

New Approaches to the History of Political Thought: Mirrors for Princes Reconsidered

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The history of political thought is often conceived as a genealogy of modern political concepts, debates, and institutions. This quest for origins is to a large extent defined by that which separates the past from the present; a teleological approach that is contingent upon an implicit notion of progress ushering in the modern world, a world which is, or ought to be, more democratic, just and egalitarian than the orders which it has supplanted.

This approach, however, neglects a substantial portion of medieval and early modern political writing, one subset of which is the genre commonly known as “mirrors for princes” or “advice for rulers.” Reconsidering this literature could address important questions in the field of political thought through engagement with non-western traditions, as well as those European strands of thought that have not been recognized by modern historians as necessarily influential in shaping modern European political thought. How do we write the history of political thought when the end-product of that process itself is not seen to promote liberal values, such as is the case with the Islamic world, or China, today? What happens to the “context” of texts if their message does not win out – should the texts then be considered void of influence, or are the reverberations of that debate still with us today? Is it possible to read texts for context if the values adumbrated in texts do not take hold in society, or to study those that produce political communities that are radically different from the ones that emerged in Europe in the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries? Who authors traditions of political thought, historians or participants in the debates? Reduced to floating ideas never anchored in historical change, how can non-western, or non-liberal political thought be studied historically, and, how can it be conceptualized?

To address these and related questions, papers presented at this conference will conduct a close reading of some fundamental aspects of the mirrors for princes genre in the medieval and early modern periods, as well as address connections (or discontinuities) with recent methodological innovations in the historical study of political thought. In order for a close reading of the past to have analytical purchase on the present, at least some of the presentations will take into account broad perspectives on the trajectories of political thought in a comparative context. They will acknowledge and address the enormous political stakes implicit in the historical narration of the development of ideas about power in different intellectual traditions.

These are some of the central questions with which this conference is concerned:

- Is the study of the history of political thought in a non-European context possible?
- How can comparative studies modify our reading of medieval and early modern political texts?
- How can the widespread appeal and perennial popularity of social texts be explained, in spite of the fact that they appear to fail to offer a narrative of change, and, as a direct consequence, fail to offer a critique of present circumstances?
- How can gradual shifts in taxonomy, narrative form, and the lexicon of political thought be traced if a dialogical relationship between religious and political writing cannot be brought

- to the fore, as in the case of the authorless structure of authority in Islam?
- How do historical texts reflect changing material and social circumstances, or in other words, how can the political be reinserted in our modern understanding of political thought in the past?

Please send abstracts of no more than 300 words to Regula Forster (forster@zedat.fu-berlin.de) and Neguin Yavari (yavarin@newschool.edu) by 29 August 2011.

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