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Political History. An Overview or the Tortuous Path of Political History

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Paolo Pombeni

Political History An Overview or the Tortuous Path of Political History

Abstract

Charged by Braudel and the Annales school with being too evenementiel, in order to renew itself political history had to face the methodological issue of «explanation». The key terrain for this revival came to be the understanding of the rise of the great dictatorships of the 20th century. This new investigation of the mechanisms of «the public arena» owed much to the doctrines of Max Weber (including the building of idealtypes), as well as to the endeavor of conceptual history, which blended the political with the intellectual and social – a trait that was to become typical of the new political history. This approach proved especially productive in the field of constitutional history, of the history of political systems and political parties. This tortuous path is also at the core of the adventure of «Ricerche di Storia Politica» since its birth, thirty years ago.

Keywords: Political History, Annales School, Conceptual History, Constitutional History, Party.

The rebirth of political history ought to date from the dire *fatwa* that Fernand Braudel pronounced against it as being the «history of kings and battles», whereas the social history that he propounded was alleged to possess a «systemic» power of interpretation unknown to those who dabbled in political affairs. The object par excellence of his invective was the historian Charles Seignobos (1854-1942) who actually little deserved to become the laughing-stock of critics who had not read his works nor were familiar with his life achievement: he had studied in Germany and was steeped in the comparative method with a feeling for the broad appraisal of political systems and issues of methodology.

Curiously Braudel and companions missed a tradition of French historiography which had had a pronounced impact on the study of political affairs. The key name there was Elie Halévy whose history of Great Britain from 1815 to the dawn of the 20th century is rich in stimulating *aperçues* and methodologically separate from the area of opprobrium which we have mentioned¹. This was a brand of history from which it was hard to follow suit after Ranke's alleged revolution giving pride of place to reconstruction «wie es eigentlich gewesen ist» (as it really

¹ On E. Halévy, P. Pombeni, *Dal modello inglese all'eccezionalismo inglese: Elie Halévy e la scienza politica del Novecento*, in P. Pombeni, *La ragione e la passione. Le forme della politica nell'Europa contemporanea*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2010, pp. 213-260.

was) whereby digging into the archives became the watchword of scholastic orthodoxy, ousting conceptual analysis and interpretive elaboration. It is odd that Braudel and the *Annales* school should have heralded in their turn the relation between historiography and «social science» whilst keeping political science on the fringe of the latter. As Braudel commented, admittedly in praise of a work by Raymond Aron, political science was an unconvincing tool for any revival of political history².

1. Historiography between interpretation and reconstruction

The issue of «interpreting» which was inevitably equated, though at times opposed, to «reconstructing» tied up with an important issue which the *Annales* school made central to its work of historiographical analysis: namely the «longue durée». For such an approach political history was bound to be too *evenementiel* to enjoy the status of social history with its attention to structures evolving and only understandable over a span of centuries. With the hindsight of decades, this issue, too, causes us some perplexity today.

For one problem that had not been fully perceived was the question of historical periods as an object of political history. In terms of the parallel with social history – then in the ascendant – one must recall that political history largely concentrated on the centuries from the late Middle Ages to the 18th century. It was a phase in which no doubt³ political history of the time was still chronicling something resembling the Braudelian stereotype of kings and battles. Where political history grew innovative in its research was in the period from the 18th century revolutions down to the great dictatorships of the 20th century. One should look at that area of output to discover how what was later labelled «new political history» struggled to gain a footing.

Once again the problem lay in reconciling the claims of history: should it reconstruct or interpret? In analysing the last two centuries interpretation had perforce to draw on reconstruction by logical deduction though it was a hazardous business to claim that the «facts» were value-judgment free, whereas in social history *à la française* one could believe that the sets of data extracted from archives amassed without prior interpretive motive might express the kind of evolutionary connection on which alone one might base a «scientific» interpretation. It has not of course escaped us that returning to political history also entailed facing the issue of «explanation» bordering on «justification». For in that field the rival claims legitimizing and delegitimizing any interpretive universe were rendered especially strident by the intellectual context which was one of painful reckoning with the rise of the great 20th century dictatorships and the problem of rebuilding democratic constitutionalism as the sheet-anchor of the new era unfolding at the end of World War II.

² Cf. *Pour ou contre une politicologie scientifique*, in «Annales E.S.C.», 88 (1967), pp. 119-132; 475-499.

³ I speak with caution as my grasp of this point is less than adequate.

Hardly surprisingly, the key terrain for a revival of political history came to be post-Nazi Germany. *Neue Sozialgeschichte*⁴ must go down as a key transition in the evolving new approach to studying the development of politics using the historian's methods. One of its undoubted merits was that it revived the teachings of Max Weber – the great observer/interpreter of crisis in the West across the turn of the 19th century. To Weber we owe the doctrine that *verstehen* (understanding) outweighs simple reconstruction. That is what turned political history into a «science» (*scientia est scire per causas*, as the ancients put it). To Weber, too, we owe the methodology of investigation by «idealtypes» which enables phenomena to be placed in a broad-ranging context, and individual case histories to take on value and significance «speaking» to mankind beyond the scholastic confines of the various academies.

2. The turning point: between constitutional and conceptual history

Among postwar German historians this kind of approach quickly caught on: one thinks of Reinhardt Koselleck's famous *Kritik und Krise. Eine Beitrag zur Pathogenese der bürgerlichen Welt* (*Critique and Crisis. A Contribution to the Pathogenesis of the Bourgeois World*), published in 1959 but dating from his degree dissertation in 1954. That was indeed broad-ranging history, blending the political with the intellectual and social – a trait that was to become typical of the new approach to political history when it left the narrow intellectual confines dominated by the fashion set by the *Annales* school⁵. The new approach was marked not just by rediscovery of Weber but, shortly afterwards, by reappraisal of the «constitutional history» tradition (*Verfassungsgeschichte*) and the names of Otto Hintze and Otto Brunner⁶.

Be it noted straight away that neither of these authors were specialists in 19th or 20th century history, but scholars engaged in analysing long-term political structures ranging from the Middle Ages to the 18th century. They could not be dubbed, either, as chroniclers of kings and battles: their analysis rested on the structures society set up for itself in its political-administrative level, its social level and its cultural level. The bedrock that brought these factors together and made them interdependent was called the «constitution». Playing on the two different terms for this in German, they could claim that while the *Konstitution* was the outcome of the late 17th to 19th century movement that formalised the structures that held a politically-based society together (usually achieving a formal Charter as it did so), any society always had (and

⁴ This was the brand of history that sprang up around Bielefeld University in the mid-Sixties under the leadership of Jürgen Kocka and Hans Ulrich Wehler. It had no axe to grind with political history. Cf. G. Eley, *A Crooked Line: From Cultural History to the History of Society*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2005; T. Welskopp, B. Hitzer (eds.), *Die Bielefelder Sozialgeschichte. Klassische Texte zu einem geschichtswissenschaftlichen Programm und seinen Kontroversen*, transcript, Bielefeld, 2011.

⁵ I use *fashion* advisedly since, apart from a certain methodological (and verbal) extremism typical of the school, French social history made an interesting contribution which should not be underestimated.

⁶ In circulating the thinking of these two authors, a lot was owed to Piero Schiera with his *Otto Hintze*, Napoli, Guida, 1974, and his editorship of O. Brunner, *Per una nuova storia costituzionale e sociale*, Milano, Vita e Pensiero, 1970.

always would have) a constitutional web (*Verfassung*), even if this was not formalised according to the classic canons of juridical constitutionalism.

This was an important revolution as it paved the way for historical research investigating the mechanisms – formation, consolidation, decline – of that connecting network we may call «the public arena» (not to jump the gun with later terminology, such as nation, State, people or what have you). Here one needed to bear in mind that the public arena was a constant workshop forging various forms of creativity: first and foremost linguistic, since consensus demanded the vehicle of speech, that ductile mechanism that conveyed not just ideas, but feelings and badges of identity. In due course (1972), as might be expected, a major work appeared, the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe: Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, edited by Reinhard Koselleck, Otto Brunner and Werner Conze.

Nowadays we take that «conceptual history» fairly much for granted, but at the time it marked a turning point, the import of which seems to me clear in retrospect. Its full significance, however, only emerges in connection with the resumption of constitutional history. The rediscovery of the manipulative power – manipulative in a benign sense – that concepts acquire can only fully be grasped in the framework of the public sphere and its dynamics: how it forms and how it is governed. The public sphere is based both on *how* it is interpreted and on the actions of the individual and social members it includes, inspired by that interpretation (which, in the process, is still further manipulated, be it noted).

In the melting-pot of these and similar ideas it became more and more necessary to extend the traditional concept of «constitution» to a much broader field: the «political system». To get this term or concept accepted as a tool of historical analysis was far from simple: it was burdened by having been used by one branch of political science that saw it as a system of relations and interactions confined to one specific phase of the political area under consideration; above all it tended to turn whatever it discovered in any specific instance into «laws». There were some political scientists, on the one hand, who were all for generalising the findings from analysis of individual case studies which they then compared with their generalizations and established in a hierarchy of closeness/remoteness from the model they had derived. On the other hand, historians clung to the principle of the uniqueness of human cases: they might be placed in general categories, but we should not forget that they only made sense when constantly rescaled and redefined against the concrete development of events.

This gave rise to a controversy that has still not been fully resolved. Could history be written by putting together research on structural phenomena instead of on separate events, and giving the phenomena a setting by a comparative approach?

3. In search of a key to reconstruct and interpret the history of modern politics

For anyone tackling the precise issue of the nature of 19th and 20th century western constitutionalism the most important phenomenon was the political party, or rather the «form» that that permanent feature of politics had taken on, namely the way groups participated

in the competition for power, or containment of power, by forming into «sides» competing within the public arena.

I can only present a rough outline of the subject here. The basis of «modern» constitutionalism lay in building a system of political legitimization combining recognition of an ideal sovereign entity at its basis (the people, the nation, the law) with inalienable mechanisms making that sovereignty visible – i.e. «representing» it. But that raised two problems: how to «educate» the forces jockeying in the public arena so as to keep them within the new framework of association; and, on the other hand, how to «include» the various individuals and social groups in the representation system so that, by participating in it, they might identify with that shared «community of destinies» which Weber famously described as the most appropriate way to define the core of modern States which claim total participation by their members.

The means by which this goal was achieved was the modern political party: «modern» to distinguish it from previous self-styled parties which were simply temporary organisations for the mutual support of their members in the struggle for power. The new-style parties in the framework of representation-based constitutionalism were a hitherto unknown «institutional» entity. They claimed a basis that was independent of their own members' will and existing without it; they purported to act with their own distinct personality regardless of those who happened to give them a public face. The parties, in short, posed and behaved as entities endowed with sovereignty, like states. Their members belonged, in theory, because they were morally obliged to do so (for reasons of class, religion or ideology); their group will was determined by participation in systems of collective confrontation («government by discussion»). The party had power to approve or promote behaviour (ultimately joining the ranks of churches and sects which were the clearest social point at which an institution had power of inclusion or exclusion: excommunication and vetting by orthodoxy).

The choice of the «party-form» as the key to understanding the modern constitutional revolution is obviously open to discussion, but one can hardly deny that over the 19th and 20th centuries it was the tool that managed the world of constitutionalism. It was the parties that provided the citizen with a political education; it was their participation in the sphere of government by discussion (in parliament, though not only) that provided a generalized form of inclusion and integration (at times, no doubt, a «negative integration»); they it was that emerged as the new phenomenon to be reckoned with in all political systems based on western constitutionalism.

This was so, regardless of how widely that model applied in practice. To take the two classic extremes, the British and the German 19th and 20th century versions, one sees quite plainly that the party phenomenon was deep-rooted in both, despite different peculiarities of expression. The same goes for all the countries of Europe and the USA as well – which is not to claim there was any standard form or that one can detect a hierarchy of merit. That classification was attempted by some contemporary political observers when the phenomenon first appeared (and even afterwards), but it lacked any scientific foundation.

Political history had to battle to free itself of naïve comparisons of the kind mentioned. It was not so much a question of finding the perfect standard by which a political organization could be rated a «modern party», but (to use Toynbee's yardstick for assessing

mechanisms of history in evolution) of what «challenge and response» features were typically found in a given political organization. Where some such were found, one might apply the label. So, if an organization found institutional form as an entity independent of the will of its members; if it sought to manage and discipline a section of those taking part in the representative constitutional system; if it claimed an independent personality expressing the goals that political action should strive for⁷, then one might justly talk of its being a «modern party». Or, to be precise, to talk in such terms one also needed to detect the existence of a «party system», since constitutionalism postulated mechanisms of competition managing and disciplining the host of social elements comprising the public arena (the State).

Along these lines of reasoning political history (wittingly or otherwise) had to reckon with Weber's proposed basic tool for addressing the «sciences of the spirit»: namely the *idealtipe*. This is not the place to go into that tool of analysis, except to say that without some yardstick for measuring and assessing, one cannot prevent the cramping of historical investigation into reconstruction of individual cases; but the fruits of such minute toil, outside the narrow boundaries of an academic discipline, are nugatory; or else they can be used by anybody, assigning sense and meaning according to their own convictions and criteria, without any strict connection with historiographic method.

En passant, it ought to be said that this led to historiography being expelled from the field of interpretive and explanatory science – and, I fear, from science altogether, since a science that fails to understand and explain serves no purpose.

What gave a boost to the new political history was its attention to the issues of the party-form, with the realization that this could only exist to any appreciable extent if it formed part of a party system, itself contained within a constitutional system giving it room for action and a web of meanings via which to seek legitimacy and build its consensus as an institution. No doubt there were many peculiar «takes» on that realization within European historiography⁸, but I see it as significant that it hinged on the presence of parties as the bearing structure. In the same context there came a revival of, and new prospects for, the field of traditional biography of outstanding political figures; there was renewed attention to electoral dynamics as these emerged over the various historical epochs; a return to analysis of ideologies now rightly unshackled from the history of political doctrines; there were developments in cultural history opening up the study of language and its role (it would come to be called the *linguistic turn*, extra to conceptual history), not to mention gender history and experiments in oral history. But all this I see as a many-sided enrichment of a dimension of political history which it was now impossible to dismiss as the chronicle of kings and battles.

⁷ I have only listed a certain number of its features, of course. To go deeper into what distinguished the modern party-form would demand more space than is available. See P. Pombeni, *La ragione e la passione*, cit.

⁸ I abstain from dealing with American historiography: first, because I lack the knowledge to do it justice; second, because the political party issue followed a different course in the USA where, from the early 20th century on, the European party model declined and nearly disappeared: I mean the stable participatory militant form within institutional limits, geared to selecting its party cadres from in-house training.

4. The tortuous path of political history

I have to admit that all this did follow a certain trend in cultivated opinion, an interest in political life. It was partly appreciation for, and the desire to reappraise, the creative commitment to building and managing the public sphere. It also stemmed from a certain disappointment with the results, if not the potential, of the medium employed. Political history followed a tortuous path, swinging from the ambition to gain status as a general interpreter of trends in constitutionalism as it reeled before the changing paradigms of the late 20th century, to the temptation to get swallowed up in the controversial issues firing the interest of the broader public, or reputed to do so as history issues hit the media.

This last phenomenon was particularly prominent in Italy where historians have had a high media profile, not always commensurate with their professional credentials, be it said. It must be admitted that this has had many unfortunate results: it has impoverished historical debate onto fairly parochial issues like the centrality of fascism/antifascism (as though that were the heart of political modernity); it has subordinated interpretation of our political history to the «court» reasons⁹ for the historical ideologies underpinning our various party divisions; from a certain stage onwards it led research to concentrate on the second half of the 20th century (after undue attention to the fascist decades), ignoring the long-term features that link the 20th to the 19th century. Fortunately, however, the harm done by such distortion has been offset by a lively determination to remember that Italian history makes little sense if not seen in the broader setting of European history.

The picture I have tried to sketch has underlain the adventure of our Review. «Ricerche di Storia Politica» sprang from a climate of thought as I have tried to describe it; in growing it has sought to keep within the flow of thought generated by European historiography in the thirty-year span of our experience as «manufacturers» of a container – as the title suggests – for the research we have been engaged in.

We have always rejected any attempt to reduce us to a «school», if that term means a place where one yardstick of interpretation dominates and must be kowtowed to, whatever the quality of the actual research being done. Were the term not over-used, we would prefer to be seen as a «workshop», a place where materials are assembled and constructed, and one learns by mutual observation of everyone's labours. What must be repeated is that building requires knowledge of the issues one is responding to in doing so; there must also be the firm conviction that historiography, like any science, calls for *thought*.

I am well aware that these may not be popular convictions, partly because history as «narration» has an inevitable fascination (if only because we delude ourselves it will be easier for the broader public to digest), and partly because so-called social and political science

⁹ The definition of the traditional history of political parties as «court history» comes from my master Roberto Ruffilli, who was drawing a parallel between historiography inspired by the great dynasties – and of course devoted to celebrating them – and the historiography of a political party when written, as so often, by a militant member and inspired by the aim of legitimizing the origins and doings of that party in line with his ideology.

(now in the doldrums) are wrongly persuaded they can preserve scientific status by snubbing their poorer relation, historiography. But when appropriately conducted, this last proves the better «interpretive science», and as such is a rival.

This then, little as it is, represents the history of «Ricerche di Storia Politica» in the first thirty years of its life. What is to come is not so much in the lap of the gods (as the ancients used to say), but on the shoulders of the younger generation who, if they think fit, will proceed down this path in a climate which, to my mind, is neither plain sailing nor free from risk.

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