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Citation style: Świercz Piotr. (2015). Contextualism vs Non-Contextualism in political philosophy : a contribution to the debate on criticism in the political sciences. "Folia Philosophica" (T. 34 (2015), s. 251-265).



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Contextualism vs Non-Contextualism in Political Philosophy A Contribution to the Debate on Criticism in the Political Sciences

Abstract: The author's aim is to analyse the problem of criticism in the context of political sciences, in particular in the context of political philosophy. The issue is considered in the light of two basic epistemological standpoints: contextualism and presentism. These two approaches are often regarded as mutually exclusive; however, the author presents arguments for their possible complementarity and demonstrates that their concurrence is the necessary point of departure for critical attitudes in political philosophy..

Keywords: political philosophy, political science, criticism, historicism, contextualism, presentism.

An essential factor that should accompany also political philosophizing is historical awareness of the discipline itself. Philosophical reflection on politics can already be found in pre-Socratic reflection. Moreover, the foundations of the rationalization of reflection on the political sphere can be found long before the birth of philosophy, in various myths of the ancient world (we can cite as an example the indications for understanding a good ruler and good kingship in the Sumero-Akkadian *Epic of Gilgamesh*). To be brief, the philosophy of politics should be aware of the history of his research discipline, which, on the one hand, should guard him against prying open doors that are already open, and on the other hand, inspire him and indicate the main paradigms and indi-

vidual propositions that have been formulated in the history of reflection on the phenomenon of politics.

The question arises whether the philosopher of politics must be a historian of political philosophy. Is his intellectual activity exhausted in attempts at reconstructing and understanding the conceptions, hypotheses, systems, and propositions that appeared throughout history?

A wonderful text discussing this problem is Jerzy Szacki's "Dylematy historiografii idei."¹ I will treat his findings as the point of departure for my own analyses.

In the beginning, let me cite a lengthier passage from Szacki's article that briefly describes the essence of the problem. He asserts that

in the historiography of ideas two completely different approaches to the past, which are incompatible, permanently coexist: one time we try to grasp the past as such, another time we almost forget, that it is the past. The historian of philosophy is a historian, of course, but he cannot also not be a philosopher, because if he was not a philosopher, he would not even be able to delimit the sphere of his research, not to mention the interpretation of its results. He cannot remain a philosopher, though, because a philosopher is interested in problems, not in where those problems came from [...]. This internal contradiction of the historian of ideas' condition finds its external expression in the discussion renewed every so often between the advocates of *historism* (or, to use a broader term: *contextualism*) and *presentism*.²

It is significant that in the conclusion of his article he emphasizes that consistently upholding either position in the debate is impossible. Thus, he recognizes that the debate between these positions is key for the entire discipline.³ It is difficult not to agree with the author on this point, for both standpoints delimit the most essential and most general boundaries of the methodology of the history of ideas. I admit that I also agree with his conclusion that both consistent contextual-

¹ J. Szacki, "Dylematy historiografii idei," in: *Dylematy historiografii idei oraz inne szkice i studia* (Warszawa: PWN, 1991), p. 11–19.

² J. Szacki, "Dylematy historiografii idei," p. 15.

³ J. Szacki, "Dylematy historiografii idei," p. 18.

ism and consistent presentism seem impossible to uphold. But a very great difficulty arises here. If upholding either side is impossible, what approach should be taken? The simplest answer is: a middle way between both extremes. But what does that mean, in essence—a middle way between contextualism and presentism?

Again, the issue may seem relatively simple at first. As Dariusz Kubok writes in regard to philosophy: “it must be strongly emphasized that philosophy (philosophizing) is by nature contextual, while its object is not.”⁴ Again, it is impossible not to agree with this statement. However, it seems that, while within the boundaries of ontology, epistemology, and logic the object of philosophy, regardless of context, is essentially the same, the matter becomes complicated when we talk about the object of political philosophy. A great danger inherent in political philosophy is the temptation, visible even in the works of authors considered “the classics” of the discipline, to present their approaches to contemporary problems through their analyses, but not in the form of critical analyses of the problem and indications of the possible implications of various hypotheses and premises, but in a way which clearly reveals the political, ethical, and axiological preferences of the author. In such cases, the history of political ideas plays the role of a treasury of arguments to back up one’s own views. Such a vividly presentist approach has little to do with earnest investigation—and such applications of presentism in the history of political ideas bring us dangerously close to ideology (though I do not assert that presentism must necessarily fall into the trap of ideologization). Defense against this sort of “mistake” (manipulation?) seems relatively simple: as Józef Maria Bocheński stated in one of his works, in wanting to understand someone’s views and conceptions, we should leave aside our own and attempt to “embrace” those that are the object of study at the given moment. In regard to political philosophy, however, that “leaving aside” or “embracing” requires

⁴ D. Kubok, *Problem apeiron i peras w filozofii przedsokratejskiej* (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 1998), p. 9.

special training. Let us put forth the thesis that retaining a critical distance towards the object of political philosophy is especially difficult: more difficult, in my opinion, than in the case of ontology, epistemology, or logic.

Nevertheless, it seems that the necessary condition for a proper methodology in political philosophy is precisely the development of this distance towards the issues under study. The surest road leading to this is most likely the initial acceptance of a historical, contextual standpoint. Why? If we begin from a presentist standpoint, then supplementing it with contextualism (i.e.: introducing contextual corrections), the latter may not suffice. In such a situation, we will be seeking either justification for the presentist standpoint, or (at least) premises for that justification. Such a justification will inevitably be based on analogies and similarities which, bearing in mind the presentist point of departure, will be sought out and interpreted from the presentist perspective. In consequence, it is very probable that a contextualist correction will only be pretence. In reality, the point is not to correct presentistically formulated theses, but on the contrary, let us account for—paradoxically—a correction of the context! It is the context, corrected from the perspective of presentist assumptions, that is to serve to strengthen the point of departure. In this way, a *circulus vitiosus* arises: I refer to history (in our case—to the history of political ideas) to strengthen my own position, without putting in any effort to understand this history, but rather only taking out of the context that which fits my starting position. In the end, what counts is only the presentist position, and contextualism is, in this case, no more than an instrument serving to strengthen the position adopted in the first place.

To a large degree, the choice to make contextualism the point of departure (though, of course, there can be no certainty) guards one against this vicious circle. For, in contextualism, the point is to extract and understand a historically formulated message in the best way possible. Therefore, above all, it is necessary to properly distinguish ideas,

their meanings, and translational possibilities. Next, it is essential for political philosophy to place these ideas on the historico-politico-legal background of the age. Of course, this attempt must be accompanied by the awareness that each researcher is conditioned by his own context—cultural, linguistic, etc. Thus, we cannot approach this attempt and its results uncritically, thinking that we have truly been able to fully grasp the meaning of the message. Most often, the results of contextual efforts are several equally-valid interpretations, which are further subject to research and evaluation. The argument of opponents of contextualism, that contextualism is senseless due to the fact that we will probably never achieve a full understanding anyway and every investigation is to a greater or lesser degree “contaminated” by presentism, seems to be a groundless exaggeration. An authentic effort at grasping the primary, original sense of a statement, accompanied by the awareness of one’s own cognitive conditions and criticism towards one’s findings significantly differs from the “consistent presentism” which by definition leaves the context aside and arbitrarily sets up the entire problem (to be more precise—in a way relativized to its own point of departure). Let us add one more essential remark here. Namely, while I accept and use the concept of “contextualism” instead of “historism” after Szacki, I feel that it is better to speak of “non-contextualism” instead of “presentism.” Frequently, we deal with the imposition of some foreign perspective on an idea, a perspective that does not have to be “present.” This often happens in relation to Greek philosophy, when concepts proper to Christian reflection are imposed on the former, which is then analyzed from the perspective of Christianity. This concerns both ontology and political philosophy. It is difficult to talk about presentism here (though certain presentistic goals often seem to be behind this). For this reason, I propose using the concept of “non-contextualism” in place of “presentism,” where presentism would be a special case of the former.

A question arises here: what should the application of non-contextualism to the initial findings of contextualism consist in? How should non-contextualism be understood? Let us start with the second issue. I understand non-contextualism as the path to extracting, grasping, and understanding the timeless, universal object of knowledge that is hidden beneath a contextual formula. There can be no doubt that in political philosophy, non-contextualism understood this way is based on the assumption, probably unverifiable, that humanity as such, human nature in itself remains unchanging, independent of the broadly-understood environmental context (both natural and cultural), in which and through which it expresses itself. Two doubts arise here. First, does nature so understood really exist? Second, even if it is real, is it worth searching for, keeping in mind that we will be perpetually condemned to moving around in the sphere of assumptions and hypotheses? I think that the answer to the second question stems from the answer to the first one. That is why we will begin with the second question.

From a historical perspective, political philosophy addresses key issues for human life: the understanding of humanity, the role of the state and political rule, the relationship between justice and legal systems, the sense of the functioning of human communities (of course, in every age these problems gain detailed specific questions and answers). It would be difficult to find more weighty and fundamental problems. It would be unthinkable for us to leave the results of thousands of years of human reflection on the side, when we can see that in many areas different from political philosophy (e.g., ontology, epistemology, logic, musical theory, etc.), this reflection has left us with many timeless discoveries and with findings that are still significant for us today. I think that only someone ignorant could assert that since so many years have gone by since the time of, for example, Aristotle, his philosophy must necessarily not be of value to us. In a nutshell: works in the history of political philosophy deal with problems of such a caliber for understanding the way man and human communities func-

tion that it would be foolish to forget about them. What does this add to our reflections on the problem of the timelessness of human nature? The fact that if we desire not only to grasp and understand the conceptions formulated in past ages in their context, but also to make an attempt at using the wisdom they hold, it is necessary to indicate a plane that would serve as a mediator between ideas. This is precisely what the hypothesis of a timeless human nature serves to do. Let me repeat: it is a hypothesis, or better yet—an axiom, that is the necessary condition for transferring ideas in the history of political philosophy.

Let us move to the question of applying non-contextualism to the grasped, almost always only fragmentarily, context. As I mentioned when defining political philosophy, I consider its object to be problems concerning the causes of the genesis of the state and the understanding of the state, the relationship between the political and human nature, the understanding of and role of justice (especially in reference to the legal system), and the relationship between the individual and the state. I take the indicated issues to be precisely that non-contextual object. They are questions, which thinkers concentrated on political matters have posed since the beginnings of human reflection. This is a hypothesis, in truth, but strongly grounded in the history of political ideas.

The task of political philosophy, then, is, first of all, to extract and grasp precisely these questions and the proposed answers in the history of reflection on politics. Sometimes this task is relatively simple, since there were many authors in the history of political philosophy who wrote about these problems explicitly. Sometimes, however, the achievement of the indicated goal will require a lot of work, as it will be necessary to generalize on the basis of more specific statements that do not directly refer to general problems. Nonetheless, without extracting the essential problems we cannot speak of political philosophy.

After extracting the indicated problems, it is necessary to return to the context. For a proper understanding of the non-contextual mes-

sage, it is vital to place them within their proper context as faithfully as possible. Otherwise, we will inevitably impose on the concepts, value systems, etc., meanings taken from other ages, most often—from our own. It is only after this second contextualization that we approach the non-contextual meaning of historically-grounded political ideas. Let us add that political philosophy did not develop, and will probably (*sic!*) never develop a language as universal and formal as mathematics or music (notes). If we had something similar at our disposal, we could possibly dream about a fully non-contextual discourse within the bounds of this discipline. However, since we do not have such a language, the road leading beyond the context must be taken cautiously, conscientiously, and, what is very significant, in a way that is open to discussion. The greatest hurdle here to creative and fruitful discussion will probably be all petrification and dogmatization. As I mentioned above, the non-contextual reading of political philosophy very rarely leads to unambiguous and certain findings. More often, we end up with many hypotheses, which we can at most discuss in terms of probability, not certainty. Such a situation means that open and critical discussion is required as an absolutely necessary instrument, in which even the questions asked should be investigated and studied, not to mention the proposed answers.

To illustrate the above remarks, I will allow myself to cite a few examples. Of course, this is a somewhat delicate matter, since I will have to refer to certain works in secondary literature. I do not do so, however, from the perspective of one wishing to instruct or admonish, but from the perspective of a skeptic-zetetic.

Let us begin with a classical problem. The Aristotelian concept of *zoon politikon* and related idea of a “slave by nature”⁵ (let us add that we can find this same problem in the so-called pseudopythagorean works⁶). This is one of the most controversial issues in the Stagirite’s

⁵ Aristotle, *Politica*, edited by W. D. Ross (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957), 1252a.

⁶ In a text attributed to Zaleukos of Lokroi one finds the following observation: “Slaves should do what is just through fear, but free men, through shame, and for the sake of beauty in conduct.”

political philosophy. Much has been written on this subject, in general emphasizing the socio-economic conditions that Aristotle, in the commentator's opinion, was unable to transcend.⁷ For, the functioning of slavery as an institution that did not meet with social reservations, as an institution resulting from "natural" conditions, in an automatic and uncritical way was to be incorporated by this thinker into his conception of political rule. However, the question arises if we are not trying to explain away and interpret this problematic subject too easily. Are we not trying, from the perspective of an age in which slavery is the symbol of socio-politico-economic savagery and clear injustice, to sweep the shameful acceptance, even apology of slavery in the philosophy of a famous and acknowledged authority "under the carpet" by ascribing to him entanglement in the historical context which was impossible to go beyond? Let us look at this issue from a slightly different perspective, indicating different interpretive possibilities.

It is doubtless that the universally indicated politico-economic context plays an important role in the concept of "slavery by nature." The thing is that "slavery by nature" does not match up with the social institution: not every slave is a "slave by nature," and not every free man is truly free. The fundamental criterion distinguishing a "slave by nature" from one who is "free" is that ability to independently aspire to the good. The consequence of this distinction is the variety of ways of ruling: the most effective method for "slaves by nature" is fear, while for those "free by nature"—shame.⁸ Let us put forth a hypothesis: the concept of "slave by nature" was, of course, formulated in a specific

See: H. Thesleff, *The Pythagorean Texts of the Hellenistic Period* (Åbo: Åbo Akademi, 1965), p. 228. The text is also available online: *Hellenismo. The True Roots of Europe*, September 28, 2012, "Political Fragments: Ancient Examples of True Righteousness" <<https://hellenismo.wordpress.com/2012/09/28/political-fragments-ancient-examples-of-true-righteousness>> (01.04.2015).

⁷ So states Giovanni Reale, writing, among others, that: "Aristotle, on the other hand, wants to defend at any cost his own view that slavery is a 'state of nature.' [...] in this matter the philosopher followed the prejudices and convictions of his time so far as to artificially bend his own principles so that they fit those convictions." G. Reale, *Historia filozofii starożytniej*. T. II. *Platon i Arystoteles*, trans. E. I. Zieliński (Lublin: Wydawnictwo KUL, 1996), p. 511.

⁸ In the text ascribed to Zaleucus of Locri, we read: "[S]laves should act justly out of fear, but free men out of shame and beauty." See: H. Thesleff, *The Pythagorean Texts...*, p. 228.

politico-economic context, but at the same it goes beyond this context, introducing a clear ethico-political correction to it. The correction may be considered timeless, especially when juxtaposed with the propositions of Niccolò Machiavelli and Thomas Hobbes (in which fear is considered the most effective, or only, instrument of political rule). Therefore, it seems that in accepting a solely contextual position, we lose not just an insignificant deal, but the essence of the problem.

We are dealing with a similar situation in regards to the reflection of Thomas Hobbes. Countless authors indicate the key significance of the historical context for Hobbes' concept of the state of nature and his version of the social contract, especially the civil war and revolution in England. Without a doubt, these events played an important role in forming the views of the English philosopher. But what follows from stating this fact? Is this meant to be a "justification"? Is it to be understood in the way that, had Hobbes lived at a different time, in different socio-political conditions, the conceptions he would have created would be different from the ones we know, for example, from the *Leviathan*? This is very probable, but at the same time unimportant and inessential. What is important and essential is what Hobbes did write. Especially since these were, it seems, the intentions of the thinker himself: to formulate a conception of the genesis and essence of political rule, based on a new conception of human nature. The fact that the observations he made during the bloody events in his homeland allowed him to more precisely and more clearly show certain issues does not mean that the most important consequences of his writings do not go far beyond the context which accompanied their creation.

A different sort of problem arises when we disregard a precise investigation of the broadly-understood context. One of the clearest cases of this concerns the political aspects of sophist reflection (especially the philosophy of Protagoras and Gorgias). The interpretation that dominates in secondary literature indicates simple subjectivism (sometimes relativism, or relativism and subjectivism) as the foundation of sophism, and in ref-

erence to political matters individualism, the social contract, and democracy (often with a clear modern ideological spin, showing the sophists, especially the first generation, as ancient “liberals”) are accented. The issue is unusually complicated, intricate, and multi-aspected.

The point of departure must be a detailed linguistic analysis of the source texts. A seemingly trite and obvious postulate, though looking at the secondary literature (I have in mind literature in the field of political thought and political philosophy, not philology or the history of ancient philosophy), this postulate seems very timely. Both texts containing Protagoras’ ideas, and those containing the conceptions of Gorgias are, from a linguistic point of view, ambiguous. It is therefore necessary to take into account various translational possibilities when conducting analyses.

It is necessary, then, to analyze the ontological and epistemological context both of the principle of *anthropos metron (homo mensura)*⁹, and that of the treatise *Peri tou me ontos e peri physeos*¹⁰. This analysis must, at the same time, take into account the philosophical context in which Protagoras and Gorgias appeared, which is constituted by pre-Socratic philosophy, especially that of the Eleatic School. Moreover, the question of, for example, the ontological or epistemological character of the theses contained in the *homo mensura* principle is open to debate, as there are researchers who question such a formulation because they consider the Platonic analyses contained in the *Theaetetus* speculations which go beyond the intentions of the thinker from Abdera. Therefore, in researching the ontologico-epistemological context, one must retain the proper distance from the thesis that this aspect is at all

⁹ Plato, “Theaetetus,” in: *Platonis Opera*. Recensuit J. Burnet (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1903), 166a–168c.

¹⁰ Gorgias B 3, Following the convention adopted in this issue of *Folia Philosophica*, all references to the works of the presocratic philosophers are made to the texts included in the following edition: Hermann Diels, Walther Kranz, eds., *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, (Vols. 1–3), trans. Hermann Diels (Dublin, Zürich: Weidmann, 1964–1966). The format of the reference will henceforth include the following elements: an abbreviated name of the author (e.g. “Xenoph.” for Xenophanes of Colophon), the capitalized letter denoting the section of the Diels–Kranz collection (“A” or “B”), the sequential number of the fragment and the number denoting the verse, e.g. (Xenoph. B 34, 4).

present in the thought of Protagoras, and, in consequence, maintain awareness that we are constantly moving around amongst hypotheses, where it is impossible to gain certainty, only some degree of probability.

The next step is a politico-legal analysis of the context, in which we need to be aware of the meaning, role, and principles of rhetoric, with a special emphasis on court rhetoric.

It is only an analysis of all of the indicated aspects (in the midst of which other areas of investigation will surely appear) that will allow for the building of a solid foundation for the search for non-contextual themes in sophist reflection. Without putting forth this effort we are condemned to trite, stereotypical, and clearly ideologically “set” ideas about sophist thought. It is enough to show that the role of sophistry cannot be overestimated in Platonic reflection to attest to the particular significance of sophistry in the history of philosophy and political philosophy. Personally, I feel that for political philosophy, the debate between Plato and the sophists is one of the most significant and most fundamental, if not the most significant and most fundamental, discussions concerning the meaning and understanding of the political and the understanding and role of justice in politico-legal systems.

A wonderful example of imposing one’s own ideas on the interpretation of ancient political philosophy are the works of Eric Voegelin. I conducted a more detailed analysis of Voegelin’s interpretation of Platonic philosophy elsewhere.¹¹ Here, I will present only my main observations. First, Voegelin creates his own conception of the history of political ideas, whose most important thesis is that the responsibility for the tragedies that touched 20th century politics and the political philosophy at its basis falls on the “immanent hypostasis of the eschaton.” Then, Voegelin searches for a justification for his thesis in the history of political ideas. However, he does this in a manipulative way.

¹¹ See: P. Świercz, “Plato. Voegelin. Transcendence. Politics. A Few Remarks about Transcendent Reception of Non-Transcendent Concept as a Fundament of Political Project,” *Littera Antiqua*, vol. VII, 2013, pp. 52–65. See also: K. Kołakowska, “Voegelin. Rhetoric and Politics in Aristotle,” *Littera Antiqua*, vol. VII, 2013, pp. 43–51.

Hence, in reference to Plato, he accepts that the creator of the Academy bases his philosophy and its political consequences on the idea of transcendence. He does not justify this in any way and does not consider other possibilities. Simply: *epekeina* meant transcendence for Plato. Such an interpretation is certainly admissible. But when the whole reading of Plato is grounded on that thought, it must be analyzed thoroughly and critically. But Voegelin seems only to want a justification for his proposition on how to understand the history of ideas. What Plato really thought is not of interest to him. The apparent contextualism here is only a means meant to serve a non-contextual project, not the point of departure to seek what is timeless. This is clear dogmatism, which, dressing itself up as philosophy, is in essence very far away from it, as every ideology is far from the skeptic-zetetic-critical position.

Let us summarize. Criticism in the history of political philosophy can be summarized in a few fundamental postulates. First, it is necessary to grasp the context in the fullest possible way. Above all, a very precise linguistic analysis is needed, in which different possible translations and interpretations are taken into account. A lack of this, especially in regards to ancient texts, is very often the main cause of mistaken understandings, or even manipulative interpretations.

It is essential to place the political reflection of the given author within his ontologico-epistemological analyses, or, at the very least, to juxtapose the two. I am not saying that a systematic approach should be taken. But, on the other hand, it is difficult to move on when these two elements are incompatible. Since ontology and epistemology are, each in its own aspect, the most general formulations of *everything*, then this also refers to political matter.

Due to its object, the history of political philosophy also requires that the broad political, legal, social, and economic context in which the text was written be taken into account. In general, it is also necessary to take into account the cultural context (I have in mind literature, music, art, religion, and customs).

It is only on a foundation so-prepared that non-contextual research should be introduced. Let me repeat once more: with work on the context, it is very easy to ascribe views to past authors that they would never have accepted. A position such as that is closer to ideology than to philosophy. At the same time, limiting ourselves to contextual interpretations makes the effort of many generations of philosophers and political philosophers *de facto* dead and unnecessary; at best—something akin to a museum exhibit.

In other words, I only see sense in studying the history of political philosophy if one keeps in mind the “philosophizing history of political philosophy.”¹² Otherwise, we become either “custodians,” or ignorant ideologues. And though it is difficult not to agree that the former is a nobler pastime than the latter, it seems that in a certain sense, the former gives birth to the latter. People will always seek so-called “eternal and unchanging” problems. But leaving the discussion about those problems in the hands of the incompetent, or even charlatans, is, to a large measure, the consequence of the neglect on the part of those, who decided to remain nothing more than “custodians” of the history of political philosophy.

¹² The first person whom I heard use a similar phrase, and who directed me toward the search for the method in the history of political philosophy, was my long-time superior at the Department of Political Thought of the University of Silesia in Katowice, professor Wojciech Kaute (he would use the expression: “the philosophizing history of political ideas”). A similar conception was presented by Prof. Jan Baszkiewicz at the beginning of the present century. See: J. Baszkiewicz, “Zagajenie konferencji,” in: *Doktryny polityczne i prawne u progu XXI wieku. Wybrane problemy badawcze*, M. Maciejewski, M. Marszał, eds. (Wrocław: Kolonia Limited, 2002), p. 10–14. See especially p. 12, where we can find the phrase: “the philosophizing history of political thought.”

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Piotr Świercz

Kontekstualizm wobec niekontekstualizmu w świetle filozofii politycznej Przyczynek do debaty poświęconej krytycyzmowi w naukach politycznych

Streszczenie: Autor stawia sobie za cel dokonanie analizy zagadnienia krytycyzmu w kontekście nauk politycznych, a ściślej – w przestrzeni filozofii politycznej. Problem ten rozważany jest w świetle dwóch podstawowych stanowisk epistemologicznych: kontekstualizmu i prezentyzmu. Te dwie metody rozumiane są zazwyczaj jako wzajemnie się wykluczające, jednak celem autora jest przedstawienie argumentów wskazujących ich łączliwość i wykazanie, iż potraktowanie ich jako komplementarnych jest koniecznym punktem wyjścia dla postaw krytycznych w filozofii politycznej.

Słowa kluczowe: filozofia polityczna, nauki polityczne, krytycyzm, historyzm, kontekstualizm, prezentyzm.