Descartes v. Vico:
Some Observations about the Importance of the Method of Inquiry in the History of Political Thought

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How does one construct a classical canon in the history of political thought? Until the so-called Age of Enlightenment consciously began to raise the question of tradition and progress, the old masters had been studied as undisputed and timeless sources of wisdom and intellectual authority. Scholastic arguments were garnished with ubiquitous references to the great thinkers of the past. But there were few explicit attempts at improving or overcoming the positions held by them.

Renaissance and Reformation with their insistence on critical consciousness and individual conscience first had begun to change all that. A new age, so it seemed to many, also needed a new approach to science, philosophy, and politics. To put it into the words that Marx would use, much later again, and about a different age: The entire scholastic heritage of "ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions" had to be "swept away".[1] Not everybody agreed. And from that disagreement sprang the two methods of modern political thinking that are still the dominant ones:

- a method of pure or technical reasoning, insistent on "getting it right" once and for all, either entirely abstract and speculative, or based on the objectivity of strict empirical observation;

- and a method of historical or practical reasoning, committed merely to "getting along," based on common experience and a tradition of shared values.[2]

Each led to diametrically opposed assumptions about the ultimate driving forces of human conditionality and progress: scientific exactitude and rational choice in the one case, and the collective exercise of common sense through historical learning in the other.

Context

In 1536, the French logician Pierre de la Ramée (1515-72) burst upon the scene with a masters thesis claiming that everything that Aristotle had taught was false.[3] During the same century, the Copernican postulation of a heliocentric world system began to question previous scientific assumptions about world and universe. But is was not until the following 17th century that the power of tradition would be challenged more seriously. After the invention of microscope and telescope, it became possible to see the universe as a calculable entity from the infinitesimal to the infinite.

The new scientists lived dangerously not so much because of what they discovered about

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[1]Karl Marx, *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848), 1 (Bourgeois and Proletarians).

[2]See Jürgen Habermas, *Technik und Wissenschaft als 'Ideologie'* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1969), 146-68; also Melissa Williams, "Toleration, Canadian-Style: Reflections of a Yankee-Canadian," in Ronald Beiner and Wayne Norman (eds.), *Canadian Political Philosophy* (Don Mills: Oxford University Press, 2001), 216-31.

[3]See Kenneth D. McRae, "Ramist Tendencies in the Thought of Jean Bodin," *Journal of the History of Ideas* XVI (1955), 306-23.

earth or stars, but because of the implications this had for the established order. In 1600, the Neapolitan philosopher Giordano Bruno (1548-1600) was publicly burnt at stake by the Inquisition, naked, hung upside-down, and with a gag on his tongue. He had led an itinerant life, escaping from city to city, and country to country, and he had endured seven years of incarceration prior to his trial and conviction of heresy, because the new understanding of world and universe led him to believe that man was a micro-cosm of that universe, and that God was present in all of its parts. This in turn at least implied that the church as intermediator was no longer needed. More famous, of course, is the case of Galileo Galilei (1574-1642), who probably escaped death, or at least lasting imprisonment, because he recanted his belief in the Copernican system, in 1633, and therefore 'only' was put under house arrest for the rest of his life.

As a natural scientist, Galileo was not particularly interested in the social or political ramifications of his work. He probably recanted not only because he was old and ill, but also because he did not care what the church thought about him and his work as long as he could continue to do it. Replacing the cosmological world view with mathematical calculation based on exact empirical observation, he refuted the Aristotelian tradition of natural science, and of physics in particular. The philosopher's views on politics as the art of practical wisdom were of little if any concern to him.

But it was only a matter of time until the new natural scientism would also infect the liberal arts and, therefore, politics. Thomas Hobbes visited Galileo in 1637, and shortly thereafter published his first work of politics, On the Citizen (*De Cive* 1642), in which every reference to Aristotle would be negative. And in the Leviathan (1651), Hobbes would speak of the "vain and erroneous Philosophy of the Greeks, especially of Aristotle."[4]

In order to appreciate the epochal battle between the classical traditionalists and the modernists, we need to take a brief look at the Aristotelian method of inquiry. On the basis of a strict separation of theoretical sciences such as physics, from practical sciences such as ethics and politics, Aristotle had held that "precision cannot be expected in the treatment of all subjects alike." Indeed, he continued,

> "a well-schooled man is one who searches for that degree of precision in each kind of study which the nature of the subject at hand admits: it is obviously just as foolish to accept arguments of probability from a mathematician as to demand strict demonstrations from an orator."[5]

In his Topics, Aristotle elaborated on how knowledge can be achieved in the practical sciences: through dialectical reasoning, taking into consideration what is held by most or the best, by including everything that mirrors a plurality of opinion, and, in doing so, by generating a suitable catalogue of topics (*topoi*) pertinent to a particular problem. These topics must then be examined systematically by securing reasonable propositions, investigating variety of expression, and by distinguishing similarity and difference.[6] In other words, practical science or philosophy was for

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[4] *Leviathan*, chapter 44 (original pagination 334);

[5] *Nicomachean Ethics* 1094b10-25.

[6] *Topics* 100a20-105a35.

Aristotle the art of critical examination and formulation of reasonable assumptions.

Fascinated and overwhelmed by the new scientific exactitude, the modernists of the 17th century rejected such imprecision. If man was a micro-cosm of a universe increasingly understood as matter in motion, just as the world revolving around the sun, and the stars following their calculable trajectories, then human behaviour had to follow predictable scientific patterns also.

In due course, the conviction took hold that political order was a matter of mathematical calculation as well. The search for such calculations also no longer required the argumentative environment of an entire academy. As Descartes reported in his Discourse,[7] the new method came to him in the solitude of a stove-heated room somewhere in wintery Germany where he was occupied with nothing more than his own thoughts.

René Descartes

When he had his wintery methodological vision, in 1619, he was on his way back from Frankfurt, where he had attended the coronation of Emperor Ferdinand II, returning to the army of Duke Maximilian of Bavaria.[8] Descartes' philosophical-scientific ambition was enormous, and he pursued it with the kind of rigour of someone who knew exactly what he was aiming for. Upon his return from Germany, he put his mind to the composition, in Latin, of Rules for the Direction of the Mind (*Regulae ad Directionem Ingenii*), in which he first conceptualized the outlines of a universal scientific system entirely based on the mathematical logic of "the indubitable conception of a clear and attentive mind, which proceeds solely from the light of reason" (*mentis purae et attentae non dubium conceptum, qui a sola ratione lucis nascitur*). What is thus "clear and certain" (*evidens et certum*), has to be distinguished from "ordinary philosophy" (*philosophia vulgaris*) with its assertions merely based on "probable conjectures" (*probabilibus tantum conjecturis*)[9] The Rules remained uncompleted and were not published during his lifetime.

Descartes then worked on an ambitious work on cosmology and physics, written in French and titled The World (*Le Monde).* It cautiously and hypothetically raised the issue of a heliocentric world system and ended with a short treatise on man as a mechanism driven by the same forces as the universe. The World was completed in 1633 but Descartes abstained from publication after he had heard about Galileo's condemnation. In a letter to a friend, he wrote: "I desire to live in peace."[10]

Next came the Discourse on the Method, Descartes' first published work (1637, together

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[7]*Discourse on the Method*, part II.

[8]Ibid., editorial footnote, 116.

[9]*Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, Rule Three; the Latin text is available at http://pedagogie.ac-toulouse.fr/philosophie/descregulae.htm .

[10]See John Cottingham, "General Introduction," in Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), xxi and xxv-xxvi.

with three essays on meteorology, optics and geometry). Written in French again, it was meant to appeal to a more general audience of readers who were even admonished, at the outset, to read it in portions rather than in one sitting. More forcefully than the Rules, the Discourse was also meant as a manifesto laying down the principles for Descartes' entire scientific quest. Programmatically, this found expression already in the lengthy title: "Discourse on the Method of rightly conducting one's reason and seeking the truth in the sciences" (*Discours de la Méthode pur bien conduire sa raison, et chercher la vérité dans les sciences*).[11]

The Discourse not only contained the aforementioned autobiographical wintery episode in Germany, but also Descartes' most famous statement: "I am thinking, therefore I exist," (*je pense, donc je suis*, or, as it became better known from the later Latin edition, *cogito, ergo sum*).[12] At a deeper philosophical level, this assertion was quite problematic because, as Descartes continued, it meant that the essence of human existence was the capacity to think and reflect, and this existence was manifest "entirely distinct from the body" (*entièrement distincte du corps*).[13] Despite the fact, in other words, that Descartes had earlier defined man as a mechanism driven by entirely physical forces, he now argued that his existence was nevertheless comprised in his entirely immaterial capacity to think. At a much simpler level, however, and with much more far-reaching practical consequences, Descartes' famous formulation brought on its way a new philosophy of pure reason detached from historical learning and experience.

The Discourse was followed by the Meditations on First Philosophy (*Meditationes de prima Philosophia*, 1641).[14] Here, Descartes returned to writing in Latin, and, as the dedicatory letter to the "most learned and distinguished men, the Dean and Doctors of the sacred Faculty of Theology at Paris" shows, the purpose was to convince the scholarly establishment of his new method. And since he knew well that criticism was to come, he included in the publication a collection of solicited responses as well as his own replies to them.[15] And just in case the scholarly establishment might find his extended reasoning too alien or cumbersome, he also provided a short "Preface to the Reader" as well as a "Synopsis" of the main arguments. As the title indicates, the narrative was presented as a series of meditations by which Descartes meant to suggest that each reader could put himself in the place of the meditator.[16]

The Meditations reiterate and deepen the argument of the Discourse. A framing theme is

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[11]The French text is available at http://www.mala.bc.ca/~johnstoi/descartes/Discours.htm .

[12]*Discourse*, Part Four; for the following, and as a solid basis of introductory interpretation, see again Cottingham, "General Introduction, xxviii-xxx.

[13]*Discourse*, Part Four.

[14]*Meditations on First Philosophy*; Latin text available at http://www.wright.edu/cola/descartes/medl.html .

[15]Among those who commented also was Thomas Hobbes.

[16]See Bernard Williams, "Introductory Essay," in Descartes, *Meditations*, vii-xvii.

the question of the existence of God, perhaps not surprising in a publication meant to impress a faculty of theology - which, apparently, it did not. In essence, Descartes' argument revolves around the assertion that God must exist because perfect knowledge, which is possible, can only come from a perfect source, which is God. As he sums up the argument at the end of the Fifth Meditation, "the certainty and truth of all knowledge depends uniquely on my awareness of the true God" (*omnis scientiae certitudinem & veritatem ab unâ veri Dei cognitione pendere*).

Two major works were still to follow. The first, *Principia philosophiae*, 1644, [17] was written in traditional textbook style as a series of enumerated short articles. It contained four parts, on methodology of human knowledge, physics, the laws of universe and earth. It was a compilation and extension of all previous work meant to replace in its entirety the Aristotelian tradition of scholarly inquiry and learning.[18] In his last completed major work, finally, The Passions of the Soul (*Les Passions de l'Ame* , 1649), Descartes turned to questions of love, hatred, joy and sadness. At the outset, he accused the ancients of having neglected passion as a topic of particular interest,[19] but then came to a rather traditional conclusion nevertheless, and well in line with what the ancients had already said: From the passions arise the sweetest pleasures (*le plus de douceur*) as well as the bitterest moments in life (*le plus d'amertume*), whence it is the principal goal and task of wisdom to gain control of passion (*la sagesse... à s'en rendre tellement maître*).[20]

Descartes turned to the question of passions mainly at the insistence of Princess Elizabeth of Bohemia with whom he had been corresponding for some time, and he also appears to have sent an earlier short draft to Queen Christina of Sweden who reportedly read it while hunting.[21] The decision to follow Christina's invitation to Stockholm would prove bitter for Descartes himself. Not taking well to the harsh northern climate and to the imposition of meeting the queen for her tutorials at five o'clock in the morning, Descartes fell ill and died of pneumonia a few months after his arrival. There is a final irony in this. During his early years of learning, at the Jesuit College of La Flèche in Anjou, he had been excused from morning classes because of his poor health. According to anecdote, he later told another famous mathematician and philosopher, Pascal, that good mathematics could never be done in the morning.[22]

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[17]*Principles of Philosophy*.

[18]See John Cottingham, "Translator's Preface," in Descartes, *Philosophical Writings*, vol. 1, 177-78.

[19]Descartes, *The Passions of the Soul*, part One, para.1.

[20]Ibid., Part Tree, para. 212; French text available at http://pedagogie.ac-toulouse.fr/philosophie/phpes/descartes.htm

[21]On these and the following biographical details see Robert Stoothoff, "Translator's Preface," in Descartes, *Philosophical Writings*, vol 1., 325.

[22] W. W. Rouse Ball, *A Short Account of the History of Mathematics* (New York: Dover, 1960), 269.

This brief and very cursory summary of the work and philosophy of one of the greatest thinkers of all time is only meant to serve one particular purpose: to demonstrate its colossal ambition of throwing overboard all that had previously been thought and taught, and of inventing a new universal system of thought and knowledge that would arise solely from the one and only truth the philosopher was sure of: that he existed, and was therefore thinking. There was an enormous arrogance in this endeavour, and particularly in the way in which Descartes set out to throw overboard all previous tradition. In his reply to one of the objections that had been raised against his Meditations, he wrote: "I make no mystery of the fact that I trust Aristotle less than my reason," and he even belittled Galileo's earlier critique of Aristotle with the remark: "Galileo is eloquent in refuting Aristotle; but it is not so difficult to do so."[23]

But while the new achievements in mathematics, astronomy and physics had indeed led to the refutation of much of what Aristotle had held to be true about world and universe, Descartes' dismissal not so much focussed on what was demonstrably wrong as on the traditional method of inquiry. And he was wary about studying the old masters more generally because he feared that their mistakes would infect his own thinking (*errorum maculae contractae*).[24] There was no place for historical learning or gradual progress, here.

In the Rules, Descartes still is relatively appreciative of past achievements. "We ought to read the writings of the ancients," he notes, "in order to learn what truths have already been discovered" (*quae jam olim recte inventa sunt*).[25] But then he immediately offers a number of reservations about such historical open-mindedness: not only will these ancients try to convince us of their point of view by ensnaring us with their most "subtle arguments" (*subtilissimis argumentis*), they will also "begrudge us the plain truth" (*nobis invident apertam veritatem*) because "hardly anything is said by one writer the contrary of which is not asserted by some other" (*quicquam ab uno dictum est, cujus contrarium ab aliquo alio non afferatur*).[26]

Descartes obviously did not like the kind of arguments which make up the methodological core of traditional philosophy. In fact, as he points out mockingly at the beginning of the Discourse, such philosophy is only useful because it "gives us the means of speaking plausibly about any subject and of winning the admiration of the less learned" (*que la philosophie donne moyen de parler vraisemblablement de toutes choses, et se faire admirer des moins savants*).[27]

He then comes to the point: "Diverse opinions" (*diverses opinions*) are merely

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[23]Quoted in Elio Gianturco, "Translator's Introduction," in Giambattista Vico, *On the Study Methods of Our Time* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), xxxii.

[24]*Rules*, Rule Three.

[25]Ibid.

[26]Ibid.

[27]*Discourse*, Part One.

expressions of what is "probable" (*vraisemblable*) and therefore "false" (*faux*).[28] This is the moment when Descartes tells us about his (wintery German) methodological road to Damascus. He also provides a telling example of what is wrong, in his opinion, with traditional imprecision. Compared to the kind of "orderly towns which planners lay out as they fancy on level ground" (*ces places régulières qu'un ingenieur trace a sa fantaisie dans une plaine*), ancient cities are usually "ill-proportioned" (*mal compassées*) with "streets crooked and irregular" (*rues courbées et inégales*).[29]

The example is telling because it reveals, with anticipatory brilliance, modernism's relentless commitment to scientific certitude and progress, from the boulevards blasted through old neighbourhoods, creating new commercial "arteries in an urban circulatory system" through which, at the same time, "troops and artillery could move effectively against future barricades and popular insurrections,"[30] to the scientific manipulation of wine production that is increasingly replacing traditional attention to *terroir* and local custom under the dictates of a global marketplace. [31]

The source of knowledge and progress also no longer is the community, school, or even books, but the individual master thinker or master builder. The kind of book knowledge "amassed little by little from the opinions of many different persons" (*grossies peu à peu des opinions de plusieurs diverses persones*) never is as close to the truth as the "simple reasoning" (*les simples raisonnements*) undertaken by a "man of good sense" (*un homme de bon sens*).[32] In fact, since Descartes is entirely concerned with finding out, for himself, what is true, and not at all with what might get him along in practical life - leave alone politics, he can easily assert that "a majority vote is worthless as a proof of truths that are at all difficult to discover" (*la pluralité des voix n'est pas une preuve qui vaille rien, pour les vérités un peu malaisées à découvrir*).[33] And this is so, because Descartes is convinced, nay, because he knows, that "there is only one truth concerning any matter" (*n'y ayant qu'une vérité de chaque chose*).[34]

Here we have it, then: the unsurpassable arrogance of a new age, committed to nothing and indebted to nobody. In the preface to the French edition of what he thought would be the textbook for that new age, The Principles of Philosophy, Descartes wrote unabashedly that "the truths contained in these principles, because they are very clear and very certain, will eliminate

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[28]Ibid.

[29]Ibid., Part Two

[30]Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air*(New York: Penguin, 1988), 150.

[31]See Jancis Robinson, *The Oxford Companion to Wine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

[32]*Discourse*, Part Two.

[33]Ibid.

[34]Ibid.

all ground for dispute" (*les vérités qu'ils contiennent, étant très claires et très certaines, óteront tous sujets de dispute*).[35] And, as he added, the new certitude would thus "dispose people's minds to gentleness and harmony" (*ainsi disposeront les esprits à la douceur et à la concorde*).[36]

All this was not meant to be the end of history, though, at least not yet. It also did not find immediate acceptance. At the same time when the Glorious Revolution in England (1688) established constitutional limits upon traditional monarchical rule, a literary *querelle des anciens et des modernes* (quarrel between ancients and moderns) broke out in Paris. At stake was the question to what extent - if at all - the teachings and traditions of the past should be considered as authoritative guidelines in the construction of future progress. From this debate emerged, eventually and gradually, the Enlightenment conviction that the destiny of man was marked by linear progress towards rational and scientific perfection.

The same quarrel also dominated intellectual life in Italy, albeit under much more difficult circumstances. As we remember, Bruno had been burnt at stake for his endorsement of the new science in 1600, and Galileo had chosen to recant in order to escape incarceration in 1633. Still in 1691, the Inquisition put on trial four men who had professed to believe that the universe was composed of atoms (admittedly, they had also held that Christ was an impostor).[37] This happened in Naples, a thriving metropolis in the southern Mediterranean but also a stronghold of orthodox Catholicism. As prohibition often begets the opposite of its intentions, so did the suppression of the new science fan the flames of intellectual radicalism. The works of Galileo, Descartes and others, such as the great English empiricist Francis Bacon, or the new champion of the law of nations, Hugo Grotius, were eagerly studied in Neapolitan intellectual circles.

Among the members of these circles was Giambattista Vico. Initially as enthusiastic about the new science as his friends, Vico would eventually develop a rather cautious view of its merits, making up, in the formulation of Jürgen Habermas, a kind of "profit and loss account."[38] As this satisfied neither his friends nor his enemies, Vico would remain, in his own words, "a foreigner in his own country" *(straniero nella sua patria*).[39] Only later, after his death, would the recognition grow that this Neapolitan professor had in fact formulated the most enlightened alternative to Cartesian rationalism, a method of historical inquiry based on collective learning and common sense, and thus, inadvertently, brought on its way the beginnings of a modern philosophy of history.

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[35]*Principles of Philosophy*, Author's Letter; French available at http://visualiseur.bnf.fr/Visualiseur?Destination=Gallica&O=NUMM-94260

[36]Ibid.

[37]On this and the following see Peter Burke, *Vico* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 10-31..

[38]*Theorie und Praxis* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1974), 49 (transl. T. H.).

[39]As cited in Burke, *Vico*, 2.

Giovanni Battista (Giambattista) Vico

As the sixth of eight children, Vico was born into the family of a poor book dealer. Like Descartes, he was first educated by Jesuits and eventually ended up with a law degree. However, he never seems to have been satisfied with what school and university had to offer. He drifted in and out of these institutions and mainly educated himself as an autodidact. Despite his enthusiasm for the new science and methodology, Vico also never lost sight of the classics. Next to Bacon and Grotius, he counted Plato and the Roman historian Tacitus among the authors he felt most indebted to.[40]

In 1697, he was appointed professor of rhetoric at the University of Naples. One of his tasks in this position was to deliver annual orations or lectures at the beginning of the academic year. The first of these to be published, in 1709, was On the Study Methods of Our Time (*De nostri temporis studiorum ratione*).[41] For our methodological discussion, this is Vico's most important work. It was entirely meant as a response to, and critique of, Descartes' rational methodology. Vico did not so much reject or deny the scientific validity of this method as he argued that it leaves out as much as it adds, by focussing only on what can be demonstrated with certainty, and by neglecting the entire realm of probability and historical experience.

The Study Methods are primarily concerned with education. "The greatest drawback of our educational methods (*incommodum nostrae studiorum rationis maximum*), Vico tells his academic audience, is the excessive study of natural science (*naturalibus doctrinis impensissime studeamus*) at the expense of ethics (*moralem non tanti facimus*). As a consequence, he exhorts, "a noble and important branch of studies, i.e., the science of politics, lies almost abandoned and untended" (*amplissima praestantissimaque de republica doctrina nobis deserta ferme et inculta iacet*).[42]

To be sure, he points out, the new scientists have "freed us from the burdensome task of speculating on nature" (t*anto negocio naturae ultra contemplandae liberarunt*).[43] But, and here he comes to his central methodological point, "it is impossible to assess human affairs by the inflexible standards of abstract right" (*non ex ista recta mentis regula, quae rigida est, hominum facta aestimari possunt*).[44]

The difference between abstract scientific knowledge and prudence in human affairs, Vico continues to explain, is this: while science aims at "reducing a large multitude of physical effects to a single cause" (*unam caussam, per quam plurima naturae effecta perducunt*), prudence operates by investigating "the greatest possible number of causes which may have

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[40]Biographical details are based on Burke, *Vico*, 10-31.

[41]*On the Study Methods of Our Time*; original Latin text can be found in *Opere di Giambattista Vico,* vol. 1.

[42]SM, VII.

[43]SM, IV.

[44]SM, VII.

produced a single event" (*unius facti quam plurimas caussas vestigant*) - and only then "conjecture" which of these may be the "true" one (*quae sit vera, coniiciant*).[45] Earlier, Vico had already revealed the classical source from which such prudence of investigation derives its inspiration: It is "the art of topics" (*topica*) which the new critical science had relegated to near oblivion.[46]

With an increasingly sharper tone of voice, Vico declares that it simply is an "error to apply to the prudent conduct of life the abstract criterion of reasoning" (*non recte... iudicandi rationem, qua utitur scientia, in prudentiae usum transferunt*). And then comes the programmatic sentence that encapsulates Vico's entire methodological endeavour:

> "Satisfied with abstract truth alone, and not being gifted with common sense, unused to following probability, those doctrinaires do not bother to find out whether their opinion is held by the generality and whether the things that are truths to them are also such to other people" (*Et cum sensum communem non excoluerint, nec verisimilia unquam secuti sint, uno vero contenti, quid porro de eo homines communiter sentiant, et an iis quoque vera videantur, nequicquam pendunt*).[47]

Here, in a nutshell, are all the themes that Vico will develop more fully in his later works: abstract reasoning and scientific demonstration cannot be applied to ethics and politics; the moderns neglect and therefore lack experience with the probabilities of human affairs; truth is a relative concept that means different things to different people. This is Vico's profit and loss account: To the extent that the new science derives rational explanations from exact demonstrations, it loses the capacity of the old science to provide rules for the prudent conduct of human affairs. Because these are the result of mere probabilities, they fall outside the range of scientific interest and inquiry.[48]

In his next published work, On the Most Ancient Wisdom of the Italians (*De antiquissima Italorum sapientia*, 1710),[49] Vico added a historical dimension to his critique of the new science. Truth not only may mean different things to different people. It also and most definitely means different things for different ages. In deliberate juxtaposition to the Cartesian *cogito, ergo sum*, Vico postulates that *verum esse ipsum factum*, that "what is true is the same as what is made."[50]

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[45]Ibid.

[46]SM, III.

[47]SM, VII; here, as elsewhere, there seems to be an evident discrepancy between the original Latin text and the English translation. Since it pertains to wording rather than meaning, I have left untouched the English translation since it will be used as a point of reference more likely.

[48]See Habermas, *Theorie und Praxis*, 52.

[49]*On the Most Ancient Wisdom of the Italians;* Latin original in *Opere*, vol.1.

[50]*Ancient Wisdom*, I. 1.

The historicity of Vico's central methodological maxim is not readily evident and will come to the fore fully only in his master opus, the New Science *(Scienza nuova*) of 1744.[51] But the argument goes like this: Contrary to the Cartesian quest for the universality of "clear and certain" knowledge through abstract reasoning, Vico claims that knowledge of any matter is only possible through the making and operation of that matter. Only God, therefore, possesses universal knowledge because he made the universe. Men can only have knowledge of the human history they made. This is even so in the case of geometry: We know that it is true, not because God implanted in us a universal capacity for abstract truth, but because we "made it."[52]

Abstract reasoning committed to the discovery of "one truth concerning any matter" will result in general rules of conduct and order that are independent of time and circumstance.[53] Reasoning derived from the process of making history will result in differentiation and plurality of what is true. In what he programmatically called *his* New Science, Vico set out to place knowledge into a human geometry of historical and sociological differentiation. The New Science is a baroque maze of thoughts and digressions, and it may well be, as has been remarked with a good degree of old world conceit, that it cannot be appreciated fully in its "deeper meaning" when it is merely used as a "quarry" of ideas, "as is particularly common in American Vico research."[54]

But a quarry it is, and no attempt will be made, within the narrow confines of this paper, to do justice to a work of which James Joyce once remarked that it made his imagination grow "as it doesn't when I read Freud or Jung."[55] However, on the basis of what we already know, it seems possible to distill from its 1411 paragraphs[56] a few that bring to the fore the core of Vico's methodological intent.

In sharp contrast to Descartes' abstract reason, Vico postulates that "human choice, by its nature most uncertain, is made certain and determined by the common sense of men with respect

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[51] *The New Science of Giambattista Vico* [NS]; Italian original in *Opere*, vol. 2. This was in fact Vico's second New Science, after a first version published in 1725. There are significant differences between the two but these are of limited relevance for the methodological discussion advanced here.

[52]See Gianturco, "Translator's Introduction," xlii.

[53]Compare Habermas, *Theorie und Praxis*, 49-50.

[54]Vittorio Hösle, "Einleitung," in Giovanni Battista Vico, *Prinzipien einer neuen Wissenschaft über die gemeinsame Natur der Völker*, vol. 1 (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1990), xxxiii; Hösle's *Einleitung* (Introduction) to the German critical edition of the New Science is nearly 300 pages long and hence about half as long as the text to be introduced.

[55]Quoted in Burke, *Vico*, 7.

[56]Like Descartes' Philosophical Principles, and with the same textbook ambition in mind, the New Science, while organized in books and chapters, is presented as a continuous chain of numbered paragraphs.

to human needs or utilities" (*L'umano arbitrio, di sua natura incertissimo, egli si accerta e determina col senso commune degli uomini d'intorno alle umane necessità o utilità*).[57] We remember that Vico had already introduced the idea of "common sense" in the Study Methods,[58] as a kind of collective prudence or wisdom that alone can help to decipher the probabilities in a plural world of human affairs. He now defines it as "judgment without reflection, shared by an entire class, and entire people, an entire nation, or the entire human race" (*Il senso comune è un giudizio senz'alcuna riflessione, comunemente sentito da tutto un ordine, da tutto un popolo, da tutta una nazione o da tutto il gener umano*).[59] And from here, he proceeds to formulate the essence of his understanding of the nexus between knowledge and history: "Theories must take their beginning from the times which bring forth the material of which they treat" (*Le dottrine debbono cominciare da quando cominciano le materie che trattano*).[60]

What is this material, and what is the meaning of judgment without reflection? Read superficially, it could mean that we should simply take as material the world we live in now, and that we should try to understand it without recourse to eternal or universal truths that are beyond our comprehension. But elsewhere, Vico argues against this kind of day-to-day pragmatism, by claiming for his New Science the same kind of general validity that is provided by geometry.[61]

This science, however, is not to be based on "the conceit of the nations, each believing itself to have been the first in the world" (*la boria delle nazioni, d'essere stata ogniuna la prima del mondo*).[62] That would mean giving way to unprincipled empiricism. Neither is it to be based on "the conceit of the scholars, who will have it that what they know must have been eminently understood from the beginning of the world" (*la boria de' dotti, i quali vogliono ciò ch'essi sanno essere stato eminentemente inteso fin dal principio del mondo*).[63] That would mean indulging in abstract generalization. Instead, and this is Vico's synthesis of old and new, it is to be based on the kind of principled historical reflection that can only spring from human comprehension of a world made by humans (*verum ipsum factum*):

> "But in the night of thick darkness enveloping the earliest antiquity, so remote from ourselves, there shines the eternal and never failing light of a truth beyond all question: that the world of civil society has certainly been made by men, and that its principles are therefore found within the modifications of our own human mind"(*Ma, in tal densa notte*

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[57]NS 141

[58]See above footnote 47.

[59]NS 142

[60]NS 314; I am deviating from the translation in *The New Science* (Cornell, 1984), here, because it is entirely unhelpful.

[61]NS 349

[62]NS 330

[63]Ibid.

di tenebre ond'è coverta la prima da noi lontanissima antichità, apparisce questo lume eterno, che non tramonta, di questa verità, la quale non si può a patto alcuno chiamar in dubbio: che questo mondo civile egli certamente è stato fatto dagli uomini, onde se possono, perché se ne debbono, ritruovare i principi dentro le modificazioni della nostra medesima mente umana.).[64]

This, if a heliocentric pun is allowed, is the light of knowledge around which Vico's world revolves. On its basis, Vico develops a theory of three historical ages, an age of the gods based on divine authority, a heroic age based on aristocratic superiority, and an age of men based on the recognition of natural equality.[65] More importantly, the *verum/factum* principle leads Vico to understand the dynamic of human development in both its practical-political and in its intellectual-reflective dimension, not as the discovery of abstract and timeless principles, but as dialectical and man-made friction between different levels of civic consciousness. In Rome, Vico's favourite object of historical learning, the plebeians became suspicious of the aristocrats' heroic pretensions and, when they began to understand themselves to be "of equal human nature with the nobles" (*d'ugual natura umana co' nobili*), class struggle, "the struggle of plebs with nobility" (*le plebi... gareggiassero con la nobilità*), led to the age of men as an age of "civil sovereignty" (*i popoli ad esser sovrani*).[66]

It does not matter that this is a fantastically foreshortened view of Roman history.[67] After all, a good deal of Descartes' scientific assumptions would have to be as much revised over time as would Vico's views of history. What matters is that the *verum/factum* principle "was turning Descartes on his head."[68] Where the Frenchman had argued that the truth of the matter lay in abstract mathematical principles, and the study of history therefore "was a waste of time,"[69] the Italian insisted that history, because it is man-made, provided a more certain access to knowledge, and precisely so because of its probabilities spread over time as well as a diversity of classes, peoples and nations.

Critical Evaluation

Both Descartes and Vico have their secure places in the pantheon of intellectual achievement. However, it is important to bear in mind the different implications that the methodological approach of each has for the history of political thought in particular, and for the understanding of politics more generally.

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[64]NS 331

[65]See the summary in NS 31.

[66]NS 1101

[67]Vico does continue that corruption led to civil war, and rescue had to come from monarchy which would keep people content; NS 1102-1105.

[68]Burke, *Vico*, 78.

[69]Ibid.

There is a direct path from Descartes' faith in abstract reasoning to the universalist claims inherent in the modern social contract tradition. Hobbes and Rousseau can take their cues directly from Descartes. If there is only "one truth concerning any matter," there must obviously be one and only one solution for political order. Man will be declared to be of one particular nature, "man's wolf, or "born free," and from this nature will spring one and only one construction of state and society. In fact, the power of reason dictates that each individual comes to the same conclusion by his or her own intellectual effort: to surrender his will to the collective security of the sovereign state, as in Hobbes' Leviathan, or to become part of the general will, as in Rousseau's Social Contract.[70]

Moreover, that solution will be purely technical, occasioned by systemic constraints alone, as a later age would put it, and void of all traditional adherence to historical experience or ethical responsibility. What matters alone, is the desired effect, security in the one case, or freedom in the other. There is an almost eery resemblance between Descartes' confident pronouncement of a truth that is "clear and certain," and, as first pre-formulated by a 1919 US Supreme Court decision, the conjecture of "a clear and present danger" that allows to curtail constitutional civil rights.[71]

The renunciation of tradition and reverence in the name of technical progress and mastery of nature as well as social order would ultimately lead to the opposite of what its advocates had hoped for. Instead of producing "gentleness and harmony," as Descartes had dreamed, the ultimate consequence of the age of reason would be Nietzsche's nihilist world of chaos in which nobody would any longer be committed to anything or anyone.

The other methodological path leads from Vico's historical common sense to that kind of sociological appreciation of diversity, across time and circumstance, that we commonly associate with the much more conservative political thought of Montesquieu or Tocqueville. But Vico's separation of the eternal truth of the universe from the historical probabilities of man-made human affairs: in other words, the separation of science from politics and ethics, would also be noticed by Karl Marx. Obviously attracted by Vico's understanding of history as a history of developmental stages and class struggle, Marx, in a rare direct reference to Vico, remarked that it was the weakness of the merely abstract materialism in the natural sciences that it "excluded history and its process."[72]

To lump together Montesquieu, Tocqueville and Marx may come as a surprise. What these thinkers share with Vico, however, is the conviction that the riddle of human affairs and politics cannot be governed or resolved by abstract principles of universal rationality. There is no abstract or best model of harmony in human affairs. Those who claim that such a model exists

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[70]To write "his or her" in the context of Descartes' philosophical endeavour is warranted because he obviously had no hesitation to count women among his disciples (see below); when it comes to the political construction of a social contract, on the other hand, the "his or her" still had to wait for quite some time.

[71]Schenck v. U.S., 249 U.S. 47 (1919).

[72]*Capital*, Volume II, part iv, chapter xv, 367, footnote.

usually only promote what is in their own interest. Politics, in other words, is the ongoing search for common sense among a plurality of human beings who gain their diverse understanding and consciousness from the material world which they produce. Marx, of course, would not leave it at that. He went on to postulate that communism would do away with differences of interest, and that, therefore the interests of each would become the common sense of all.

Vico criticised the new science of rationalism for its neglect of politics. By rejecting the critical discourse among different opinions as a basis of knowledge, Descartes had deprived the study of human affairs of its classical core, topical or problem-oriented reasoning for the purpose of finding common sense, or common ground. As we are entering the 21st century, and, therefore, a world characterized, at least more than before, by integration as well as fragmentation, we need to rethink what kind of guidance we still want to draw from the venerable classical canon of political thought. Do we want to continue to search for what constitutes the core of the Enlightenment project which Sheldon Wolin has called a project of "supplying legitimacy to totality?"[73] Or do we need to rethink political thought as a different kind of project that no longer aims at finding a universal political 'fix' for whatever ails humanity?

Already in 1960, Wolin had pinpointed, in the political philosophy of Plato, the dialectical tension between the philosophical yearning for "political fixity"[74] and the empirical acknowledgment of the "random movements"[75] in real politics. Still forty years later, in his newly added chapter on Rawlsian liberalism, Wolin noted that it struck him as outright "quixotic" to assume that there could be one political culture based on universally shared "basic values" in an age of "multiculturalism, ethnic diversity, and porous borders."[76] And he ended his book with the observation that the "central challenge at this moment is not about reconciliation but about dissonance, not about democracy's supplying legitimacy to totality but about nurturing a discordant democracy."[77]

Ideas and concepts about discordant democracy, diversity and plurality, we find in Althusius, Montesquieu and Tocqueville rather than in Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau, and thus in the political thought of social philosophers usually categorized as conservative. There is a simple historical explanation for that, of course. Ever since the French Revolution, the politics of difference has been associated with feudalism and the political right, whereas it has been the centralized universalism of the Jacobin state that stood for progress, emancipation, and the political left. However, to conclude from this that pluralization, differentiation and decentralization inevitably are conservative strategies is a circular fallacy. First, the left entirely abandons such strategies to the forces of conservatism, and then it defines them as conservative

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[73]Sheldon S. Wolin, *Politics and Vision* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 605.

[74]Ibid., 46.

[75]Ibid., 39.

[76]Ibid., 550.

[77]Ibid., 605-6.

strategies.

The reactionaries today are those who stubbornly cling to outmoded 19th century models of state and nation. Almost everywhere, these models are being challenged in a new world characterized by overlapping legal domains, de-bordered authority, pluralized societal contexts, and competing normative visions. To the extent that the left has neglected and ignored the tradition of pluralization and differentiation, in the history of political thought as much as in real politics, I suggest that progressive and radical democrats have to reoccupy the ground they abandoned.