

# John Dunn Interview

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## *John Dunn Interview*

**Ivan Cerovac:** *You are considered one of the finest experts in John Locke's political thought. What drove you to this research topic? What sparked your interest in political philosophy in general, and what attracted you to Locke's political writings?*

**John Dunn:** I was not initially drawn to Locke himself through any direct personal attraction. I was born in Britain in the second year of the Second World War and had become keenly interested in politics before I got to University because of idiosyncratic family experience in Germany, Iran and India. I have been deeply preoccupied with politics ever since because I knew already by then that the stakes in politics for everyone are always vast, the situation of most human beings then alive in the world hazardous and often painful, and that the chances of its improving seriously were, as they remain, largely at the mercy of politics. I recognized quite young that my parents' vision of politics was in many ways unreal and absurd, and since I loved them and admired many things about them, I wished with some intensity to learn to see politics for myself more clearly and steadily, without illusion and without self-serving. Through a series of whimsical pieces of good fortune I have spent my very privileged life in trying to learn how to.

I was drawn initially to philosophy because I hoped it would show me how to see everything which mattered to me clearly and because for someone arriving in Cambridge at that point, in the lingering aura of Wittgenstein, philosophy still held the imaginative glamour to make that fond hope almost plausible. I was drawn to political philosophy a year or two later, and as a student of History, because I hoped especially that it would show me how to see politics steadily in that way.

After I had completed my undergraduate degree in History I decided to go on to undertake doctoral research in the history of political thought hoping to do so under the supervision of the inspirational teacher who had introduced me in my final year to the thought of the Scottish Enlightenment and in particular to that of David Hume and Adam Smith. I intended the dissertation I hoped to write to be on Hume's understanding of political obligation, which I felt was woefully insufficient, despite the dazzling intelligence of his vision as a whole. I wanted to understand why he had come to see that understanding as sufficient: to rethink his thoughts at this point as deeply as I could in the hope of somehow seeing beneath them and through them how

to understand the political bonds which hold (or fail to hold) a society together more clearly.

The teacher in question, Duncan Forbes, was a figure of arresting intuition, strong passions, but less capacity for calm and intellectual composure. He was wrestling with Hume's thinking himself at the time and working towards his important study of *Hume's Philosophical Politics* (1975). The last thing he wanted was an ignorant and over-confident graduate students stumbling around in his vicinity, so he passed me smartly on to Peter Laslett, a very different figure, flamboyant, charming, enthusiastic and very much at home in the world. Laslett had just published his path-breaking edition of Locke's *Two Treatises of Government*, which demonstrated that these were written not to vindicate a Revolution which had already occurred but to justify revolutionary resistance to the government of Charles II. Laslett wished me to trace the impact of the *Two Treatises* in Britain, France and North America over the century following its publication as a pathway towards two later Revolutions, in France and North America, and a third potential revolution in Britain itself, which did not in fact occur. I studied this for three years but found that impact over most of the century, except perhaps in one or two specific ways in the run up to American Independence, shallower than was widely alleged, and not worth systematic presentation as a book. Whilst doing the research I had, however, also seen something I thought was really important about Locke's own thinking and it was that to which I devoted my first book and my unsuccessful submission for a doctorate. I still think the central perception of that book was right, as have a variety of other scholars since. It was that Locke's overall vision of politics and its place in human life depended for him on a Christian *Weltanschauung* and that his main arguments, as he said explicitly himself whilst he was in a position to do so, do not hold good without it. A lot of the subsequent intellectual history of the west and much of the global political vulnerability of liberalism as a political approach today has followed from that fact.

**IC:** *Many hold that your work in the 1960s, along with that of Skinner and Pocock, fundamentally changed how political philosophers read some of the most important past political thinkers. What was wrong with the political philosophy in 1960s and what methodological prescriptions did you suggest in order to improve the reading of classics such as Locke?*

**JD:** I am afraid that I don't think it is true that the work of Pocock, Skinner and myself has changed anything much in how political philosophers read important past political thinkers, though one or two major figures like John Rawls have made polite concessions to the need for a measure of historical accuracy in understanding the views of past thinkers they continue to take seriously. I remain confident that it

would still be better for the historical turn to have more of an impact in that respect.

It is unsurprising that my own work should have had little impact to that effect, but Skinner and Pocock are both scholars of extraordinary ability, immense depth of knowledge and each has produced since an oeuvre of enormous distinction and range which should extend the political imagination of any philosopher who chose to take politics seriously. I see no pressing need for any political philosophy which does not take politics seriously and consider it simply a misnomer.

Political philosophy in the Anglophone world was at a low ebb in the early 1960s, apart perhaps from Herbert Hart's philosophy of law, and university teaching on the history of political ideas or political philosophy as a whole was parochial, unrelentingly self-referential and rather smug.

Skinner and I were friends, and also at that time close intellectual companions. What united our view of the limitations of our elders (and Oxford contemporaries) was the sense that they were seeing and thinking within an extraordinarily narrow range and learning very little from the texts they happened to study. We thought they were doing so because they were failing to recognize the drastic existential sources of the works in question or take in what their authors were doing in bothering to write them at all, and hence often even to recognize what those authors intended to argue. We thought that this amply sustained habit was foolish and self-harming.

As already said, I still think that what I saw about Locke himself fifty years and more ago was accurate and important; but it is only fair to acknowledge that seeing it did not at that point improve the political discernment of my own reading of his political works. It has taken some time for me to recognize quite how deeply Locke thought into the fundamental elements of politics, the resources through which human communities can live relatively benignly together in face of its hazards, and the always limited reserves of patience and generosity in their feelings towards one another. It was not until I came to register the political insight of his insistence on the centrality of trust (and distrust) in human life, and the discomfiting strains on mutual tolerance inherent in the unease with which human beings experience one another that I really saw how far in advance in these respects he remains of any of today's leading philosophers of politics. Who, setting out from the text of Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* could begin to imagine a world distantly resembling the world in which all of us are now living? But that is the world which has been made by politics and the world in which human beings must continue to live and die. I am not an enemy of intellectual division of labour and I do not think that philosophers should turn themselves into historians. I simply think that any philosopher today who hopes to do political philosophy of real value needs both to open their imaginations fully to the realities of politics today and to call on

the aid of historians when they try to learn from the great political philosophers of the past.

**IC:** *Political philosophers throughout history, as well as today, often construct political systems designed for citizens understood as rational and well-informed individuals. Nonetheless, empirical research suggests that citizens often lack the basic understanding not only of the political process, but also of their own interests. The rise of populist politicians and movements, often related to fake news and anti-science (or anti-experts) movements, evokes worries that political philosophy has little to say about real-world politics. What are your thoughts on this? Is there a way for political philosophy to address these modern trends and to help us change the world for the better?*

**JD:** All citizens are only intermittently rational and incompletely informed. Any political philosophy premised on assuming otherwise can scarcely hope to illuminate politics.

As already indicated, I believe that any serious political philosopher must focus on politics as it is and think with and for their fellow citizens or fellow human beings as these too are.

**IC:** *You have written extensively on the politics of socialism and the (quite dangerous) Marxist hope that new social, political and economic structures will end the exploitation and lead to a better future. Though still far from Marxism, we are witnessing the rise in support for some populist left-wing politicians and social movements that presume that they are acting in the interest of the majority of people. Should left-wing parties appeal to (weak or modest) Marxist argumentation when they criticize the existing inequalities and offer solutions, or should the left abandon Marxism and start anew?*

**JD:** Marx himself did see, and many Marxist political actors and thinkers in his wake have since seen, many aspects of collective human life quite realistically. The deep failing of Marxism as a political heuristic has been its absurd promise of a world beyond politics which History would somehow in the end deliver, the opportunistic reach for power vindicated by that claim, and the grotesque underestimate of the durable harm inflicted on any human society by decades of brutal oppression under the aegis of that claim. The left should keep from Marxism what is descriptively true and disavow completely what was always fantastical and is now brazenly mendacious.

**IC:** *In one of your recent books, *Setting the People Free*, you focus on the story of democracy and how the word changed its meaning from Ancient Greece to contemporary western societies. There, you make a careful distinction between democracy as an electoral instrument and the democratization process. Can you explain this distinction and explain why do you think it pushed democracy in the political mainstream?*

**JD:** Ostensibly free elections on the basis of universal suffrage have become the canonical form for establishing and sustaining legitimate government within a single historical sequence. They have done so largely because they provide a more compelling picture of how a population can authorize and de-authorize its government than any extant rival. The original experience of democracy as a political form provided for the relatively narrow ranks of free citizens a far more direct relation between governing and being governed than any modern state could replicate. For the citizens themselves, it lifted the burden of personal subjection from their lives. Democratization is a far vaguer process of lightening the burdens of subjection across a population which has proceeded to varying degrees across many different societies over the last few centuries and has sometimes been consciously and quite effectively steered through political action. It will never be complete, but it is a denser existential transformation than any modification of the process of government could possibly be.

**IC:** *Democracy is, if I understand your position well, a way to think politics together. Do you think that we are in a danger of losing that way of thinking temporarily, or even permanently? Is democracy something that can be forgotten and then recovered? What are the conditions under which people understand their living together politically in democratic terms?*

**JD:** Democratic politics in that sense is a historical creation and it has to be created through political action, though it of course relies throughout on many social and economic preconditions. I believe it to be a creation of great value but also of ineliminable vulnerability. At present it is being wounded, deliberately and pretty brutally and effectively, in many different settings. Making room for it requires high political strategy and luck, but democratic politics itself must consist in the actions of very much wider circles of a population. It must make some sense to them and it must on balance benefit, not harm, them. In the hands of the unscrupulous and malign it is very easy for high politics to take away what only it could make the space for in the first place. Above all it requires a people (a *demos*) with the will and capacity to live together in peace. As any resident of former Yugoslavia knows all too well, high politics can destroy that fast and thoroughly. It cannot make it either fast or thoroughly. You could say only History can make it, but it would be better simply to recognize that it has to make itself and do so in time.

**IC:** *There seems to be a rise of illiberal democracies in the world. Apart from China and Russia, more and more European countries (with Hungary and Poland as notable examples) reject the liberal political tradition and embrace simple majoritarianism reinforced by shared religious or ethnic identity. Why is this the case? How do you see the future of global democracy? Will it continue to be intertwined with liberalism or will it make an illiberal turn?*

**JD:** I don't think liberalism is a clear political category, any more than democracy. In those societies which have had the historical opportunity to develop democratic politics and experience it for some time I think it has had a liberalizing effect on the society over time and has in practice done so to some degree by now across a very wide range of cultures across the world from Taiwan, South Korea and even Japan to Uruguay. Illiberal residues remain very large in all societies and in many it is obviously wrong to view as residual since they constitute a substantial majority of the population. Where they do the freest and fairest of elections will not hand power to liberals and the prospects for establishing democratic politics or sustaining it for any length of time are poor. There is good reason to describe Hungary as an illiberal democracy, above and beyond the fact that its present and frequently re-elected leader chooses to do so. There is less reason to describe any state in which the rulers simply authorize themselves as a democracy at all. I doubt if democracies which it is reasonable to call liberal, where they happen to exist, are in much danger of being supplanted wholesale by any other state form so far invented, though they might of course be subjugated militarily in some way or other. What may destroy them from within is the failure of their democratic politics, but that necessarily will have to be a failure of the citizens themselves. Democracy is not a providential form. It is a collective opportunity for citizens to use or squander.