

Workshop “Expanding the Canon: Political ideas from Non-professional Thinkers”

18 April 2023, Sciences Po (CEVIPOF), 9.00-17.30

1 place St-Thomas d’Aquin, Paris 7e, Room B 108

Zoom: <https://sciencespo.zoom.us/j/94678077897>

Argument

Since their emergence as disciplines, whether in departments of history, political science or philosophy, political theory and the history of political thought have traditionally focused on the great authors. Their texts are sometimes described as the "canon" of political thought (Stuurman 2000), a term that indicates what this approach owes to theology. What has sometimes been called the "new" history of ideas (Skornicki and Tournadre-Plancq 2015; Bonin and Dupuis-Déri 2019), inspired by the Cambridge school of the history of ideas, Begriffsgeschichte, gender and postcolonial studies, the Marxist or Bourdieusian social history of ideas, or by comparative/global political theory, has considerably broadened the scope of relevant texts. It is not uncommon for political theorists and historians of ideas to focus on lesser-known authors and controversies than on the individual works of a handful of great thinkers.

Yet the history of political thought often remains overwhelmingly focused on works attributable to individual authors. While this is indeed how many intellectual works are conceived, written, published, and disseminated, it leaves out a considerable amount of writing that is anonymous or impossible to attribute to a single identifiable author or group of authors. More importantly, we still lack methodological and epistemological discussions about how to adapt our ways of doing political theory and studying the history of political thought to the age of the masses and the transformations of the public sphere that characterise it (Habermas 2015). Indeed, since the end of the 18th century, there has been a tremendous increase in literacy, and thus in potential readers and writings, technical transformations that have enabled the emergence of mass media, and since World War II a global boom in the number of people with access to higher education. It has radically increased the number of people participating in debates, changed their forms and their privileged places - and yet it is still unclear how we, theorists and historians of political thought, should adapt our methods.

In this workshop, we would like to address these issues, through discussions along a few interrelated lines.

1° The mass media era has opened up new venues for political theorists, as well as opportunities for outsiders to gain attention and strength. We could therefore study the strategies they used to make political thought visible. The development of higher education has also created new opportunities for intellectuals in the academic world, including radicals and members of subordinate groups. How have these changes affected hierarchies among writers? What new formats have been developing, both within and outside the academy? Which of them have been used by political theorists and activists, and with what effects on political thought itself?

2° Increasing literacy and falling publication costs mean that many more people can print their ideas, which has led to the emergence of new formats. This has led to the emergence of non-

professional, non-bourgeois political thought, such as the working class philosophers studied by Rancière (Rancière 2012). What difference does it make for political thought to be produced from different situations and points of view, including those under domination? What kinds of public spheres (oppositional, proletarian, etc.) constitute favourable environments for the dissemination of such writings, and what are their particular rules (Negt, Kluge, and Hansen 1993)? What does it imply to characterise these thoughts as "popular", "from the margins", or "from below" (Cerutti 2015)?

3° If the phenomenon is not new, the development of voluntary associations (unions, parties, etc.) has made them more and more present in the production of political thought, making the figure of the author less omnipresent. What kind of collective production of political thought has emerged, and with what effects? What role have organisations played in the production and dissemination of political thought? How has the production of political thought been articulated with mobilisations and political activism?

4° On a more reflexive level, the consideration of these changes also affects the sources and methods of historians and political theorists. How does the expansion of the number of texts in the history of ideas change the scope and methods of archival work? What archives are now available for the history of ideas in the age of the masses? What constitutes useful material when we study this material? What kind of quantitative and qualitative analysis can be used on these sources? What are the intersections with social history, cultural history, literary history, labour history? How can political theory make use of these texts?

References

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