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## Travelling theories

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## **Editorial – *Travelling theories***

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In an essay from 1982, the renowned cultural critic Edward Said explored the idea of travelling theory. '[I]deas and theories', Said suggested, 'travel – from person to person, from situation to situation, from one period to another' though the 'circulation of ideas' takes different forms, including 'acknowledged or unconscious influence, creative borrowing, or wholesale appropriation'.<sup>1</sup> While they emerge from within particular traditions, and bear the traces of their historical and cultural conditions of production, theories are nevertheless mobile, exported to contexts diverse from their own. The ability of a particular theory or body of ideas to survive over time, or to gain influence in an historical epoch distinct from that in which it originated, might well be attributable to this capacity for travel. Travelling theories are not left unaffected by their journeying, however. As Said makes clear, as it moves from one environment to another, a theory will change, being 'to some extent transformed by its new uses, its new position in a new time and place',<sup>2</sup> a process that raises important methodological and interpretive questions about the relationship between the newly emplaced or transplanted theory and the 'original' from which it stems. These include questions, for instance, about fidelity (the extent to which the terms of the 'new' incarnation of a given theory conform to those of its original), textual meaning (whether we consider meanings to be 'embedded' in texts and thus unaffected by contextual shifts or whether all interpretation, whenever and wherever it takes place, does violence to the text under examination), and translation (the existence, or otherwise, of terminological equivalents, the presence of elements in a theory

that resist translation, and the transformations effected by any translational encounter).

While Said attends to the capacities of theories to travel, others have turned for illumination to the etymological roots of the word theory. Theory derives, of course, via the noun *theoria*, from the Greek verb *theorein*, connoting to consider, speculate or look at. In this, as the political theorist Fred Dallmayr notes, it suggests ‘the practice or attitude of “looking at” or “gazing at”’.<sup>3</sup> Political theory on this description might be thought of as a particular way of seeing the world; or given the absence of a singular vision of what that involves, particular ways, in the plural, of seeing it. But as Roxanne Euben points out in her essay in the volume *What is Political Theory?*, *theoria* is, in fact, a ‘compound of etymological possibilities’, encompassing not just the idea of vision but also, interestingly, that of travel. The *theoros*, the practitioner of *theoria*, connotes, amongst other things, ‘a state delegate to a festival in another city, and someone who travels to consult an oracle’.<sup>4</sup> The theorist is thus not only “one who sees”; s/he is also a traveller, moving figuratively, if not always literally, between familiar and alien traditions and cultures, ‘seeing and making seen’.<sup>5</sup> Theory, in this sense, might also be understood not just an entity that travels, as Said intimated, but as *itself* a ‘practice of travel and observation’.<sup>6</sup>

Each of the essays in this volume, in different ways, illustrates aspects of these notions of travelling theories and theory as travel. Some focus, as we will see shortly, on the mobility of a particular theory as it moves between different contexts, historical and geographical. Others reveal how a particular theory is itself a product of the (figurative) passage of a theorist between

different worlds, languages, or cultures. Several disclose something of the problems of the translatability, whether linguistic or temporal, of a particular theory or body of ideas. Each author also acts as a guide, translating – ‘making seen’ – specific ideas for the reader. Two of the essays travel back in time and place to explore modes of ancient thought, which have recently experienced something of a revival. In *Reassessing the Rhetoric Revival in Political Theory: Cicero, Eloquence, and the Best Form of Life*, Giuseppe Ballacci examines what Bryan Garsten has called the ‘rhetoric revival’ in political thought. For Ballacci, while the (re)turn to Aristotle, in particular, has enabled contemporary thinkers to contest some of the rationalist assumptions of deliberative theories of democracy, it has unnecessarily restricted the significance of rhetoric to the practice of public deliberation. For this reason, the author suggests revisiting the work of Roman philosopher and jurist, Cicero, to examine the figure of the perfect orator and his idea of eloquence as a political, ethical, and existential ideal in order to open up, what Ballacci contends, would be a more expansive sense of politics than one centred on deliberation. Such a politics implies that political participation entails more than reaching decisions; focused as it is on distinction and persuasion, it is a way ‘to show who we are at our best’. The paper ends by suggesting that one way to revive the ideal of the perfect orator is to put Cicero in conversation with thinkers such as Hannah Arendt and Chantal Mouffe for whom the agonistic and existential dimensions of politics are so important.

The second essay to examine a contemporary revival of ancient thought is that by Hubertus Buchstein, *Countering the “Democracy Thesis” – Sortition in Ancient Greek Political Theory*. Adopting a different approach to

Ballacci, Buchstein's goal is not to revivify a particular ancient mode of thinking for deployment in contemporary political theory; rather he returns to the thought of ancient Greece in order to challenge a certain orthodoxy that has emerged, which he characterizes as the 'democracy thesis of the lottery'. This is the argument that a systematic linkage existed in ancient Greece between democracy and sortition. Revisiting the debates of antiquity, Buchstein sets out to show that this thesis is, in fact, mistaken. There are, he contends, no statements by the advocates of Athenian democracy that construe lotteries as one of its essential elements; in fact, evidence points to the contrary. It was those ancients most critical of democracy, particularly Socrates and the early Plato, who coupled sortition with democracy. The democracy thesis was, in other words, 'an invention of contemporary opponents of ancient democracy'. Moreover, the understanding of the function of lotteries perpetuated in recent writings is also, he argues, at variance with the actual use of sortition in ancient polities. It is only by abandoning the democracy thesis that a new account of sortition might be developed, one capable, as Buchstein puts it, of broadening its applicability beyond the narrow field of opportunities for political participation within which it has been confined to date.

What is, of course, interesting about these two articles from the perspectives of travelling theory and theory as travel is how they mark the twin prongs of the duality exposed by Said: the creative borrowing or appropriation of ancient thinking for the present, which is adduced (by Ballacci) to have the potential to open up – to make visible – alternative avenues or ways of thinking about rhetoric in the present, as against the

difficulties that, for Buchstein, attend the kinds of transformation wrought in ancient theories of sortition when they circulate in an environment different from that in which they emerged and are translated incorrectly for current political debate.

The essay by Ioannis Evrigenis, *Digital Tools and the History of Political Thought: The Case of Jean Bodin*, takes a different route, examining the possibilities for textual interpretation opened up by digital technologies. (Evrigenis currently oversees The Bodin Project at Tufts University, which is working to produce an electronic variorum edition of Bodin's *Les six livres de la république*.) He is particularly interested in how digitization impacts on two interrelated sets of issues. The first is practical, to do with the actual production of a variorum edition, including problems of access to primary and secondary materials, and the management of that material in the production of a critical edition. The other is interpretive; what light a critical edition is able to shed, for instance, on the intentions of an author in writing a text and the methods employed in its composition. The thrust of his argument is that digitization is of benefit in addressing both sets of problems. By way of illustration, he focuses on a specific example from Bodin's work that centres on 'a small example of a telling variant of the conclusion' that Evrigenis insists had a significant impact on the reception of the work. Since Bodin originally published his *magnum opus* in French, before deciding to publish a version in Latin in order to extend its readership beyond France, one issue Evrigenis addresses is the effect of translation, particularly where directly equivalent terms do not exist, on the conceptual and theoretical apparatus of the text. Another is the impact the change in intended readership had on other aspects

of Bodin's work; in particular, the alterations he needed to make in order to aid the exportation of his theory to a different environment.

The final article of the volume is *The Ideological Framework of the French Nouvelle Droite and the Contemporary Finnish Far Right* by Tuula Vaarakallio, which focuses on two themes present within the anti-immigration discourse deployed particularly by a faction of the Finnish political party, *Perussuomalaiset* (PS). The two themes that interest her are differentialism and anti-egalitarianism, which Vaarakallio argues have been imported from the French *Nouvelle Droite* (ND), particularly from the thinking of Alain de Benoist, and used in a 'populist and simplified form' by the PS. It is the author's contention in the paper that theoretical ideas drawn from ND have 'crossed certain temporal, geographical and intellectual borders' and are currently being used selectively in various radical or extreme right parties throughout Europe. What interests Vaarakallio is less the relocation of these concepts from one context to another, however, than the manner in which they are utilised to declare membership in a particular grouping and to generate a sense of ideological unity. Presenting egalitarianism as the opposite of differentialism becomes a way to map who belongs in which camp (pro- or anti- immigration), because according to the logic of this discourse one cannot be an egalitarian at the same time as defending the principle of diversity. Although Vaarakallio is interested in the way that ND ideas circulate within Finnish anti-immigration debates, she is also keen to stress the transformations that have taken place in those ideas when imported into Finland, specifically the differences in the purposes served by the stress on cultural diversity in Finland compared to France. Moreover, her paper attends

not simply to questions of ideology but also, in a way that returns us to the theme of the opening paper, to those of political rhetoric.

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Said, 'Traveling Theory' in *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, Harvard University Press, 1983, p. 226. Originally published in *Raritan: A Quarterly Review*, (1982) 1: 3, 41-67. His particular concern was literary theory, though his arguments pertain equally, I would suggest, to political theory and its interpretation.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 227.

<sup>3</sup> Fred Dallmayr, *Mindfulness and Letting Be: On Engaged Thinking and Acting*, Lexington Books, 2014, p. 9.

<sup>4</sup> Roxanne Euben, 'Traveling Theorists and Translating Practices', in Stephen White ed., *What is Political Theory?*, London: Sage, 2004, p. 147. See also Dallmayr, *ibid.* and James Clifford, 'Notes on Travel and Theory', *Inscriptions* 5 (1989), available at: <http://ccs.ihr.ucsc.edu/inscriptions/volume-5/>

<sup>5</sup> Francois Hartog cited in Euben, *ibid.*, p. 162.

<sup>6</sup> Clifford, 'Notes'.