6
Historical Mode of Analysis

The historical mode of analysing political theory assumes that the meaning of a classic text can be established only if it is firmly situated in the appropriate social, political, and economic context and the relationship between the theorists’ realms of ideas and the world of action in which they lived and wrote is carefully defined. The logic of ideas must always be securely tied to the logic of practice, to the everyday life of the age, to the turmoil of the political forum and the hustle and bustle of the market. Far from neglecting the internal assessment of the text, the historical approach requires that each step of the analysis is informed by what can be discovered about the concrete activity of the period. Because ideas and actions are mutually dependent and interpenetrating, forming a seamless web, history should never serve as mere background to a political theory in a static and lifeless way. Theorist and theory are essential and integral components of the historical process. To separate the two is to obscure and distort the nature of history, human creativity, and the ideas of the theorist.

The basic objective of the historical mode is to explore the connections between the ideas of the theorists and the material conditions of their society, in essence the social history – construed in a broad way – of those ideas. The ideas should be embedded in their social matrix, associated with what was occurring in the social universe. If the meaning of the theories is to be ascertained, the question to be asked is how the theorists’ ideas relate to the structure of their society, the nature of its government and law, the crucial political conflicts, and the system of class and status. Since politics in reality
cannot be divorced from economics, an historical examination of a political theory must go beyond relating its ideas narrowly to formal governmental arrangements. A whole range of questions must be asked in order to understand the connections between the political ideas and their economic context. What, if any, is the relevance of production, property relations, and the division of labour to the appreciation of the political ideas? How does each of these factors in relation to the others help to elucidate the theorists’ realm of ideas as an interconnected whole? How is this totality of ideas and actions, in turn, related to what went on before in the society and what was to occur in the future?

This kind of analysis may rescue the study of political theory from stale antiquarianism and sterile abstractionism by restoring the text to where it was conceived and belongs, to the historical process, one of constant flux and change as well as stability and continuity. When so approached, the text is reinstated as a dynamic and living element of history, a meaningful and vital constituent of the ebb and flow of civilized life. Thus, the historical mode should always be sensitive to the historical process, showing how it is reflected in a text and the role of the text in the process. A text and its ideational and material contexts are not isolated fragments, but integral, connecting links between past and future. History is not a chronological sequence of self-contained episodes or autonomous occurrences, but a dynamic causally interrelated movement of practices and ideas from their bare beginnings to their disappearance from the human tableau. This view results from the scrutiny of the past from the vantage-point of the present and does not entail a teleological conception of history involving the inexorable direction of all events toward a predetermined end. Because current practices and ideas often originate in the past and evolve to their present state, we can situate them in a historical process, such as ‘the rise of capitalism’, without being teleological or anachronistic. Without such an approach to many past practices and ideas, we may very well obscure and even obliterate our connection with the past and hence our understanding of the present by severing their link with us in failing to identify the process by which they undergo change. A prime reason for understanding political theories historically, as integral parts of the historical process, is to illuminate the present.

In this chapter I shall try to deal with several questions of a fundamental nature raised by the historical mode of analysis. First, what