

In Zusammenarbeit mit dem Husserl-Archiv Freiburg und dem Lehrstuhl für Politische Philosophie, Theorie und Ideengeschichte

Donnerstag
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HS 1199
KG I

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Why We Need A Global History of Political Thought



The history of political thought as an academic discipline is still to an overwhelming degree national, or at most continental, in scope. For the last century at least this has been a growing intellectual deficiency in the way its practitioners have conceived it, taught it, and trained their successors to continue to do so. In this fundamental respect the discipline has become increasingly parochial in both its intellectual horizons and its political apprehensions. As an enterprise in training a political elite, an intelligentsia, or even a body of educated and politically aware citizens it has failed ever more lamentably. In itself the failure of an academic discipline need be no great disaster for anyone but those who bury their own lives within it. But in this case the cumulative failure of an academic discipline as self-consciously gratified by its own growing sophistication as most others contrive to be parallels an immense practical failure for the human population of the globe: the very limited degree to which human intelligence has yet taught us how to render our collective lives less irrational, less chaotic, less spasmodically murderous, and better at controlling the harm which we do over time to one another and the world in which we have to live. The premise of my argument is that these two failures connect closely with one another.

The second huge, and by now potentially eschatological failure is best understood not as a shapeless juxtaposition of meaningless contingencies (a buzzing, booming and often very nasty chaos), but as the failure of innumerable local traditions of political apprehension and political choice to face the breadth and complexity of the puzzle of how humans can coexist with one another for the better across the globe. The tradition of western reflection on politics has travelled the world. It has infiltrated and reshaped the belief systems of political elites and intelligentsias across the continents. But it has failed even to try to register what has been happening as it did so, and failed in its own enterprise because of that failure. The failures of our statecraft, the blatant indiscretions of our economic policies, and the continuing revulsions at one another's ways of life form parts of a single vast structure of intellectual failure. We do not know that it would have been possible at any point in the past to do better, nor that it will prove possible to do so in future. But we can now see if we choose to look, just why we have failed so badly in the past. We can work out what explains that failure; and if we are cleverer and braver, we may still prove lucky enough to learn how to fail less badly in future. (Text: John Dunn)