized state” (p. 215) there encouraged production of “a tradition of political thought in which individuals, without mediation by corporate entities, were conceived as the basic constituents of the state” (p. 216). This not only made for the possibility of defining the state as an impersonal entity —as already offered in Bishop John Ponet’s *Shorte Treatise of Politike Power* from 1556— and the polity as a single ‘commonwealth’ —as first coined by Sir Thomas Smith, the ambassador to France, in 1583— but also framed political thinking in the tradition of the mixed constitution, though not anymore for stressing the moderating effects of the intermediate bodies but rather for arguing for the balance between the different principles embodied by each of its constitutive parts.

Such consensus over balance was broken by the Stuart drive towards absolutism in the early 17th century. As the Parliament denounced the violation of the composite monarchy partnership by the King, there emerged unique constitutional debates: in the absence of strong corporations embodying collective rights, for the first time there could appear a demand for the inclusion, as individuals, of those subjects not directly represented in Parliament but without the consent of which it was argued that there could not be a legitimate sovereignty. The outbreak of the Civil War eventually opened a period “of unique intellectual ferment” in which inherited social conditions “placed radical ideas on the agenda in unprecedented ways” (p. 224). It was in particular the creation of the New Model Army —which quickly became not just an effective military machine but also “a militant political force”— what urged for a settlement in the definition of new basic concepts such as consent, active citizenship and property, and for the first time there appeared a tension between the definition of

rights as natural or conventional. Wood reconstructs the debates between the Levellers, who insisted on the extension of the franchise to all Englishmen, and more moderate positions reducing the contours of sovereignty to those represented in Parliament; interestingly, the account of leading intellectual figures such as Hobbes and Locke is founded in their ability of “appropriating some of the most democratic ideas” of their time” (p. 255), if only to produce important re-orientations that would eventually serve as bulwarks against the actual development of a democratic political system while offering what appeared as universal, abstract approaches to sovereignty and property rights.

One problem of this insightful and rigorous narrative stands out when Wood deals with its 18th-century sequels, for she traces the conceptual conditions for commercial society debates back to the seventeenth-century discourse settlements; and these are, in their turn, ultimately explained by the institutional and social transformations already well under way by the sixteenth century, if not before. The social conditions of the Scottish Enlightenment are thus presented as essentially given at least two hundred years before! On the other hand, in this long-term historical picture, the uniqueness of the West is further reduced to the exceptionality of England, with the problem that, if the former tends to be identified with Eurocentrism, Wood’s social history may then be charged of being Anglo-centric. One way of avoiding this risk would have been a reflection on how, even if produced and resulting from specific geographical contexts, ideas also travel and are rather more nomadic than born to remain settled down. In practice, Wood takes this into account when for example she traces the import of Hobbes’s ideas into the Dutch political-intellectual environment; but she operates this way mainly to stress the different role played by Hobbes’ ideas depending on context. A systematic approach to this issue of semantic transfers would have probably rendered a more complex casuistry, though, for what ultimately lies behind the building of a canon of Western political thought seems to be the relative convergence in patterns of interpretation of classical works, not only in time but also in space.

Old intellectual history could be blamed for its commitment to transhistorical approaches but the alternative should avoid a reductive understanding of spatial contextuality. Interstate relations are a relevant feature in any social history of political thinking, and especially in Western Europe during the early modern period: as the wars

of religion gave way to the rise of competition for hegemony among kingdoms, the reception and adoption of concepts, discourse and ideologies became embedded in every culture and public sphere. In order to grasp the relevance of this empirical argument it is mandatory a dialogue with Reinhart Koselleck's proposition that concepts are not mere reflections of institutional and social settings but also active factors in their transformation.

The book closes with Wood arguing for a new understanding of modernity not as equated with the Enlightenment but rather with capitalism. The debate is certainly of interest to the extent that it contributes to make distinctions that are not always considered by historians and intellectuals in general, who tend to take modernity's self-referential ideology as an analytical tool. In this sense, Wood's differentiation between an Enlightenment founded on the cultural outlooks of the bourgeoisie under pre-capitalist social conditions, and a properly-speaking culture of capitalism, is both appropriate and useful. Still the problem remains: it is far from clear that capitalism produces one single ideology or culture of its own but rather incorporates as well traditions from its recent past such as the Enlightenment. The proper approach to this issue should stem out from a theory of which is the status of political thinking in society and how does it change through time. For it seems that, as a historical phenomenon, the Enlightenment has to do with the growth in autonomy of ideas, to the extent of directly influencing contextual change. From a materialist point of view, one means of avoiding here an idealist approach is again to discuss with the Koselleckian conceptual history approach.

In all, Ellen Wood performs as a very good contextualist intellectual and conceptual historian, and this is not in spite of but thanks, at least partly, to her distilled, refined and exigent Marxism. Many of the arguments and interpretations of this social history should incite research as much as debating. Even if her definition of political theory is not as radically historical as conceptual historians would like, it is out of question that this approach to political thinking poses relevant questions, not only to the premises of the history of political thought after the linguistic turn, but also to the actual practice of conceptual history. In particular, this social history of political thought shows the relevance of the changing—and increasingly complex—concepts of property for any account of the longer-term semantic transformations brought about with the development of the early modern state and capitalist economy. In implicitly

pointing to a vacuum in this respect, Wood's Marxism is actually signalling the conventional way by which means conceptual historians practice their professional activity, too much dependent on the preferences and shortcomings of historians of political thought.

Even if profiting from best quality historical materialism, Wood's history cannot make for a brand new paradigm; yet she makes the case for a social history of discourses after the linguistic turn. While dispensing of Quentin Skinner's work as "yet another kind of textual history, yet another history of ideas" (p. 9), she denounces John Pocock's vision of history as having "little to with social processes" and being interested in historical transformations "only as visible shifts in the language of politics" (*Citizens to Lords*, p. 10). It is remarkable how a practitioner of historical materialism is able to denounce the new intellectual history paradigm for not being historical enough: in criticizing their method and perspective Wood reminds that "[t]o historicize is to humanize, and to detach ideas from their own material and practical setting is to lose our points of human contact with them" (p. 14). This is followed by the usual call of attention against the risks of presentism —"If we abstract a political theory from its historical context, we in effect assimilate it to our own" (p. 16)—; yet the argument is more radically framed in its extra-intellectual consequences: the relevance of a social history of political thinking is not just in that it enables "a critical distance from our own unexamined assumptions" (p. 80) but in that it avoids "emptying historical political theories of their own political meaning" (p. 15).

In order to make of this social history a proper alternative there are however important methodological challenges to be faced and solved, starting with how the non-linguistic dimension of contexts are rendered intelligible or translated into language and discourse, and ultimately inserted in the works of authors. A theory of the ability, and the limits, of language for giving meaning to objective social and economic processes still remains to be built, but it would certainly contribute to a better understanding of the long-term separation of the economic and the political in the West and elsewhere.