Purification versus Plurality: Lustration in the Canon of Political Thought

Christopher J Finlay

In a certain popular TV show, a famous chef visits a failing local restaurant and advises its owners how to get things back on track. Invariably, week after week, one of the methods for doing so is to demand that the multi-page menu with a plethora of options is pared down to something much simpler. A shorter list is easier to do better from the kitchen's point of view and, crucially, it's easier to navigate for the customer, helping focus their attention and manage their expectations. Building a single, disciplinary canon is rather like this. The process of selection is as much (if not more) about forgetting as about remembering, what to exclude rather than which to include. To highlight the preeminent few, scholars filter out the many supposedly lesser figures and texts. In doing so, their aim is to improve the discipline's focus on those that truly represent the best. As Kimberly Hutchings and Patricia Owens suggest, selectiveness helps 'mark out the terrain of academic disciplines' and inform newcomers of 'the perennial discipline-defining questions and how they are addressed over time'. Canons thus 'establish a common set of reference points for disciplinary discussion, form a core part of university curricula, and serve as a crucial pedagogic tool for the socialization of generations of scholars' (2020, 347).

I won't try to argue *for* the inclusion of more women in the canon of political thought. The vitally important recent anthologies of primary and secondary works by and on women in international political thought edited by Patricia Owens and Katharina Rietzler (2021) and by Patricia Owens, Katharina Rietzler, Kimberly Hutchings and Sarah Dunstan (forthcoming) make the case for this eloquently and compellingly. Instead, I'll focus on the question of *what* we would be doing in expanding or otherwise rethinking a canon. Should we argue for extending the same list of historical males by simply *adding* the excluded? Or, perhaps more controversially, should we make a point of following the Gordon Ramsay model of excellence and shoo out some of the old incumbents to make space for the new? Or should we adopt an altogether different approach? Should the very idea of a canon itself be subject to revision at the same time as we revisit the rules for entry?

In their analysis of the canon of international relations and theory, Hutchings and Owens argue two things. First, they argue that exclusion of women in particular is due to a series of inherently biased practices in the discipline as it was previously composed—and, indeed, as it has been practiced up to now, given that we're only now remedying its results and might, in fact, be engaged in perpetuating them even up to the present day. Second, they argue that restoring women will alter our understanding of the discipline in potentially quite radical ways. If those two claims are true of the canon of political theory and the history of political thought, then it points towards a set of flipped questions. Imagine that we admit a body of neglected work by

women theorists. Imagine, secondly, that we also eliminate the vicious practices that had excluded them. And thirdly, imagine that we reinvent the discipline along new lines suggested by the different intellectual agendas that these newcomers to the canon mapped out. What then should we think of those (white) men who had already made it into the canon under the old regime? Would we leave them all in post?

We have some reason to think not. The project to include the excluded is inseparable from 'the strategy of *reconstituting* the canon altogether'. On this basis, to quote Hutchings and Owens again, 'future research agendas on international thought should combine elements of *recovery, rejection,* and *reconstitution*;' 'reconstitution' is about 'an ongoing process of unsettling, where the criteria for inclusion and exclusion are constantly in question' (2020, 357). Excluding anyone and, a fortiori, whole (gendered, racialized) categories of person, shaped the discipline as it emerged and unfolded. By the same token, (re)admitting the excluded will require a further rethink. The criteria of inclusion / exclusion and the norms defining the discipline are interconnected. If you change the former to include the excluded, then you change the latter; and if you change the latter, then they are in turn likely to change the former in further, perhaps unexpected ways.

If so, then isn't it likely that having included the excluded, one would need to consider excluding the included? Not all, of course. But some are presumably present on false pretences insofar as their prominence in the discipline as they helped define it is premised on norms that are themselves premised on exclusion. They do not well represent the best. Recasting the canon around new criteria of inclusion might then turn out to be something akin to lustration. When war or revolution liberates people from an unjust, oppressive order, lustration seeks to purify the new regime by eliminating the most obnoxious elements of the old. If so, then it might be tempting to think about the exclusions of some established thinkers or texts as a matter of *justice.* After all, the exclusion of women from the canon was surely an *injustice,* one suffered both by the individuals whose works were consequently overlooked and by women more generally since they are thereby excluded from being represented and heard (Owens and Reitzler 2021, 10). If that is the right description of what has been going on, then there is an interesting question to ask about culpability or moral responsibility and, hence, how we should view those scholars who *perpetrated* these injustices. As Yvonne Chiu writes on the subject of 'liberal lustration,' the grounds which might be considered for excluding someone from an old, unjust regime include 'complicity in a group agent that was wrong for having defended' it and 'representative responsibility for an epistemically unreliable system' (2011, 443).

The latter in particular implies an ethics of belief according to which we might form a moral judgement about an author's decision to embrace a repellent view. There is at least something to this. If a public figure is found to have made misogynistic remarks on social media, for instance, the outcry against them is not solely directed at their *communication* of those beliefs but also reflects the discovery that they *held* those beliefs in the first place. To choose such a view is surely wrongful; to choose not to relinquish it if, say, one had inherited or learnt it from others might be judged a significant moral failure. Of course, were we to follow this line of reasoning, it would apply equally to women 'perpetrators' of scholarly injustice as to men.

Hutchings and Owens begin their story of the exclusions from IR with a textbook by a woman who helped define the canon in the first place as an all-male affair. And their first example of a leading female voice in early (i.e. late nineteenth- / early twentieth-century) IR thought—Ellen Churchill Semple—'exemplified highly influential evolutionary, racist, and Eurocentric ideas' (2020,350).

The desire to remove the names of some thinkers from buildings, their texts from the syllabus, or their statues from public places, once their non-egalitarian views on gender or race have come to public attention sometimes expresses such an idea. We've recently seen controversies about Aristotle and David Hume based on their connections to racism and the institution of slavery. But, of course, there are probably lots of reasons to think this would be the wrong way to go in further interrogating the shape of the discipline. Crucially, it's very hard to judge the degree to which someone is responsible, still less culpable, for holding a belief. And this difficulty is only intensified in cases where, to use Owens' words on Arendt, a thinker 'is unable to escape [a discourse] in which she was trained and acculturated' or perhaps where philosophers make the mistake attributed by Agnes Callard to Aristotle of 'inscribing' into their ethical theory the results of empirical observation in a context of actually-existing deep inequality (Owens 2017, 423; Callard 2020).

In any case, seeking restorative justice for victims of historic wrongdoing doesn't necessarily entail the need for retribution against those implicated in the wrongs. Perhaps, then, the ethics of belief should focus on a related but different idea. Whatever one might think about the idea of being held responsible for wrongful choices, we might agree that people who hold certain beliefs thereby render themselves ineligible for certain social roles—for instance, that of being promoted as a celebrated scholarly exemplar. The worry might be that promoting such figures risks moral or ideological contamination in the process of 'socialization' that the canon is meant to shape.

In a recent philosophical reflection on the works of artists compromised by revelations of unsavoury views or deeply wrongful behaviour, Noël Carroll argues that the important distinction to make is between artworks that 'summon' us to 'endorse evil' and those that are unconnected with the author's 'moral misbehaviour' or problematic views. Carroll thinks that when art says something that is both important and distinguishable from the wrongs attributed to the artist, then it might redeem itself (Carroll 2021). But I think that, in philosophical debates, we might want to go a step even further. We might, that is, still wish our students, for instance, to interrogate texts that in some ways carry forward arguments that we are fundamentally antipathetic to. Without doing so, we run the risk of treating the most important matters as axiomatic rather than arguing for them. The best way to argue for them might in some instances be to confront them in the classroom and in published scholarship with the most persuasive of their opponents. Of course, teachers should not be in the least hesitant about stating their views on the texts in question (or their authors). That someone or some book is included in a canon shouldn't be taken to imply agreement (or even openness to agreement). One should merely be open to hearing their argument and responding to it with a reasoned (if sometimes quite a firm) reply.

For various reasons, then, it is important that students we intend to socialize within the norms of the discipline are introduced to figures whose contribution to thought is morally ambiguous and, in some ways, tainted. One is the Millian reason that we need to test our beliefs against the most powerfully argued rivals. Another, to quote Owens again, is that, 'to refuse the work may be to miss what [a thinker] got right, to miss certain things that nobody but she had fathomed' (2017, 423). A third reason, paradoxically, is perhaps motivated by self-purification. We find ourselves with intellectual - conceptual, moral, ideological - legacies in our own vocabulary, in the principles we invoke to make moral judgements about contemporary politics, in our 'intuitive' responses to questions of politics and justice that have highly ambiguous provenance. John Locke combined active involvement in running slave-owning colonies and arguments for land acquisition conducive to colonial appropriation with arguments that are widely characterised as liberal, tolerant, egalitarian, and democratic. His canonical status is at least partly due to the significance that those latter ideas have for current political thought and practice. But it forces us to ask, how should we feel about beliefs that many of us now think to be intuitively right and that yet came from such a problematic source? These are *our* beliefs; Locke arguably played a part in conceiving and disseminating them. 'We' must therefore ask to what extent we can extricate ourselves and our beliefs from those other practices and ideas with which they were originally twinned. It's a matter of current beliefs being 'held to account' (Owens 2017, 423). To ask this properly, surely we must return to their origins and interrogate their historical sources critically.

In any case, as Patricia Owens writes, 'there are no unproblematic thinkers' (2017, 423). So rather than embracing an ideal of purity and modelling canon-building on lustrating an old regime, I'd propose that we embrace an ideal of plurality, one that is open to and even places a value on impurity. As an alternative to scholarly lustration, we might conceive of this as a pragmatic 'flashlight' approach. We start by asking, what are the questions *we* feel compelled to ask? Then we need to ask who explored them or offered ideas that might spoke to them historically. The flashlight is one that we knowingly and purposely shine on the past—it serves *our* ends, helping us search out kindred spirits, sympathetic voices, and also more or less able interlocutors and sparring partners. On this model, the canon doesn't dictate to us whom we must engage with but makes texts available to us from which to make selections according to criteria we have come up with for our own reasons.

Such an approach should be distinguished from studying the history of political thought qua History and the curating of canons suited to contemporary inquiry. But, at the same time, it complements these activities. In effect, this suggests we need to negotiate the relationships between three (or more) different activities and their somewhat divergent ends:

1. Building *a* canon (singular): the ends of doing so might include defining intellectual presuppositions and research agendas, modelling excellent scholarship, socializing newcomers, etc.
2. Researching the history of the discipline: The restoration of forgotten voices and influences is part of this. It might also inform the composition of the singular canon but

it might not – the two activities can be quite independent of one-another and their differing aims might lead to quite different (if sometimes overlapping) lists of texts.

3. Composing thematic reading lists: this is something we might characterize as composing *canons* (plural).

Rather than thinking about inclusions and exclusions chiefly vis-à-vis a singular canon, it might be best if we shift emphasis from the first activity (and the Gordon Ramsay approach) to the second and third. If it is conducted carefully and if the need for inclusiveness is recognized and asserted in a judicious way—as exemplified in the work collected in the two anthologies— then historical research and the retelling of the historical narrative in new ways can help us restore forgotten or suppressed voices and reopen avenues of thought and inquiry that had been blocked or concealed. And it can do so without prompting *exclusions* of the sort that building a singular, hegemonic canon might give rise to. Likewise, the creation of plural mini-canons around multiple research themes and methodological paradigms seems apt to enable expansion and greater inclusiveness. Guided by the current questions of contemporary scholars it is likely to reflect more equitably the current composition of the profession and might even help to cultivate greater diversity of membership and participation. And if it is informed by inclusive historical scholarship too, then it can provide impetus to a continuous 'unsettling' of the boundaries of our reading (Hutchings and Owens 2020, 357).

In a pluralistic, pragmatic approach, the questions come first and they come up now; and then the question of finding interlocutors, sources, sparring partners, or outright opponents from the history of thought comes second. This seems to me to be consistent with the ambition of admitting the excluded to the reading lists for the discipline in ways likely to alter the questions we ask and our manner of answering them. If admitting women changes the questions and standards, then we can't really be talking about 'perennial' ones, can we? It must be an open-ended debate partly about the terms of debate.

Callard, Agnes (2020) 'Should we cancel Aristotle?' *New York Times,* July 21st, published in 'The Stone': https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/21/opinion/should-we-cancel-aristotle.html

Owens, Patricia (2017) 'Racism in the Theory Canon: Hannah Arendt and "the One Great Crime in Which America Was Never Involved",' *Millennium,* 45.3: 403-24.

Carroll, Noël (2021) 'How should we relate to the work of cancelled artists?' *The New Statesman Agora Blog,* 2 February: https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/2021/02/how-should-we-relate-work-cancelled-artists

Hutchings, Kimberly, and Owens, Patricia (2021) 'Women Thinkers and the Canon of International Thought: Recovery, Rejection, and Reconstitution,' *American Political Science Review,* 115.2: 347-359.

Owens, Patricia, and Rietzler, Katharina (2021) *Women's International Thought: A New History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

Owens, Patricia, and Rietzler, Katharina, Hutchings, Kimberly, and Dunstan, Sarah (forthcoming) *Women's International Thought: Towards a New Canon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).