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Revue de littérature et de civilisation (XVI^e – XVIII^e siècles)

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Varia

To Use or Not to Use ... The Intellectual Historian and the Isms : A Survey and a Proposal

Cesare Cuttica

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This essay examines the role of *ism*-categories in history-writing. Very often unconsciously used, *isms* permeate not just scholarly work but also everyday parlance – and yet neither outside of nor within academia do people often ask exactly why and how we use them. What do they mean ? What types of *things* are they supposed to encapsulate ? Would it be possible to do without them or, rather, are they part and parcel of our language in its multiple applications in life and to different fields of intellectual investigation ? Without pretending to

provide an exhaustive account of this complex matter, this article presents an overview of some of these issues through references to a chronologically and thematically varied spectrum of sources ; it unveils some significant early modern instances of isms and makes a small theoretical contribution to the field of intellectual history. Departing from a widespread epistemological approach for the study of history, this essay suggests that to use *isms* can be both useful and important in the attempt to understand the past, its languages, ideas, people and systems of beliefs. In fact, the following pages show how a less essentialist use of *isms* might provide new meaningful readings of past thoughts and events. Finally, it is here argued that to reflect on how *isms* are employed in historical research can serve to cast light on how history is written now. By rethinking the role of the intellectual historian in dealing with *isms*, some methodological reflections on the practice of history-writing as an act of observation as much as one of creation will also be advanced.

Cet article analyse le rôle des concepts en *-ismes* dans la pratique historique. Souvent utilisés, les *-ismes* font partie soit du travail académique soit du langage courant. Pourtant, dans les deux cas on ne se pose pas la question de savoir pourquoi et comment nous les utilisons. Quelle est leur signification ? Quel type de *choses* sont-ils chargés de représenter ? Est-ce que on peut imaginer de ne pas avoir recours aux *-ismes* ? Sans vouloir donner un tableau complet de cette question complexe, cet article propose une présentation originale et nouvelle des problèmes concernant les *-ismes* grâce à une série d'analyses textuelles qui touchent des champs thématiques variés et des époques différentes. En outre, il dédie une partie de son article à l'étude des certains *-ismes* de la première modernité, en soulignant leur nature polémique, et il se concentre sur les rares travaux consacrés à l'examen des *-ismes* dans le domaine de la recherche historique. En s'appuyant sur la méthodologie de l'histoire intellectuelle, l'auteur soutient qu'une utilisation moins essentialiste des *-ismes* peut être utile pour comprendre le passé. L'article a en particulier pour but de montrer que ce nouvel emploi des *isms* peut produire une lecture plus riche de la pensée du passé et de ses événements. Enfin, la réflexion sur les *isms* amène l'auteur à redéfinir le rôle de l'historien des idées dans la pratique de l'écriture historique, qui peut se voir comme un acte d'observation aussi tant que de création.

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Notes de l'auteur

This piece was first presented as a paper at the “Séminaire d'Histoire Intellectuelle”, Université Paris 8 ; at the Trinity Long Room Hub, Trinity College Dublin ; at the Center for Early Modern Studies, University of Wisconsin. The author would like to thank Ann Thomson, Jason McElligott and Johann Sommerville for their invitations and the audiences for their questions. Knud Haakonssen, Gaby Mahlberg, Robert Lamb, Johann Sommerville, Ann Thomson, Charlie Weaver Rolfe, Richard Whatmore and the two anonymous referees of this journal provided helpful comments on this essay. Translations of non-English sources that have no English edition are the author's.

Texte intégral

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I.

- 1 See e.g. Dominick LaCapra, *Rethinking Intellectual History : Texts, Contexts, Language*, Ithaca, Cor ([...](#))

1To delve into the historian's toolkit exposes us to the risk of providing either patronising or hackneyed advice whose actual effect on the ways research is conducted proves negligible. This being said, it is undeniable that intellectual history represents a valuable instance of how dialogue on methodological and historiographical issues can be constructively pursued, generating important outcomes and fruitful debates¹.

2Although we do not have the pretence to cover such an extensive and complex subject as the question of whether it is legitimate for historians to employ *ism*-categories in their work, in what follows we aim to make a small theoretical contribution to the field of intellectual history. First, we will portray an inevitably limited but hopefully stimulating picture of how *isms* have been regarded, used or rejected in various fields of human understanding. In so doing, we will unveil a widespread epistemological approach to the study of history which has often been left unexplored. This should also provide some relevant methodological considerations concerning the ways in which historians, scholars, philosophers and writers adopt *isms* both when interpreting texts, ideas, phenomena and groups of people in the galaxy of the past, and when explaining emerging intellectual, social and political forces in the present. Second, having considered a

few important early modern *isms*, we will set forth a series of reflections on how a less essentialist use of *isms* might be beneficial to historians. Lastly, by looking at the type of history-writing undertaken in intellectual history, we will advance some general methodological remarks on the role of the practitioner and the importance of *constantly* inspecting his/her toolkit.

II.

- 2 *Oxford English Dictionary*, “ism, *n.*” (the author consulted both the hardback version and the online [...](#))
- 3 As for what follows, see *OED*, “ism, *suffix*”.

3The *Oxford English Dictionary* primarily defines an *ism* as “[a] form of doctrine, theory, or practice having, or claiming to have, a distinctive character or relation.” Less neutrally, it points out that an *ism* is “chiefly used disparagingly².” Above all, from the *OED* we learn that *isms* refer to the following units of meaning³:

1. nouns of action where the suffix “ismòs” derived from verbs in “izein” indicates a thing done which is “rarely concrete” (e.g. “agonism”, “aphorism”, “baptism”, “criticism”);
2. words that express “action or conduct of a class” of people (e.g. “heroism”, “patriotism”, “despotism”);
3. nouns applied to “the condition of a person or thing” (e.g. “barbarism”, “anomalism”, “parallelism”);
4. names of “a system of theory or practice” (often named after a person, subject or object : e.g. Cartesianism, Kantism, Poujadism, Thatcherism) related to the “religious”, “ecclesiastical”, “political”, “philosophical”, “social” spheres (e.g. “Arminianism”, “Buddhism”, “Calvinism”, “Catholicism”, “Chartism”, “Liberalism”, “Machiavellism”, “Epicureanism”, “Positivism”, “Radicalism”);
5. “class-names” or terms describing “doctrines or principles” (e.g. “altruism”, “atheism”, “fanaticism”, “feminism”, “polytheism”, “realism”, “universalism”);
6.
 - 4 An updated version of the *OED* (see *OED*, “ism, *n.*”, *Draft additions June 2004*) cites *isms* which refe [...](#)

terms “denoting” linguistic characteristics (e.g. “Americanism”, “Latinism”, “Orientalism”, but also e.g. “archaism”, “colloquialism”, “witticism”)⁴.

- 5 The references that follow are mainly taken from the *OED*.
- 6 See T. J. Hogg, *The Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, London, E. Moxon, 1858 ; 4

vols, i, p. 373.

- 7 See *OED*, “ism, *n.*” for examples of this belief. In 1867-8 Matthew Arnold – much hostile towards *ism* (...)
- 8 Marcel Proust, “Sodome et Gomorrhe”, in *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu*, Paris, Gallimard, 1954, Bibl (...)
- 9 Phillipe Sollers, *Femmes*, Paris, Gallimard, 1983, p. 151.

4This dry taxonomy comes to life when we look at some chiefly negative historical examples of how *isms* and their users have been regarded since the eighteenth century⁵. A telling sample of various social mindsets and literary conventions comes from a letter dated 4 November 1789 where Horace Walpole reproached his interlocutor for his tendency to “squabble about Socianism, or some of these isms.” Twenty two years later, in a display of filial disaffection Percy Bysshe Shelley contemptuously proclaimed : “He [his own father] is nothing – no ‘ist’, professes no ‘ism’, but superbism and irrationalism⁶.” More cheerfully, in October 1820 in *A Letter to M. Allen* Thomas Carlyle stated : “I expect much pleasure from talking over old bygone things, from discussing Spürzheimism [Spürzheim was the founder of phrenology], Whiggism, Church of Englandism, and all other imaginable ‘isms.’” On a harsher note, the issue of *Fraser’s Magazine for Town and Country* (June 1840, xxi, 702) referring to women and their place in society as well as to socialism and Owenism unsympathetically declared that “[a]ll the untidy *isms* of the day shall be dissipated.” In general, in nineteenth-century Britain it was believed that the plague of *isms* had spread from France as a result of the French Revolution⁷. As for French views of *isms*, in 1921-2 Marcel Proust sarcastically dismissed the famous French diplomat Talleyrand as “one of the inventors of dilettantism [“dilettantisme”], of I couldn’t-care-lessism [“je m’enfichisme”], of many words in ‘ism’ now in fashion with our little snobs [“nos snobinettes”]⁸.” Another star of the French literary pantheon, Philippe Sollers, had one of his fictional characters mull over “[a]narchism, cubism, surrealism, communism” and scathingly remark that “‘isms’ after all give the impression of having been fabricated in order to hide the dawn of new names⁹.”

- 10 It is generally accepted that the suffix “ismatic” pertained to the *ism*-category, indicating adhere (...)
- 11 See Nicholas Tyacke, *Anti-Calvinists : the Rise of English Arminianism c.1590-1640*, Oxford, OUP, 19 (...)
- 12 See below.

5Despite this apparent post-1789 flourishing of *isms*, in the early modern period the adjectival forms “ist” and “ian” and their derivative nouns “ists” and “ians” were more commonly employed than *isms*¹⁰. The latter were applied as convenient short-hands like in the case of “Arminianism” in seventeenth-century English political and religious discourse¹¹ or when describing the thought and/or activities of one person from whom a movement or group of ideas took their origins (“Hobbism”)¹². In fact, it is often assumed that all *isms*, which abound not only in political discourse but also in sociological, juridical and journalistic

language, constitute technical words which the specialist is supposed to decode for us. Implied in this view is the distinction between common language as it is employed by people in their daily interaction with the world and a more intellectually subtle and evolving conceptual use.

- 13 As for the second kind, see further down in this paper.
- 14 Cited in M. B. Ferrari, “Incontri sul Grande Fiume 5. Ma cosa fai Guareschi in bicicletta? Nel pae (...)”
- 15 However, it can be said with reasonable confidence that positive (or, at least, neutral) connotatio (...)”
- 16 Cited in Richard Newbury, “Graham Greene : Spiare, viziuetto di famiglia”, *La Stampa*, 31 December 20 (...)”

6 Searching for examples of the first kind, that is of how *isms* are present in everyday parlance¹³, we find that on 9 August 2010 in an article published in the Italian daily *La Stampa*, Alberto Guareschi, son of the famous Italian journalist, cartoonist and humorist Giovannino Guareschi (best-known for his literary creation of the priest Don Camillo) said that his father “was against all ‘isms’, fascism, communism [...] and he made use of the pen as a weapon, writing and drawing. He never took himself too seriously and his self-mockery made him closer to his readers¹⁴.” This brief statement is significant in that it reveals a die-hard conviction that *isms* are not only the opposite of irony, but that they encapsulate the ideological poison whose lethal effects caused the tragic events which occurred in the twentieth century¹⁵. To confirm this view stands none other than Joseph Goebbels who referred to communism, fascism, Catholicism and liberalism as “lies big enough to be believed¹⁶.”

- 17 We are aware that our choice of *isms* is arbitrary and that examples could be multiplied almost *ad i* (...)”
- 18 Edmund Husserl, “The Vienna Lecture. Appendix 1 : Philosophy and the Crisis of European Humanity”, (...)”
- 19 See David Carr, “Translator’s Introduction”, in Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences*, p. xv-xli (...)”

7 Other *isms* might be perceived as less dangerous, but they are still capable of arousing vehement reactions¹⁷. Amongst these is intellectualism, which is identified with the practice of turning simple things into complicated and overly unclear matters. As an attitude towards life, intellectualism is despised as the opposite of a good and matter-of-fact (hence healthy) conduct. Confirming this diagnosis is the case of the philosopher Edmund Husserl who in 1935 predicted that he would be accused of rescuing “an intellectualism which loses itself in theories alienated from the world, with its necessary evil consequences of a superficial lust for erudition and an intellectualistic snobbism¹⁸.” Husserl’s defence was all the more vital when one considers that the Nazis had at that time made of “antirationalism” and “anti-intellectualism” two explicit touchstones of their propaganda¹⁹.

- 20 In *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society* (1958) – dedicated to the study and observation of the inh (...)
- 21 See e.g. Giulio Bollati, *L'Italiano. Il carattere nazionale come storia e come invenzione*, Turin, E (...)

8 Some *isms* are thought to be useful to capture individual and/or collective behaviour in society. In these cases, it is often the moral sphere to receive the greatest attention. An insightful instance of this is familism, which describes the historically enduring custom of Italian public life to make of the family the primary societal unit in the country. “Amoral familism”²⁰ – as it was very perceptively captured by Federico de Roberto’s (1861-1927) novel *I Viceré* (1894) – can be employed as an effective key to access Italian history since the Unity (1861). This is to say that, thanks to this concept, one understands a phenomenon whereby the family is the springboard on which a great deal of affective, professional and political relationships centre and which has led the country to high levels of corruption, public inefficiency and constant opposition to the processes of modernity and modernization²¹.

- 22 See Edward W. Said, *Orientalism : Western Conceptions of the Orient*, London, Routledge, 1978. Said (...)
- 23 Kant referred to a condition where mankind would be deprived of freedom and dignity, and where peop (...)
- 24 Whereas Francophobia can be found in the *OED* and is used currently, anti-Frenchism is not recorded (...)

9 To be a source of heated disputes does not prevent *isms* from being successful : Orientalism – rocketed to academic stardom thanks to the highly influential as well as deeply divisive book on Western attitudes to the East written by Edward W. Said (1978)²² – and barbarism – to be found in Immanuel Kant’s *What is Enlightenment ?* (1784)²³ – are only two examples amongst a plethora of terms frequently used by the literati. It is also important to consider that there are *isms* which are marked by the *anti* prefix. In this regard, the central question is whether it is plausible to adopt a polemical term such as, for instance, anti-Americanism (curiously, we do not have anti-Frenchism²⁴ or anti-Italianism) in a scholarly context. Obviously, this type of *ism* has derogatory connotations which might be seen as the attempt to exclude a critical analysis of a phenomenon or set of ideas, and thus to prevent debate. However, at other times the category *can* be legitimately used by the scholar in the study of a certain time’s mindset, views or policies (e.g. anti-Americanism in the context of the Cold War could be an uncontroversial instance of this).

- 25 This idea relies on the work of Reinhart Koselleck and of conceptual historians (see e.g. Javier Fe (...)

10 The various typologies of *isms* hitherto illustrated – taken from historically and culturally different contexts – enter manifold fields of discourse (political, moral,

intellectual, geographical, temporal etc.) and convey multiple meanings which are often the result of the pursuit and/or the defence of power. *Isms* are constantly alterable and expanding categories ready to include new ideas within their definitions. They are an attempt to seize an ever-changing reality and, consequently, they are used, understood and judged in different ways according to intellectual trends, social realities and political interests. In other words, they are not only “indicators” of change but also “factors” of it²⁵. *Isms* reveal much about our ways of interpreting the world as well as of modifying it or conditioning it.

III.

- 26 Michael Quinion gathers an impressive quantity of categories but limits his analysis to the descrip ([...](#))
- 27 A. London Fell, *Origins of Legislative Sovereignty and the Legislative State : Volume 5, Modern Ori* ([...](#))
- 28 London Fell, *Origins of Legislative Sovereignty. Volume 5, Book II*, p. ix.
- 29 Ibid., p. x.
- 30 Ibid., p. xi, p. 1, p. 2-3. See also A. London Fell, *Origins of Legislative Sovereignty and the Leg* ([...](#))
- 31 London Fell, *Origins of Legislative Sovereignty. Volume 5, Book II*, p. 3.
- 32 Glenn Burgess reviewed London Fell’s discussion of these *isms* in *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, 29 ([...](#))
- 33 London Fell, *Origins of Legislative Sovereignty. Volume 5, Book II*, p. 335 (his italics). In partic ([...](#))

11Despite being a recurrent feature of discourse both in common parlance and in a good range of intellectual fields, there are very few studies dedicated to *isms*²⁶. One exception is A. London Fell’s work on the major *isms* of early modernity and modernity²⁷. Interestingly, London Fell pointed to the numerous “forms of ideology expressed as ‘isms’” thriving in the American public press during the heated political debates of the 1990s between Republicans and Democrats. The then President Bill Clinton accused his opponent Newt Gingrich of unduly inciting “rivalry” between conservatism and liberalism²⁸. For London Fell such a public interest in *isms* showed that what in the nineteenth century had been “endemic” had by then become “epidemic²⁹.” Myriad terms ending in *ism* could be found not just in the larger arena of public discourse and media, but also in a wide spectrum of academic fields from the history of art to philosophy and legal-political thought. In this respect, according to London Fell, the misuse of *isms* on the part of historians had led to sundry anachronistic interpretations of the past. For this reason, he adopted a – loosely conceived – deconstructionist approach to these “problematical ‘constructs’”, so as “to exploit” and “to explode” them³⁰. Behind his anti-“modernistic” deconstructionist project lay what London Fell called an attempt at “de-Hegelianizing” the welter of “anachronisms [sic] and

ideological ‘isms’” that have dominated scholarship on the modern state in the last two centuries³¹. Viewing them as “artificial academic devices” disconnected from the historical texts they purported to analyze, he astringently declared that “to apply the suffix ‘ism’” – he took the three antithetical couples of absolutism-constitutionalism, rationalism-empiricism and liberalism-conservatism³² – implies a large degree of scholarly blindness in that it obfuscates one’s “perception of a problem.” In consequence, this process “needs to be dispelled³³.”

- 34 See London Fell, *Origins of Legislative Sovereignty. Volume 5, Book II*, p. 11.
- 35 On this perspective see John W. Burrow, “Duncan Forbes and the History of Ideas : an Introduction t [\(...\)](#)
- 36 London Fell openly stated that he believed in the importance of being “value-neutral, as well as ‘s [\(...\)](#)

12In summary, if it is right to underscore that studying history through *isms* is open to pitfalls, it is also true that to use *isms* does not always correspond to invoking a quasi-Hegelian mystique of development³⁴. Rather, it means to advance a more fragmented reading of ideas in a given *historical* context with the platitudinous but fundamental goal of communicating knowledge to modern readers and of making sense of what went on before us. It also means to accept that the historian is inevitably caught in the whirlwind of his/her time’s intellectual activity, scholarly fashions and cultural interests, which shape the direction of his/her research³⁵. If warning against anachronisms superimposed on historical sources and presentist interpretations of them is fruitfully pursued by people like London Fell, it has nonetheless to be observed that this type of approach presupposes that original texts and meanings exist and that as such they can be recovered thanks to the *oracular* voice of the historian³⁶.

- 37 Angelo d’Orsi (ed.), *Gli ismi della politica. 52 voci per ascoltare il presente*, Rome, Viella, 2010
- 38 d’Orsi, “Presentazione”, in Angelo d’Orsi (ed.), *Gli ismi della politica*, p. vii-xi, p. viii. As a [\(...\)](#)

13More recently, the Italian historian Angelo d’Orsi issued a series of short-entries dedicated to various political *isms*³⁷. Surprisingly though, the volume says nothing about the methodological use and philosophical role of *isms* in historical research. It is as if the editor and the contributors to the volume took for granted the legitimacy of using them. Aiming to dispel the “‘confusionism’” in which current European political debates are enmeshed, d’Orsi simply maintained that “[e]ach ism constitutes an idea, a movement, [which can be] theoretical or practical, not only political”, and whose purpose is “to communicate and spread one or more principles : art and philosophy, religions and literature, even sport and fashion, have their own isms³⁸.”

IV.

- 39 Harro Höpfl, “Isms”, *British Journal of Political Science*, 13 (1983), p. 1-17, here p. 1-2.
- 40 They then passed on to Latin from which, in turn, developed the French *isme* and the English *ism*, wh [\(...\)](#)
- 41 Ibid., p. 9.
- 42 *Isms* went from meaning “abusive” to “technical” (ibid., p. 5-6).

14Harro Höpfl can be considered the only theorist who systematically engaged with the practice of using *isms* in historical and philosophical scholarship, and with the ensuing methodological problems³⁹. Focusing on etymology, Höpfl argued that *ism*-formations did not express the content of a doctrine or body of ideas. In their original Greek form “ismòs”⁴⁰, *isms* served as derogatory and abusive terms with which to define heretical, unorthodox or false beliefs held by one’s adversaries, and to characterize their conduct as much as their way of being. Subsequently, *isms* played a role in “the construction of developmental histories” to define “forces and agencies” behind social progress and change as well as to explain such histories in a more accessible fashion within a polemical context. They thus came to represent more than simple labels for people’s creeds : they expressed “agents and causes⁴¹.” In light of this evolutionary trend⁴², Höpfl provided a series of “genealogical” units with which to classify *isms* :

- those denoting the conduct or practices of a group ;
- those generated in doctrinal and politico-religious contexts of conflict ;
- those born out of political and intellectual controversies since the nineteenth century ;
- those adapted to scholarly use from their original polemical use ;
- those specifically created for scholarly purposes ;
- ◦ 43 Ibid., p. 11-12.

those first employed by scholars but afterwards taken up in common parlance⁴³.

- 44 Ibid., p. 1.
- 45 Ibid., p. 13-14.
- 46 Ibid., p. 15.
- 47 Ibid., p. 15-16.

15Most importantly, Höpfl asserted that *isms* serve to create “a subject-matter for oneself⁴⁴.” Their popularity stems from the fact that a precise definition of what

they mean is not required. Instead of being seen as a problem of synthesis, they should lead their users to “a pause of reflection” in order to specify what one is referring to by them⁴⁵. This way of proceeding is easier to pursue, according to Höpfl, when the referent is a set of doctrines instead of a phenomenon (such as “fascism, communism, colonialism, leftism, pacifism, individualism, collectivism, etc.”)⁴⁶. This is allegedly so because in the former case the category entails a process of self-identification on the part of the actors involved, whilst in the latter instance one has to confront the impossibility to grasp historical phenomena by dint of a simple *ism*. To remedy this last problem, Höpfl (perhaps a little too reductively) concluded, it is not sufficient for scholars to declare what it is they mean by their *ism* since this is tantamount to highlighting one aspect to the detriment of a larger spectrum of components pertaining to the occurrence or circumstances under scrutiny⁴⁷.

- 48 Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being. A Study of the History of an Idea*, Cambridge, Mass., H (...)
- 49 Nicholas Henshall, “Early Modern Absolutism 1550-1700 : Political Reality or Propaganda ?”, in Rona (...)
- 50 Ibid., p. 51.

16Much more trenchantly, the founding father of the history of ideas Arthur O. Lovejoy had warned that *isms* are “trouble-breeding and usually thought-obscuring terms, which one sometimes wishes to see expunged from the vocabulary of the philosopher and the historian altogether⁴⁸.” By the same token, Nicholas Henshall proclaimed that to study early modern political history implies the need to dispense with “a series of early nineteenth-century ‘isms’, which still obscure the differences between early modern consciousness and our own⁴⁹.” According to Henshall, terms like “‘liberalism’, ‘socialism’, ‘communism’, ‘nationalism’ and ‘absolutism’ met the needs of political and social polemic in the 1820s and 1830s”, but they do not help historical recovery of the past. Henshall disparagingly argued that “[t]he beauty of ‘isms’ is that everything can be made to fit them” : they are generalizations which are used as historical tools⁵⁰.

- 51 Höpfl, “Isms”, p. 14.

17Pace Lovejoy and Henshall (and to some extent Höpfl too), we nonetheless believe that many abhorred *isms* are endowed with sound explanatory power and, therefore, can be used to describe portions of political thinking, social life and economic trends expressed in various mediums in the past across the world. In this respect, Höpfl’s approach whereby there are “three sorts of -isms which, at least in the hands of careful users, occasion no particular difficulty” - that is *isms* accepted by those grouped under a category ; *isms* referring to stances in a specific debate ; and *isms* created “ad hoc” to speak of “some determinate doctrine already identified independently of -isms” - is more incisive and deserves our attention⁵¹.

V.

- 52 This is the approach taken by scholars like Conal Condren and Jonathan Clark (exponents of a “*lingu (...)*”
- 53 Davis, “Afterword”, p. 367.

18As for the first point, we think that the criterion of self-identification (on the part of a group of presumed adherents) as determinant in establishing the legitimacy and validity of an *ism* can hinder the work of the historian in that it assumes that, to use an interpretative category to describe something in the past, that same category had to exist then⁵². In practice, this view - as will be elaborated below - restrains the creative element informing all history-writing. In fact, if applied with due caution and awareness of their conventionality, *isms* can serve as interpretative torches with which to throw light on a more or less coherent plurality of ideas formulated at a given time in a specific historical milieu within a more or less wide array of texts. Thus, for instance, one can reasonably adopt “radicalism” to refer to “radical moments of actions devoid of a programmatic radicalism, that is the development of radically pragmatic responses under the sheer pressure of events and circumstances”⁵³, to describe the situation in which many early seventeenth-century English Puritans thought and acted.

- 54 The two historical junctures at which “European thought appears to have been particularly productiv [\(...\)](#)

19With regard to Höpfl’s second remark on *isms* to be found in intellectual debates as objects of dispute or weapons with which to attack one’s adversaries, we deem it necessary to consider some historical examples detailing the first appearances of some of the categories most frequently mentioned in the scholarship. This way of proceeding will provide a unique illustration of how *isms* played a decisive role in early modern polemics. It will also show that they established the meanings of concepts or currents of thought which were to rise to prominence in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Thus, searching for early instances of *isms* (notably, in the English context) we find that Machiavellism, Hobbism, Jesuitism, fanaticism and a few others were fairly common both as ideological markers in political and religious controversies, and as labels with which to identify sets of ideas, principles and patterns of behaviour⁵⁴.

- 55 Thomas Nash, *Christs Teares ouer Ierusalem [...]*, London, 1593, p. 80b.
- 56 A. E. Baldini, “Machiavellismo e machiavellismi : progetto di ricerca e messa a punto di un concett [\(...\)](#)
- 57 Baldini, “Machiavellismo e machiavellismi”, p. 38.
- 58 Ibid., p. 39-41.

20During the Elizabethan and Stuart eras, “Machiavellism” appeared as an

abusive epithet in the works of authors such as Thomas Nash (1593, where an attack was launched on “veneriall machauielisme”)⁵⁵, George Downame (1603), Thomas Morton (1606), Andrew Willet (1607), Robert Bolton (1631) and William Burghley (1675). This might not come as a surprise, given the troubled pedigree of the Florentine’s doctrines and their impact on European political theory and practice. And yet knowledge of this is a far cry from providing a thorough account of its fortunes. In fact, as Enzo Baldini underlined⁵⁶, Machiavellism is an “ambiguous and difficult-to-seize” term. By and large, it indicates “theoretical arguments and political conducts” which throughout the centuries have directly referred to the Florentine’s works. However, it has also been identified with all kinds of unscrupulous behaviour and has often been equated to the paradigm of “reason of State⁵⁷.” As a result, we can say that, whilst “Machiavellian” has to do with the theories elaborated by Machiavelli himself, “Machiavellism” denotes a re-elaboration of his theories in another historical context (e.g. the wars of religion in France or in relation to republican thinking). This process includes translations and interpretations of his writings pursued in a more or less faithful way. In addition to this distinction, we have the terms “Machiavellic” (*machiavellico*) and “Machiavellist” (*machiavellista*) : the former is employed in common parlance to refer to cunning and untrustworthy conduct (with an emphasis on plotting and dissimulation) ; the latter points to a disciple of Machiavelli, that is one who puts into practice his teachings without any moral caution or scruple but with the exclusive aim of achieving personal gain. Finally, from the usage of the Florentine’s works and ideas it has been possible to define Machiavellism as a “political principle”, whereby for a state (or for those in power) it is licit to act in any way which is conducive to the benefit of one’s country, especially if this is done in contrast to other states⁵⁸.

- 59 John Collinges, *A reasonable account why some pious, nonconforming ministers in England judge it si (...)*
- 60 This can be verified by searching the database *Early English Books Online (EEBO)*.

21Equally controversial albeit less enduring than Machiavellism was “Hobbism.” If John Collinges (1679) argued that “the world were drunk with *Hobbism & Parkerism*”⁵⁹, decrying what he saw as nefarious political models, sundry thinkers associated Hobbism primarily with “Atheism⁶⁰.” It appeared in this vein in the works of, amongst others, Anne Conway (late 1670s), Zachary Cawdrey (1681), Edward Stillingfleet (1681), William Sherlock (1687), Jeremy Collier (1689) and Richard Baxter (1689 : “Peccadillo as Atheism, Sadduceism, Bestiality, Hobbism, Popery, Man-slaughter, Adultery, Drunkenness, Swearing”).

- 61 Owen (d.1623) was the author of *Herod and Pilate Reconciled* (1610) in which the last chapter is tit (...)
- 62 “Iesuitisme” appeared soon after (Georg Sohn, 1592 ; Christopher Bagshaw, 1601 ; Antoine Arnauld, 1 (...)
- 63 See *EEBO*.

22 Making people who were normally at odds with one another agree, the bogeyman of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English public polemics “Jesuitismus” was used by Laurence Humphrey as early as 1582, and then in the tracts of Francis Hastings (1600), David Owen (1610)[61](#) and William Prynne (1655)[62](#). It was vehemently and univocally attacked as the embodiment of scheming politics, ideological danger and reprehensible moral conduct. Equally endowed with negative connotations and thrown around as a term of insult to describe doctrinally extreme positions typical of zealous and enthusiastic people was “fanaticism”, which can be found in the works of John Gaule (1657), Samuel Fisher (1660, spelt “Fanaticisme”), John Corbet (1661) and Jeremy Taylor (1663)[63](#).

- 64 Around the same time, it was maintained “that love of despotism [...] is imbibed with the name of ki [\(...\)](#)
- 65 See e.g. Conal Condren, *Argument and Authority in Early Modern England. The Presupposition of Oaths* [\(...\)](#)
- 66 Henry More, *Some cursory reflexions impartially made upon Mr. Richard Baxter [...]*, London, 1685, p [\(...\)](#)
- 67 See *EEBO*.

23 Besides these fairly straightforward categories, one can point to others where flexibility of meaning and contextual changes engendered opposite definitions of the very same term. This was certainly the case of “patriotism”, an instance of which featured in Thomas Urquhart’s *Logopandecteisio* (1653)[64](#). In fact, whereas in the Tudor era the appeal to patriotism indicated support for the monarch, in the 1620s claiming to be on the patriotic side meant to manifest one’s loyalty to the nation *in contrast to* the king. Patriotism served opposite political projects and theoretical discourses[65](#). As for “republicanism” (a source of heated historiographical dispute for the past twenty years), Henry More (1685) left his readers in no doubt about his stance on what it stood for when he declared that “Monarchy is secured against Republicanism, Blood, [...] and Rebellion[66](#).” Meanwhile, in other texts from the late seventeenth century (e.g. those of Denis Grenville and Luke Milbourne) republicanism was equated with popularity[67](#).

- 68 *Ecclesia anglicana* appeared well before Anglican (1635) : see Julian Davies, *The Caroline Captivity* [\(...\)](#)
- 69 Michael P. Winship, “Freeborn (Puritan) Englishmen and Slavish Subjection : Popish Tyranny and Puri [\(...\)](#)
- 70 William Bradshaw, *English Puritanisme*, London, 1605. Like the labels “Arminianism” and “papism”, “P [\(...\)](#)
- 71 See e.g. Reginald Pole, *The seditious and blasphemous oration of Cardinal Pole [...]*, London, 1560, [\(...\)](#)

24 Another significant instance of a scholarly contentious *ism* is “Anglicanism.” Whilst it was not employed before the 1830s and 1840s, “Anglianisme” had already been used in 1616 in Thomas Hanab’s *Tessaradelphus*[68](#). Earlier still, attacking the jailed separatist lawyer Henry Barrow, the Episcopal archenemy of Puritans

Richard Bancroft had complained about the “new frenzy of Barrowisme” (1593)[69](#). In 1605 the prolific nonconformist pamphleteer William Bradshaw had issued the laconically titled *English Puritanisme*, providing evidence that this other historiographically disputed *ism* existed in the Jacobean period[70](#). Going back in time we discover that “Lutheranysme” and “Lutheranisme” as well as “Caluinisme” were also part and parcel of early modern religious parlance, especially to indicate two forms of “schism[71](#).”

- 72 Höpfl, “Isms”, p. 14.

25Having so far addressed two of the three points raised by Harro Höpfl, it is now time to turn to the last and most relevant one : this has to do with *isms* created “ad hoc” to speak of “some determinate doctrine already identified independently of –isms.” To analyze this complex issue entails two things. Firstly, to attempt an inevitably limited but hopefully insightful classification of *legitimate* – to paraphrase Höpfl’s words[72](#) – *ism*-categories which might help us to spot opinions, to speak of ideas and to identify moods present in a given context. Secondly, to examine what kinds of tools we use in our activity as interpreters of the past and, more specifically, to reflect on the practice of history-writing and its meaning from the methodological perspective of intellectual history. The next and final paragraphs deal with these two concerns.

VI.

- 73 Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being*, p. 6.

26If Lovejoy’s claim (reported above) that the historian’s toolkit should be purged of *isms* is exceedingly harsh, his observation that *isms* “are names of complexes, not of simples” serves one of the cornerstones of the present essay[73](#). We are aware of the intricate network of theoretical avenues crossing history and of the difficult task of undoing them. But it is nonetheless necessary to sketch a variegated multiplicity of language-patterns to be found on the canvas of this very history where they have been woven in different ways by men and women. This means that, as neologisms signal a change in the perception of the world on the part of a community, so the invention of new *isms* by the historian helps to shed light on phenomena hitherto left unearthed and to excavate novel ideas deposited in the past.

- 74 Alexander Schmidt, “Irenic Patriotism in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century German Political Discou [\(...\)](#)
- 75 Ibid., p. 245.
- 76 See *ibid.*, esp. p. 265-268.
- 77 Ibid., p. 248, p. 249.
- 78 See *ibid.*, p. 250-253.
- 79 Ibid., p. 258.

- 80 Ibid., p. 260.
- 81 Ibid., p. 268-269.

27 This is precisely the case of a recent article by Alexander Schmidt where the category of “irenic patriotism” is employed to analyze “different phases of irenic debate in the Empire” in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries⁷⁴. Aiming to achieve religious peace through “both utilitarian *politique* and more principled arguments”⁷⁵, “irenic patriotism” for Schmidt was more than Hugo Grotius’ irenicism in that it promoted the idea of the church’s complete submission to the authority of the magistrate and to the *patria*⁷⁶. Generally seen as binary opposites so that “anyone who changed religion was a traitor to his country”, patriotism and irenicism became to be associated when the former was used as an antidote to religious conflict and sectarian confessionality “in late sixteenth-century Germany, France and the Netherlands⁷⁷.” In the post-1555 German context of religious strife, *amor patriae* served the peace cause and fostered unity to the detriment of private interests⁷⁸. Most importantly, this rhetoric of toleration based on patriotic claims – Schmidt argued – was not the fruit of the efforts of “isolated” humanists, but it resulted from “a much broader debate⁷⁹.” The latter was animated by a flurry of different texts focused on the interplay of “religious concessions, tolerance, and the defence of the fatherland⁸⁰.” From this Schmidt inferred that those who set out such ideas were exponents of an “irenic patriotism” that had a “greater practical impact” than traditional irenic narratives of Christian reunion. In interweaving the irenic and the patriotic motifs, they tempered the potentially aggressive features of “a narrow patriotism” and highlighted the successful potential of a peace-driven love of fatherland against all confessional war⁸¹.

- 82 This expression is taken from Said, “Orientalism Reconsidered”, p. 211.
- 83 This view is supported by neo-Historicism, with its nominalist approach to all types of scholarly c (...)

28 In carving out “irenic patriotism” as distinct from “reason of State” or “*politique*” patriotism, Schmidt’s research prompts important methodological questions on how to address paradigms of thought in a given historical context and on how to unfold features of past-discourses which have not been previously taken into account. His piece shows how *isms* display new objects of study, foster “new projects of knowledge”⁸² and unmask hermeneutical deception. Against arguments that they inevitably produce essentialist universalism⁸³, Schmidt’s article confirms the (didactically useful) potential carried by *isms* in uncovering and expounding intellectual complexity. It also encourages us to break the unitary epistemological and interpretative model whereby the past is made of polar opposites (often expressed via misconceived and reductive *isms*).

- 84 To the possible question of what difference does it make whether a term which denotes some ideology (...)

29 Thus, on the basis of what has been outlined in the foregoing paragraphs, we will now formulate a different (less evolutionary than Höpfl's) proposal on *isms*, their *mode d'emploi* and their value. Six non-mutually-exclusive categories emerge⁸⁴ :

1. Cultural isms : they are employed in everyday conversation ; they bring attention to certain phenomena, ways of speaking, habits and mindsets. In so doing, they often denounce, mock and scorn. Hence they can hold an ethical dimension.
2. Descriptive isms (quasi-factual) : they can indicate specific policies or strategies adopted by a government towards others ; programmes implemented by groups with a particular intent ; and individual behaviours informed by one main feature contained in the term composing the ism.
3. Derogatory isms : they are created to target people, groups (e.g. sects, heretical fringes, rival parties, iconoclasts) and attitudes reputed to be abnormal or not in line with majority-thinking or dismissed as insignificant or disregarded as inferior.
4. Didactic isms (disciplinary-academic dimension) : their purpose is to explain and, to a certain extent, to simplify and/or clarify movements and ideas, historical periods and events to an audience in education or part of the so-called educated-public.
5. Ideological isms : they refer mainly to the political, philosophical and sociological spheres in that they denote grand narratives of thought and principles characterizing units of ideas interwoven with historical developments, especially in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.
6.
 - 85 We believe that e.g. Thatcherism can encompass all of the six categories.

Technical isms : they are employed in scholarly work as a creative key with which to unlock hidden and/or neglected objects of study⁸⁵.

- 86 See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, transl. E. Anscombe, Oxford, Blackwell, 1963 (...)

30 This way of proceeding is inspired by Ludwig Wittgenstein's idea of discourse as social practice and language in action. It applies to the issue of *isms* a sort of Wittgensteinian-linguistic cartography, an anthropology of language-usage⁸⁶. This is not some kind of Borgesian utopia/dystopia whose ambition is to catalogue every application of *isms*. Rather, it is an attempt to provide a picture of some central *ism*-uses. Despite being a work *ad infinitum*, this strategy enables us to recognize some cardinal points on our intellectual horizon and on that of the men and women studied. As a geographical map does not exactly correspond to

the surface of the earth, so a schematic grid of *ism*-applications does not exhaust the entirety of all possible uses, but makes us more aware of the territory on which we move as investigators of the past. Exploring the ways in which *isms* might be adopted as well as how they fit with past terminology can be illuminating for the historian at pains to understand different theories, convictions and prejudices.

31 In summary, what has been attempted above is no more than an outline of some important debates and tendencies concerning the use of *isms* in both public discourse and the scholarship. Having provided a broad picture of how various *isms* first emerged, of how they function in non-strictly academic circles and of how they have been and are treated by scholars, we have then concentrated on the only work expressly dedicated to the study of *ism*-categories. Relying on Harro Höpfl's pioneering but now dated article, we have advanced some suggestions on how to make a more accurate and thorough use of *isms*. Now, we need to connect these suggestions to the issue of history-writing as – we think – it is pursued in intellectual history. To do so might enable us to further clarify important aspects of the *ism*-question.

VII.

- 87 If we choose, instead, to follow an equally large number of scholars, philosophers, sociologists and [\(...\)](#)
- 88 See John G. A. Pocock, “The Concept of a Language and the *Métier d’Historien* : Some Considerations [\(...\)](#)

32 If we take heed of several voices heard in this piece, we are told we should get rid of *isms*⁸⁷. This is due to the reductionist and constraining configuration of the past they are supposed to seize and give account of. And yet the problem remains : what do we replace many of the *isms* with ? What are the alternatives, and if we identify them, why are they in any lasting sense less problematic terms to become part and parcel of our scholarly vocabulary and methodological toolbox ? To attempt to give an answer to these questions implies setting forth a few considerations on the *métier d’historien*⁸⁸. Practitioners of different disciplines within the larger framework of history-writing disagree about *the right thing to do* with regard to method and often dismiss ways of proceeding which are not in tune with theirs as unfounded and sloppy. Instead of perpetuating this less than sympathetic trend and prescribe recipes for *the good scholar*, we rather think it more valuable to explore the field of research in which we pursue our work. In brief, the issue of whether *isms* should or should not be used might depend on how we look at our practice.

- 89 Although it is not our concern in this paper, it would be worth carrying out a critical analysis of [\(...\)](#)

33 More specifically, it might have to do with what we think of the conventional devices which we deploy in our effort to provide new readings of history. As terms like “early modern”, “modern” and “post-modern” help us divide into smaller units of time the chronological vastness opened before us⁸⁹, so the employment of *isms* help us grasp portions of the theoretical panorama of the past. Equally, classifications of past-traces according to whether they are written or oral, documents or texts, public/official or private, intellectual or popular, in a foreign language or our own, translated and, if so, by whom and under what circumstances, constitute indispensable lenses through which to bring into focus historical experience(s). All of these instruments – *isms* included – are the fruit of conventions which can facilitate the study of history and strengthen our inevitably limited approach to it.

- 90 Quentin Skinner, *Liberty before Liberalism*, Cambridge, CUP, 1998, p. 110-112. See also Robert Lamb, (...)

34 To address the complex issue of *isms* is also an attempt to rethink the conditions of knowledge available to the intellectual historian. In this sense, it is of chief importance to ask whether the (intellectual) historian is an antiquarian or a rescuer of the past or, rather, a shaper of its cultural codes for consumption in the here and now. Is studying the past in its multifarious manifestations a reproductive effort or does it imply a creative endeavour? Should historical research be guided by the unachievable goal of telling what *really* happened? Or, more humbly, should it consist in a search for understanding through the fallible instruments at our disposal, the meanings of textual traces left behind on that distant – or not so distant – horizon? If the task of the intellectual historian is to become aware of concepts and ideas employed nowadays in an unconscious and even uncomprehending manner, then to examine our way of employing *isms* is not only justified but necessary⁹⁰. As an archaeologist excavating the past and bringing to life remnants of it, the type of historian whose work we admire should not refrain from using language, categories and models which, whilst respectful of the rhetoric of past authors, are also capable of conveying to modern readers a sense of what it *might have been like*.

- 91 Brian Young, “The Tyranny of the Definite Article : Some Thoughts on the Art of Intellectual Histor (...)
- 92 Young, “The Tyranny of the Definite Article”, p. 105, p. 107.
- 93 Blair Worden, *Roundhead Reputations : The English Civil Wars and the Passions of Posterity*, Harmond (...)

35 To achieve this entails an inventive effort on the part of the historian. It presupposes a practitioner willing to adopt a different pose before past-fragments left in texts, documents, paintings etc. : one that applies imagination and irony to the art of unveiling *and* narrating what went on in both the foreground and the background of historical experience. Moved by the aim of giving form to new ideas, images or concepts so as to better capture events and actions, words and

theories scattered on that often alien canvas we name history, the intellectual historian pursues his/her activity more like an artist than like a scientist. As Brian Young - following Duncan Forbes - put it, he/she is active and persistent “in cultivating the artist’s penetrating eye⁹¹.” Shaped by “the idea of history as literature, and literature as history”, intellectual historians are “uniquely sensitive masters of rhetoric (and entrepreneurs of the rhetorical repertoire rather than philosophers)⁹².” This profile strongly suggests that “historians, like novelists, are makers of order⁹³.” It also reminds us that to use *isms* is integral to this enterprise of translating past utterances for twenty-first-century readers. After all, history-writing is a narrative art.

- 94 Partly drawing on the ideas of the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard, imagination is here taken a [\(...\)](#)
- 95 Brian Young referred to Hugh Trevor-Roper as an eminent instance of this kind of history-practition [\(...\)](#)
- 96 John W. Burrow, “Intellectual History in English Academic Life : Reflections on a Revolution”, in W [\(...\)](#)
- 97 Richard Cobb, prolific historian of modern France and eccentric cosmopolitan Oxford don, pertinentl [\(...\)](#)

36Thus, our historian is at work to stage the aesthetically and intellectually rich encounter between texts and contexts. Instead of cutting a presumptuously - if not tyrannically - oracular figure, this historian is a stylist whose trained imagination⁹⁴ has the liberating power of bringing together the familiar and the unfamiliar, the known and the unknown⁹⁵. In so doing, he/she accounts for the important variations which informed the meanings of concepts such as “absolute”, “homeland”, “radical” and “liberty”, and clarifies how these affect scholarly definitions of “absolutism”, “patriotism”, “radicalism” and “liberalism.” As intellectual categories of the former helped societies to reflect on their organization and life, so scholarly conventions belonging to the latter invite scholars to examine their own assumptions. In this regard, we can say with John W. Burrow that “[i]ntellectual history is not parody” : rather, it is a negotiation between us and the past in the form of “eavesdropping” and indeed “translation⁹⁶.” Since to translate entails not just the operation of translating *from* but also that of translating *into* a language, it is legitimate to assert that chronologically heterogeneous concepts can be employed to interpret discourse formulated in the past. In other words, to convey the past to an audience implies transmitting images in an intelligible way, and this is precisely what *isms* do by helping the reader to see connections – in the Wittgensteinian sense – that might otherwise have remained obscure. The job-description we hereby propose requires two main skills : observer and creator⁹⁷.

37Might the intellectual historian thus be described as an *ismist*, as one engaged in the art of *ismism*, which may well, from time to time, involve not just the

radical redefinition of existing *isms* but even the invention of new *isms*? If so, to operate within the methodological framework of intellectual history means to avoid all a-priori proclamations of whether *isms* should be used or (imperatively) avoided, but to ask ourselves – as has been done in this essay – how *history* has used them, how we can understand them, and what use of them might be productive of new knowledge. When handling *isms* the intellectual historian acts, on the one hand, as somebody engaged in tracing their developments through the successive epochs and multifarious contexts and, on the other, as somebody who carefully clarifies how he/she is employing them in his/her effort to illuminate and narrate the past. Animated by the spirit of critical enquiry, the intellectual historian leads us to realize that *isms* are both the elaboration and the outcomes of choices (to the exclusion of other legitimate ones) made at different times in that endlessly finite stream of events which we call history (our own history too). He/she might also encourage us to think about the future of *isms*, notably of those that, faced with the incumbent global economic recession, have failed to provide solid answers to it (e.g. capitalism, neo-liberalism, socialism and libertarianism). 38. After all, one of history-writing's main vocations (and one especially pursued in intellectual history) is to be always at pains to be inquisitive and inventive not only when interpreting and representing human experience in its plural temporal dimensions, but also when critically addressing itself.

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Notes

1 See e.g. Dominick LaCapra, *Rethinking Intellectual History: Texts, Contexts, Language*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1983 ; Donald R. Kelley, "Horizons of Intellectual History: Retrospect, Circumspect, Prospect", *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 48 (1987), p. 143-169 ; John E. Toews, "Intellectual History after the Linguistic Turn", *American Historical Review*, 92 (1987), p. 879-907 ; James Tully (ed.), *Meaning and Context. Quentin Skinner and his Critics*, Cambridge, CUP, 1988 ; D. R. Woolf (ed.), *Intellectual History: New Perspectives*, Lewiston-Queenston-Lampeter, The Edwin Mellen Press, 1989 ; Knud Haakonssen, "The History of Ideas", in Knud Haakonssen (ed.), *Natural Law and Moral Philosophy. From Grotius to the Scottish Enlightenment*, Cambridge, CUP, 1996, p. 8-14 ; Stefan Collini, Richard Whatmore, Brian Young (eds), *Economy, Polity and Society. British Intellectual History 1750-1950*, Cambridge, CUP, 2000 ; Donald R. Kelley, *The Descent of Ideas. The History of Intellectual History*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2002 ; Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics. Volume I: Regarding Method*, Cambridge, CUP, 2002 ; Richard Whatmore and Brian Young (eds), *Palgrave Advances in Intellectual History*, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2006.

2 *Oxford English Dictionary*, "ism, *n.*" (the author consulted both the hardback version and the online one at <http://www.oed.com> accessed on 26 December 2010). Underlining the "informal" connotation of the noun "ism", *The Longman*

Dictionary of Contemporary English offers the following definition : “used to describe a set of ideas or beliefs whose name ends in “ism”, especially when you think that they are not sensible or practical” (*The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, Harlow, Longman, 1995, iii ed., “ism”, p. 753). The French dictionary *Le Grand Robert* refers to the “suffix” *ism* as “indicating a profession, an opinion (socialism, journalism), membership of a group or of a system (structuralism).” It also says that an *ism* is “very productive” and includes the meanings of : “attitude, tendency”, “schools”, “positive attitude towards (a belief)” (*Le Grand Robert de la Langue Française*, dirigée par A. Rey, Paris, Le Robert, 2001, ii ed., tome 4 “Inco-Orga”, p. 397). English dictionaries’ definitions of *isms* seem to be more negative than French ones : although addressing this issue would require twice the space here available, this difference might tentatively be accounted for by distinguishing a pragmatic and anti-intellectual(ist) vein in the former case and a more positive attitude towards free intellectual coinage in the latter.

[3](#) As for what follows, see *OED*, “ism, *suffix*”.

[4](#) An updated version of the *OED* (see *OED*, “ism, *n.*”, *Draft additions June 2004*) cites *isms* which refer to nouns expressing (the conviction of) “the superiority” of one person or group over another (e.g. “racism”, “sexism”) and *isms* conveying “prejudice” on the basis of age and physical appearance (e.g. “ageism”). This already rich list could be extended to include *isms* that are used in a colloquial way (e.g. Blairism, catastrophism, parochialism, snobbism, voyeurism, hooliganism, but also Machiavellism and post-modernism, whose current use has often lost any historical accuracy) and those of a humorous nature (e.g. charlatanism, confusionism, whateverism).

[5](#) The references that follow are mainly taken from the *OED*.

[6](#) See T. J. Hogg, *The Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, London, E. Moxon, 1858 ; 4 vols, i, p. 373.

[7](#) See *OED*, “ism, *n.*” for examples of this belief. In 1867-8 Matthew Arnold – much hostile towards *isms* – mocked “*hole and corner* forms of religion” for their “provincialism” (Matthew Arnold, “Culture and Anarchy”, in *Culture and Anarchy and Other Writings*, ed. Stefan Collini, Cambridge, CUP, 1993, “Preface”, p. 196).

[8](#) Marcel Proust, “Sodome et Gomorrhe”, in *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu*, Paris, Gallimard, 1954, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, tome ii, ii partie, ch. iii, p. 876.

[9](#) Phillipe Sollers, *Femmes*, Paris, Gallimard, 1983, p. 151.

[10](#) It is generally accepted that the suffix “ismatic” pertained to the *ism*-category, indicating adherence (“ismatize”).

[11](#) See Nicholas Tyacke, *Anti-Calvinists : the Rise of English Arminianism c.1590-*

1640, Oxford, OUP, 1987.

[12](#) See below.

[13](#) As for the second kind, see further down in this paper.

[14](#) Cited in M. B. Ferrari, “Incontri sul Grande Fiume 5. Ma cosa fai Guareschi in bicicletta ? Nel paese del parmense dove vive il figlio : ‘Pedalava per raccogliere storie e dimagrire’”, *La Stampa*, 9 August 2010, p. 21.

[15](#) However, it can be said with reasonable confidence that positive (or, at least, neutral) connotations are generally attached to artistic movements such as Expressionism, Symbolism, Cubism, Surrealism etc.

[16](#) Cited in Richard Newbury, “Graham Greene : Spiare, viziuetto di famiglia”, *La Stampa*, 31 December 2010, p. 35. Totalitarianism is the quintessential example of this class of *isms*.

[17](#) We are aware that our choice of *isms* is arbitrary and that examples could be multiplied almost *ad infinitum*.

[18](#) Edmund Husserl, “The Vienna Lecture. Appendix 1 : Philosophy and the Crisis of European Humanity”, in Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, translated, with an Introduction, by David Carr, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1970, p. 269-299, p. 289.

[19](#) See David Carr, “Translator’s Introduction”, in Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences*, p. xv-xliii, p. xxvii.

[20](#) In *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society* (1958) – dedicated to the study and observation of the inhabitants of the village of Chiaromonte (called Montegrano in the book) in the Potenza province (Basilicata) – the American political scientist Edward Christie Banfield focused on this category as the prism through which to decipher some aspects of a certain mentality typical of Southern Italy. In particular, Banfield underlined how “amoral familism” entailed the dissolution of the principles of good and evil.

[21](#) See e.g. Giulio Bollati, *L’Italiano. Il carattere nazionale come storia e come invenzione*, Turin, Einaudi, 1983 ; Ernesto Galli della Loggia, *L’Identità Italiana*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1988.

[22](#) See Edward W. Said, *Orientalism : Western Conceptions of the Orient*, London, Routledge, 1978. Said defined Orientalism as “a structure erected in the thick of an imperial contest whose dominant wing it represented and elaborated not only as scholarship but as partisan ideology” (Edward W. Said, “Representing the Colonized : Anthropology’s Interlocutors”, in Edward W. Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Literary and Cultural Essays*, London, Granta Books, 2001, p. 293-316, p.

299). See also Edward W. Said, "The Clash of Definitions", in *ibid.*, pp. 569-90, p. 586 and Edward W. Said, "Orientalism Reconsidered", in *ibid.*, pp. 198-215, p. 199, p. 202.

23 Kant referred to a condition where mankind would be deprived of freedom and dignity, and where people would still be affected by "immaturity" and want of free and rational judgement "in all matters of conscience." This scenario was the opposite of an enlightened society. Interestingly, in English translations the term adopted to depict such a situation is either "barbarism" or "barbarity" (see e.g. Immanuel Kant, "What is Enlightenment?", in Immanuel Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, transl. L. W. Beck, Indianapolis-New York, MacMillan Publishing Company, 1959, p. 85-92, p. 91 ; the term can also be found in Kant's *The Critique of Judgement* of 1790 (see Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, transl. J. C. Meredith, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1952, para 13). In reference to barbarism as "absence of culture" and civilization see *OED*, "barbarism, *n.*" (<http://www.oed.com> accessed on 1 February 2011) and for the origins of the term with the meaning of "to speak like a foreigner" see *Oxford Dictionaries*, "barbarism, *noun*" (<http://oxforddictionaries.com> accessed on 1 February 2011).

24 Whereas Francophobia can be found in the *OED* and is used currently, anti-Frenchism is not recorded there even though one can read references (all of which very recent) to it by doing a Google-search.

25 This idea relies on the work of Reinhart Koselleck and of conceptual historians (see e.g. Javier Fernández Sebastián (ed.), *Political Concepts and Time. New Approaches to Conceptual History*, Santander, Spain, Cantabria University Press-McGraw Hill, 2011, p. 5.

26 Michael Quinion gathers an impressive quantity of categories but limits his analysis to the descriptive framework of a dictionary : see Michael Quinion, *Ologies and Isms. A Dictionary of Word Beginnings and Endings*, Oxford, OUP, 2002 ; new edn). The same applies to Raymond Williams, "Isms", in Raymond Williams, *Keywords. A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, London, Flamingo, 1983 ; i edn 1976, p. 173-174.

27 A. London Fell, *Origins of Legislative Sovereignty and the Legislative State : Volume 5, Modern Origins, Developments, and Perspectives against the Background of 'Machiavellism.'* Book II : *Modern Major 'Isms' (17th-18th Centuries)*, Westport, Conn. and London, Praeger, 1996 and A. London Fell, *Origins of Legislative Sovereignty and the Legislative State : Volume 5, Modern Origins, Developments, and Perspectives against the Background of 'Machiavellism.'* Book III : *Modern Major 'Isms' (19th-20th Centuries)*, Westport, Conn. and London, Praeger, 1999. In the former London Fell concentrated on "absolutism", "constitutionalism", "rationalism", "empiricism", "liberalism" and "conservatism", whilst in the latter on "utilitarianism", "positivism", "idealism", "nationalism", "socialism", "legalism" and "authoritarianism."

[28](#) London Fell, *Origins of Legislative Sovereignty. Volume 5, Book II*, p. ix.

[29](#) Ibid., p. x.

[30](#) Ibid., p. xi, p. 1, p. 2-3. See also A. London Fell, *Origins of Legislative Sovereignty and the Legislative State : Volume 5, Modern Origins, Developments, and Perspectives against the Background of 'Machiavellism.'* Book I : Pre-Modern 'Machiavellism', Westport, Conn. and London, Praeger, 1993, p. 3.

[31](#) London Fell, *Origins of Legislative Sovereignty. Volume 5, Book II*, p. 3.

[32](#) Glenn Burgess reviewed London Fell's discussion of these *isms* in *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, 29 (1998), p. 565-567, here p. 566.

[33](#) London Fell, *Origins of Legislative Sovereignty. Volume 5, Book II*, p. 335 (his italics). In particular, London Fell targeted the alleged coherence of the “civic republicanism” paradigm claimed by many scholars since the 1990s (see e.g. Martin van Gelderen and Quentin Skinner (eds), *Republicanism. A Shared European Heritage*, Cambridge, CUP, 2002 ; 2 vols).

[34](#) See London Fell, *Origins of Legislative Sovereignty. Volume 5, Book II*, p. 11.

[35](#) On this perspective see John W. Burrow, “Duncan Forbes and the History of Ideas : an Introduction to ‘Aesthetic Thoughts on Doing the History of Ideas’”, *History of European Ideas*, 27 (2001), p. 97-99 and Duncan Forbes, “Aesthetic Thoughts on Doing the History of Ideas”, *History of European Ideas*, 27 (2001), p. 101-113.

[36](#) London Fell openly stated that he believed in the importance of being “value-neutral, as well as ‘system-free’” when studying the theories of writers like Machiavelli (London Fell, *Origins of Legislative Sovereignty. Volume 5, Book I*, p. 10).

[37](#) Angelo d’Orsi (ed.), *Gli ismi della politica. 52 voci per ascoltare il presente*, Rome, Viella, 2010.

[38](#) d’Orsi, “Presentazione”, in Angelo d’Orsi (ed.), *Gli ismi della politica*, p. vii-xi, p. viii. As a further sign of *isms*’ popularity see e.g. James Chandler (ed.), *The Cambridge History of English Romantic Literature*, Cambridge, CUP, 2009, “Introduction”, p. 8-9.

[39](#) Harro Höpfl, “Isms”, *British Journal of Political Science*, 13 (1983), p. 1-17, here p. 1-2.

[40](#) They then passed on to Latin from which, in turn, developed the French *isme* and the English *ism*, which is though pronounced “isem.” *Isms* are masculine in all languages apart from Dutch (ibid., p. 11, fn. 33).

[41](#) Ibid., p. 9.

[42](#) *Isms* went from meaning “abusive” to “technical” (ibid., p. 5-6).

[43](#) Ibid., p. 11-12.

[44](#) Ibid., p. 1.

[45](#) Ibid., p. 13-14.

[46](#) Ibid., p. 15.

[47](#) Ibid., p. 15-16.

[48](#) Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being. A Study of the History of an Idea*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1936, p. 5.

[49](#) Nicholas Henshall, “Early Modern Absolutism 1550-1700 : Political Reality or Propaganda?”, in Ronald G. Asch and Heinz Duchhardt (eds), *Der Absolutismus – ein Mythos ? Strukturwandel monarchischer Herrschaft in West- und Mitteleuropa (ca. 1550-1700)*, Köln, Böhlau, 1996, p. 25-53, p. 49.

[50](#) Ibid., p. 51.

[51](#) Höpfl, “Isms”, p. 14.

[52](#) This is the approach taken by scholars like Conal Condren and Jonathan Clark (exponents of a “*linguistic*” or “*nominalist*” approach), and to a less degree Colin Davis (employing a “*functional*” approach), who have warned against applying “radical” and “radicalism” to historical contexts - such as the early modern period - where these categories had not yet been coined (Glenn Burgess, “Introduction”, in Glenn Burgess and Michael Festenstein (eds), *English Radicals 1550-1850*, Cambridge, CUP, 2007, p. 1-16, p. 7-8). For Davis’ position see J. C. Davis, “Afterword : Reassessing Radicalism in a Traditional Society : Two Questions”, in Burgess and Festenstein (eds), *English Radicalism*, p. 338-372, p. 367. See also Conal Condren, “Afterword : Radicalism Revisited”, in Burgess and Festenstein (eds), *English Radicalism*, p. 311-337. However, when referring to authors such as Gerrard Winstanley (*d.1676*), Davis adopted the term “communism” to indicate ideas of common property (see J. C. Davis, “Utopianism”, in J. H. Burns and Mark Goldie (eds), *The Cambridge History of Political Thought 1450-1700*, Cambridge, CUP, 1991, p. 329-344).

[53](#) Davis, “Afterword”, p. 367.

[54](#) The two historical junctures at which “European thought appears to have been particularly productive of -isms” were the end of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth centuries, which corresponded to the breaking of

Christendom into different confessions, and the first half of the nineteenth century (Höpfl, “Isms”, p. 4-6). However, the *Encyclopédie* churned out plenty of *isms* (see *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, par une société de gens de lettres. Mis en ordre & publié par M. Diderot ... & quant à la partie mathématique, par M. d’Alembert.* (tom. 8-17. Mis en ordre et publié par Mr *** [i.e. D. Diderot].), 17 tomes, Paris, 1751-65). Afterwards, it was the twentieth century that was to replenish (sometimes creatively) both highbrow and lowbrow vocabularies.

[55](#) Thomas Nash, *Christs Teares ouer Ierusalem [...]*, London, 1593, p. 80b.

[56](#) A. E. Baldini, “Machiavellismo e machiavellismi : progetto di ricerca e messa a punto di un concetto”, in Alessandro Arienzo and Gianfranco Borrelli (eds), *Anglo-American Faces of Machiavelli*, Monza, Italy, Polimetrica, 2009, p. 23-48, esp. p. 38-41. On Machiavellism as a category see London Fell, *Origins of Legislative Sovereignty and the Legislative State : Volume 5, Book I*.

[57](#) Baldini, “Machiavellismo e machiavellismi”, p. 38.

[58](#) Ibid., p. 39-41.

[59](#) John Collinges, *A reasonable account why some pious, nonconforming ministers in England judge it sinful for them to perform their ministerial acts [...]*, London ?, 1679, p. 80.

[60](#) This can be verified by searching the database *Early English Books Online (EEBO)*.

[61](#) Owen (d.1623) was the author of *Herod and Pilate Reconciled* (1610) in which the last chapter is titled “Puritan-Iesuitisme” (see David Owen, *Herod and Pilate Reconciled [...]*, Cambridge, 1610, ch. 9, p. 46-75). However, in the 1643 edition the title was changed into *Puritano-Iesuitismus, the Puritan turn’d Jesuite*, London, 1643.

[62](#) “Iesuitisme” appeared soon after (Georg Sohn, 1592 ; Christopher Bagshaw, 1601 ; Antoine Arnauld, 1602).

[63](#) See *EEBO*.

[64](#) Around the same time, it was maintained “that love of despotism [...] is imbiied with the name of king” (Christopher Love, *The strange and wonderful predictions of Mr. Christopher Love [...]*, London, 1651 ?, p. 71). Almost ten years earlier, the Independent minister and radical parliamentarian John Goodwin had composed the explicitly anti-royalist *Anti-Cavalierisme* (1642).

[65](#) See e.g. Conal Condren, *Argument and Authority in Early Modern England. The Presupposition of Oaths and Offices*, Cambridge, CUP, 2006, p. 162.

[66](#) Henry More, *Some cursory reflexions impartially made upon Mr. Richard Baxter* [...], London, 1685, p. 22-3.

[67](#) See *EEBO*.

[68](#) *Ecclesia anglicana* appeared well before Anglican (1635) : see Julian Davies, *The Caroline Captivity of the Church. Charles I and the Remoulding of Anglicanism 1625-1641*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1992, p. 5, esp. fn. 3.

[69](#) Michael P. Winship, “Freeborn (Puritan) Englishmen and Slavish Subjection : Popish Tyranny and Puritan Constitutionalism, c. 1570-1606”, *English Historical Review*, 124 (2009), p. 1050-1074, here p. 1060.

[70](#) William Bradshaw, *English Puritanisme*, London, 1605. Like the labels “Arminianism” and “papism”, “Puritanism” is also a problematic word and needs to be used with caution. This is so because of its derogatory connotations in that it was originally (1564) applied to nonconformist clergy within the Elizabethan Church as “a term of abuse” and as such it was often vociferously disavowed by the latter (John Coffey and Paul C. H. Lim, “Introduction”, in John Coffey and Paul C. H. Lim (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Puritanism*, Cambridge, CUP, 2008), p. 1-15, esp. p. 1). As Nicholas Tyacke clarified, “until the 1620s Puritan, as a technical term, was usually employed to describe those members of the English Church who wanted further Protestant reforms in liturgy and organization.” Afterwards, “Puritanism” came to commonly include Calvinists and became “an abusive epithet” to denote all aspects of “Protestant religiosity” (Tyacke, *Anti-Calvinists*, p. 7-8). The so-called Puritans called themselves “godly” or “the Elect” : interestingly neither of these two terms were turned into a noun ending in *ism*.

[71](#) See e.g. Reginald Pole, *The seditious and blasphemous oration of Cardinal Pole* [...], London, 1560, “Fabyan wythers to the gentle reader”, fo. iii ; Johannes Sleidanus, *A famouse cronicle of oure time*, London, 1560, e.g. bk 9, p. cxv, p. cxviii, bk 10, p. cxliii, bk 12, p. clviii, bk 15, p. cci, bk 17, p. ccxvi ; Stanislaus Hosius, *Of the expresse vvorde of God* [...], Louvain, 1567, p. 69, note.

[72](#) Höpfl, “Isms”, p. 14.

[73](#) Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being*, p. 6.

[74](#) Alexander Schmidt, “Irenic Patriotism in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century German Political Discourse”, *The Historical Journal*, 53 (2010), p. 243-269.

[75](#) *Ibid.*, p. 245.

[76](#) See *ibid.*, esp. p. 265-268.

[77](#) *Ibid.*, p. 248, p. 249.

[78](#) See *ibid.*, p. 250-253.

[79](#) *Ibid.*, p. 258.

[80](#) *Ibid.*, p. 260.

[81](#) *Ibid.*, p. 268-269.

[82](#) This expression is taken from Said, “Orientalism Reconsidered”, p. 211.

[83](#) This view is supported by neo-Historicism, with its nominalist approach to all types of scholarly categorization and periodization.

[84](#) To the possible question of what difference does it make whether a term which denotes some ideology, set of principles, opinions, or prejudices, ends in *ism* or not, we reply – once more – that *isms* do hold a conceptual and epistemological specificity and that as such the suffix is not a linguistic accident. This can be understood by paying attention to the suffix’s prime etymological origins as they are traced in the *OED* where “the n. in - μ had the sense of acting or doing like, siding with, adhesion to, or speaking like” (*OED*, “ism, suffix”).

[85](#) We believe that e.g. Thatcherism can encompass all of the six categories.

[86](#) See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, transl. E. Anscombe, Oxford, Blackwell, 1963, especially for the concept of “family resemblance” (“Familienähnlichkeit”). For Wittgenstein’s anti-essentialism see also Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Preliminary Studies for the ‘Philosophical investigations’, generally known as the Blue and brown books*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1960 ; ii edn and Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*, transl. C. J. Luckhardt and M. A. E. Aue, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1980, vol. 2.

[87](#) If we choose, instead, to follow an equally large number of scholars, philosophers, sociologists and so forth, we then find no or little exploration of what it means to resort to *isms* in our enterprise of interpreting the past as much as the present, and in that of history-writing. Thus, our position embraces neither a trenchant rejection of all *isms* nor an unconditional and unexamined acceptance of them.

[88](#) See John G. A. Pocock, “The Concept of a Language and the *Métier d’Historien* : Some Considerations on Practice”, in Anthony Pagden (ed.), *The Languages of Political Theory in Early-Modern Europe*, Cambridge, CUP, 1987, p. 19-38.

[89](#) Although it is not our concern in this paper, it would be worth carrying out a critical analysis of terms derived from “modern” and of their usage.

[90](#) Quentin Skinner, *Liberty before Liberalism*, Cambridge, CUP, 1998, p. 110-112. See also Robert Lamb, “Quentin Skinner’s Revised Historical Contextualism : A

Critique”, *History of the Human Sciences*, 22 (2009), p. 51-73.

[91](#) Brian Young, “The Tyranny of the Definite Article : Some Thoughts on the Art of Intellectual History”, *History of European Ideas*, 28 (2002), p. 101-117, here p. 105. As for Forbes, see Forbes, “Aesthetic Thoughts”, p. 101-113. The opposite opinion, that is that historians have become more like scientists and less like literary men, can be found in Richard J. Evans, *In Defence of History*, London, Granta Books, 2000 ; new edn, e.g. p. 71. It would not be far-fetched to say that nowadays historians resemble neither of these two figures : but they are rather like hurrying and bustling civil servants or business executives (Forbes, “Aesthetic Thoughts”, p. 107, p. 113) !

[92](#) Young, “The Tyranny of the Definite Article”, p. 105, p. 107.

[93](#) Blair Worden, *Roundhead Reputations : The English Civil Wars and the Passions of Posterity*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 2001, p. 19.

[94](#) Partly drawing on the ideas of the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard, imagination is here taken as a creative force leading to the elaboration of new images of reality. Thus, the function of the historian becomes that of providing new and novel images of the past. Informed by the imaginative power of the practitioner, history-writing is, therefore, the self-critical enterprise of unfolding different portions of the past through the (inevitably) relative and fallible scholarly use of image-construction. As for Bachelard, see his *The Psycho-analysis of Fire* (1938) and *The Poetics of Reverie* (1960).

[95](#) Brian Young referred to Hugh Trevor-Roper as an eminent instance of this kind of history-practitioner (see Young, “The Tyranny of the Definite Article”, p. 108). See also Hugh Lloyd-Jones, Valerie Pearl and Blair Worden (eds), *History and Imagination : Essays in Honour of H.R. Trevor-Roper*, London, Duckworth, 1981.

[96](#) John W. Burrow, “Intellectual History in English Academic Life : Reflections on a Revolution”, in Whatmore and Young (eds), *Palgrave Advances in Intellectual History*, p. 8-24, p. 22-23.

[97](#) Richard Cobb, prolific historian of modern France and eccentric cosmopolitan Oxford don, pertinently defined the historian as “a stationary witness, an observer of a swirling collectivity of which he is not a part” (Richard Cobb, *A Second Identity. Essays on France and French History*, London, OUP, 1969, p. 43). For Cobb, the “task of the historian [...] is very much akin to that of a novelist” in that “[t]here must be a wide element of guesswork” (see Richard J. Evans, *Cosmopolitan Islanders. British Historians and the European Continent*, Cambridge, CUP, 2009, p. 149, p. 150).

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Référence électronique

Cesare Cuttica, « *To Use or Not to Use ... The Intellectual Historian and the Isms : A Survey and a Proposal* », *Études Épistémè* [En ligne], 23 | 2013, mis en ligne le 01 avril 2013, consulté le 22 juillet 2018. URL :

<http://journals.openedition.org/episteme/268> ; DOI : 10.4000/episteme.268

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Auteur

[Cesare Cuttica](#)

Cesare Cuttica is 'Maître de conférences en Civilisation Britannique', at the Département d'études des pays anglophones, Université Paris 8-Vincennes. He is the author of *Sir Robert Filmer (1588-1653) and the Patriotic Monarch : Patriarchalism in Seventeenth-Century Political Thought* (Manchester University Press, 2012). Together with Glenn Burgess, he has edited *Monarchism and Absolutism in Early Modern Europe* (London : Pickering & Chatto, 2012). He has also published articles in *History of Political Thought*, *History of European Ideas*, *Renaissance Studies*, *History & Theory* and *Intellectual History Review*.

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