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Preface

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Human beings were never well suited to living with one another on a very large scale (and most of us imperfectly equipped to do so on any scale whatsoever). Once they had constructed between them a system of exchange that increasingly required them to do so, they were also, as Andrew Sartori points out in this collection, faced with the novel need to grasp quite what constraints this outcome placed on the ways in which they could now do so. That is a cognitive and very practical challenge that has deepened erratically ever since. We have now reached a point where the hazards in doing so are especially salient and the techniques developed to handle them conspicuously inadequate. No possible university curriculum could show its students how to negotiate these hazards in practice with aplomb, but it is a reasonable demand on any institution of higher education that it should at least offer, somewhere within its educational portfolio, an informed guide to the more promising expedients for meeting them.

In any community which has attempted to study its own efforts to handle such hazards, the history of its political ideas, the results of that study, will form a key part of its citizens' education, however informal that education may be. Most societies with protracted literacy and a degree of political continuity have in fact generated histories of this kind, though none as yet anything like as elaborate as those spawned on the continent of Europe over the last two and a half millennia and by now at least dispersed across the world by western imperial intrusion and its backlash.

In the context of modern higher education, a canon is not, at least confessedly, a geography of the contours of orthodox belief, but simply the specification of a curriculum for study. Students must study something if they are to study at all and curricula are created, maintained and adapted to enable them to do so. The microhistory of curricular change will often be unedifying in detail and seldom spiritually arresting, but in any form of political study it will also reflect a constant pressure of needs and preoccupations from the community for which it presumptively exists.

Italy, as Diego Lazzarich points out, has had particularly intense and thoughtful discussions of how such a curriculum can best be designed and how its content can best be understood for well over a century. In the last few decades those discussions have been extensively deflected by the proliferating variety of persuasions advanced in the globally intrusive language that emanated from the Kingdom of England. No voice in those discussions could carry a weight privileged either by past or present power or by grounds for resentment, however weighty those grounds or bitter that resentment may be. A fair amount of those discussions inevitably consists of more or less acrimonious and self-interested squabbling, but insofar as any may carry a more elevated point that point must be the help they offer for understanding politics better. Their only possible educational vindication must be that increment in understanding. Every human community now needs that increment with dire urgency and is most unlikely to attain it by insisting on the special value of the curriculum it currently happens to offer or the epistemological recipes it favours for studying it appropriately. The best of all possible curricula could only be an educational hypothesis, vindicated if at all solely by the understanding it generates in practice. Anyone with a serious interest in the study of political ideas will find a lot to think about in the pages which follow.