

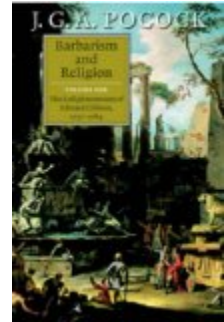
# H-Net Reviews

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## The Rise and Triumph of the History of Ideas

Future students of historical methodology in the English-speaking world will give a prominent place to a related set of innovations in the history of ideas (meaning initially the history of political thought) of which John Pocock has been a pioneer throughout his career. Indeed it would not oversimplify to trace, in Namierite fashion, two lines of descent: one from Herbert Butterfield to Pocock and his students and associates; the other from Peter Laslett to his pupils and associates, including John Dunn, Quentin Skinner and Richard Tuck. Between these schools there has been both agreement and difference. But their net effect, since Laslett's edition of Filmer (1949) and Pocock's monograph *The Ancient Constitution and the Feudal Law* (1957) has been to make former conventions in the history of ideas seem either (as with George Sabine or John Plamenatz) anachronistic or (as with Leo Strauss) decidedly odd. Indeed the net effect has been so to raise standards of conceptual and evidential rigour in this field as to make other traditions seem merely subservient to some recent polemical social purpose.

Pocock's own writings since 1957 have importantly evolved: in no sense has he urged a single model over the decades. His writings on method, collected in *Politics, Language and Time* (1971) are especially associated with the idea that the task of the history of political thought

is to trace the discourses, the political languages, which unified intellectual exchange into idioms with common styles, assumptions, preoccupations and results. *The Ancient Constitution and the Feudal Law* had illuminated one such discourse, that of common law thinking, and showed its close relationship to historical writing in the later seventeenth century. Pocock was, secondly, associated with the recovery of the language of civic humanism, especially in his monograph *The Machiavellian Moment* (1975) and his definitive edition of *The Political Works of James Harrington* (1977). From his *Virtue, Commerce and History* (1985), Pocock's enquiries have steadily explored more and more of the discourses available in the English-speaking world of the eighteenth century, a diversification captured in *The Varieties of British Political Thought 1500-1800*, a collection he edited with Gordon Schochet and Lois B. Schwoerer in 1994.

Pocock's discourses have, to some degree, come to occupy a space left vacant by the decentring of Locke in the 1960s and 70s. This in itself was partly a consequence of Laslett's work: intending initially to celebrate Locke as a founding father of liberalism, the effect of his profoundly important edition of the *Two Treatises* (1960) was to replace Locke in a context very close to that outlined by Pocock in *The Ancient Constitution and the Feudal Law*. This decentring was a process that Pocock, in the 1970s

and 80s, urged forward with zeal.

If the eighteenth century mind could no longer be described as *Locke et praeterea nihil*, a great many other figures present themselves as points of access to the discourses of the age. In this magisterial study, the first two volumes of a larger work, Pocock has been drawn to Edward Gibbon, the author who best embodies in the late eighteenth century the intellectual preoccupations first surveyed by Pocock in his monograph of 1957, and many other preoccupations besides.

This work offers Gibbon in the context of languages of discourse concerning historical writing, religion, scholarship and politics. It situates him, in other words, in 'a series of contexts in the history of eighteenth-century Europe', challenging the idea that there was only one Enlightenment to which to relate Gibbon. The contexts offered by volume one are chiefly biographical and geographical: Putney, Oxford, Hampshire, Paris, Lausanne, Rome; they take us to the alleged moment of the conception of *The Decline and Fall* on 15 October 1764. The second volume offers a series of intellectual contexts in the historiography of the Enlightenment in the form of studies of historians and others who influenced Gibbon: Giannone, Voltaire, Hume, Robertson, Ferguson and Adam Smith.

Gibbon is being located, then, in an intellectual landscape rather different from that which preoccupied Pocock in the 1960s and 70s. The concept of an ancient constitution is not prominent. James Harrington features only infrequently in these volumes, and civic humanism lacks an entry in their indexes ('The rise of a high-minded civic humanism was part of the story, but not the whole of it': II, p. 204); rather, Gibbon's family was implicated in Jacobitism, and dynastic politics are taken seriously here (indeed one of the tasks of pastor Pavillard at Lausanne was 'to wean Gibbon from his persisting Jacobitism' (I, p. 72n). The interconnections of dynastic politics are also rightly appreciated: discontent with the Revolution Settlement 'took not only a dynastic but an ecclesiological and theological form' (I, p. 19). *The Machiavellian Moment* identified a language of civic virtue and the anxieties expressed about its declension, latterly in the face of advancing commercial society; although such issues are important in the second of these volumes, what set the main intellectual contexts for the young Gibbon, explored in the first volume, were 'barbarism' and 'religion'. Indeed the social project of *The Spectator* is now identified as precisely to secure a victory over those two things (I, p.107): in Pocock's pages barbarism and reli-

gion now bulk large, and civic virtue is a moderate and belated response –sometimes as fragile a response as Gibbon's militia service.

Pocock proposes an intellectual context set by issues of theology, ecclesiology and an historiography which often concerned itself with Biblical history and the history of the early Church (Gibbon, indeed, appears as 'an ecclesiastical historian', inhabiting 'a world where Enlightenment was a product of religious debate and not merely a rebellion against it': I, p. 5). It is this salience of religious debate which, writes Pocock, entitles England to claim to have had an Enlightenment; not *the* Enlightenment, nor a prototypical Enlightenment, but its own variant, the similarities established first by the survival and intellectual force of the Church of England and second by the need for English intellectuals to challenge and rebut the theology and ecclesiology of that church. Franco Venturi's argument that Gibbon was a member of an European Enlightenment which had no counterpart in England is gently dismissed (I, pp. 6, 292-308): Venturi was using a French model as if that were the only appropriate one.

Volume one shows, from Gibbon's earliest English and Swiss settings, "a number of ways in which he had occasion to be Enlightened"; in particular, 'scholarship, we may say, was his Enlightenment' (I, pp. 8,10). Pocock finds the immediate historiographic antecedents of the attention to Byzantine history of *The Decline and Fall* in the young Gibbon's chance reading (William Howel, Echard) in the library at Stourhead in 1751; and he finds in the young historian's erudition 'a strong clerical component'. Gibbon's disparaging remarks on his university may be 'a juvenile disappointment at finding the high-church and non-juror clerical learning, which had been the glory of Oxford, in abeyance and no longer expected of him' (I, p. 43).

Failing such enlistment, Gibbon was drawn into the debate on miracles launched by Cambridge's Conyers Middleton in 1749 and joined the Catholic church in reaction against English scepticism; this choice is presented as 'an expression of the Anglican predicament', caught since the sixteenth century in the tension between the claims of Rome and Geneva (I, p. 24). His father's reaction in sending him to Lausanne pitched Gibbon into a philosophical culture far more diverse than his family could have foreseen, notably the European Calvinist culture that Pocock interprets as another variant of the Enlightenment. Pocock creates a richly drawn context in the theological writings of late seventeenth-century

members of the French Protestant diaspora (Bayle, Basnage, Le Clerc, Jurieu), although admitting that 'How far the young Gibbon at Lausanne was reading histories of this kind cannot be determined' (I, p. 66). It seems more likely that at that time the more influential items on his reading list were Crousaz's logic and Locke's epistemology, the second an implicit undermining of the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation (I, p. 75). Having reconstructed a variety of plausibly relevant contexts, Pocock is candid about the difficulty of bringing this rich scholarly culture to bear in explaining exactly how the project of the *Decline and Fall* was formulated (I, pp.275-308; II, pp. 397-402): 'As Gibbon's history moved outwards it became also a multi-faceted history of barbarism; and it is hard to find even the germ of this on 15 October, 1764', or even to explain the work's development towards being an ecclesiastical history (I, p. 288;II, pp. 378-9, 382).

In volume two we are introduced to a world of Enlightened historians, beginning with Giannone, who explored on a large narrative canvas the ways in which an ancient world of virtue and civil law had given way to ecclesiastical dominance, which in turn was being recast by commercial society. What engaged Gibbon in his encounters with the historians was his confidence that they had indeed outlined a defensible account of the rise and fall of feudalism. As Momigliano suggested, Gibbon combined the insights of the *erudits* with those of the *philosophes*, and added the discipline of narrative. As Pocock shows, 'The marriage was not made in heaven', for Gibbon's art emerged in a complex conjuncture of contexts which generated, for him, 'a narrative ...of systemic change' (II, p. 5).

One of those changes was prompted by a reflection on the civil role of religion which Pocock traces to Giannone (II, p. 69); another by the assimilation of an historiography focused on manners, something pioneered by Voltaire. Voltaire, too, prefigured the sixteenth chapter of *The Decline and Fall* in his account of the early Church as 'a concealed republic within the empire' and wrote that 'Two scourges at length destroyed this great colossus [the Roman empire]: barbarians and religious dispute' (II, pp. 94, 122). Hume features as an investigator of 'the historical conditions which underlie modern commercial society and its government', drawn backwards in time from the Stuarts to Julius Caesar to explain the historical preconditions of the Hanoverian regime (II, pp. 197, 200).

Robertson appears as a member of the 'Moderate' party, understood as a late import of the English Arminian Enlightenment, an historian preoccupied with

the question how Scotland might become a polite and cultivated commercial society, such as the Union with England was intended to make it'. The answers had to do with martial virtue (the militia) and manners (the repression of 'enthusiasm') (II, pp. 268,270). Robertson's *Charles V*, a history of the European state system in which Scotland hardly featured, was nevertheless 'a history needed for the understanding of Scottish history' (II, p. 275).

Adam Smith is dealt with as the archetypal author in an emergent 'species of "natural" or "conjectural" history of civil society in general', written by men like Smith, Ferguson and Millar who did not call themselves historians but produced accounts of 'morality, sociability and ...history as systems intelligible in themselves' and in which the divine did not feature: Gibbon 'was to proceed in this way when writing the history of the Christian church' (II, pp. 310-11, 312-14). Ferguson himself appears as a justification for Gibbon's regarding the prehistories of Greek and Roman society as 'founded in barbarism, but never in savagery' (II, p. 355).

So persuasive is this contextualisation in historiography, law and religion that it is puzzling to understand how the history of ideas as practised in recent decades came to be associated so exclusively with an artificial (and perhaps narrow) genre termed the history of political thought. Pocock's masterpiece is thus a summing up, and perhaps also a fresh departure.

This is clearly a magisterial study by a supreme practitioner of the art. Yet it is difficult fully to assess partly because, although it is the first instalment of a work which will presumably take us through the *Decline and Fall* itself to the end of Gibbon's career, no plan of this second part is provided. How will Pocock engage, for example, with David Womersley's essentially text-centred account of Gibbon's great work? To what extent do the contexts which Pocock has here reconstructed with such fine scholarship further our understanding of what Gibbon wrote, or how far are they free-standing studies in their own right? If the theological and scholarly contexts of Gibbon's historical art were as powerfully formative as Pocock might be understood to imply, has most of what needs to be said been said in the first two volumes, or are there important revelations in their successors?

Pocock intends his work to show that 'there is far more to the *Decline and Fall* than the tensions between virtue and commerce, ancient and modern, or even, in a sense, than *Decline and Fall* itself'; that Gibbon did not fully anticipate where his work would lead him when he

published its first volume in 1776 (I, pp. 2-3); but what is to follow? Given that Gibbon in 1751 read Howel's *General History* and the continuation of Echard's *Roman History*, which carried the story to the fall of Constantinople in 1453, why did Gibbon himself much later take the same dates and end as an historian of Byzantium, an empire with a history that hardly exemplified stadial transitions from feudalism to commerce, rather than of the medieval West? If Gibbon is legitimately entitled to rank as an exemplar of an Enlightenment, what will be the significance of his alignment against both American and French revolutions?

All these issues, and more, excite our curiosity. Books published in sections sometimes try the patience of the reader, but in this case one's appetite for what is to come is heightened. As was, indeed, the case with *The Decline and Fall* itself in its three instalments. Pocock, himself the *philosophe* and *erudit* combined, has found his subject.

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