Μy interests have always lain in the question of the relationship of the East to West, from a European perspective, and in the ways in which one might adapt the western liberal model to societies that emerged from a different cultural template. The typical way of course is to seek commonalities between disparate traditions to bridge the differences.

I was, however, divided on what undergraduate degree to follow. Everyone expected me to study sociology or political science. I was reading Marx, Bakunin, de Beauvoir, Bottomore, Aron and others in high school. But I was allergic to the Greek political scene that permeated even academia, highly partisan and not very analytical—plus I would never survive there, as an independent. My professional horizons were still framed by Greece, even though I knew I would get my first degree in England and graduate studies in the US. The “rational” decision seemed to be to study “culture” instead, which, I thought, would allow me to deal with the same problems from a different angle, and avoid the overtly politicized field of politics. Reading Hegel, and all the stuff about art, religion, and the collective consciousness, too young is not the best way to answer the question of which degree to follow, however, as I later discovered. I went to the Courtauld Institute to study the Byzantine and Western Middle Ages (it’s the only 5-star institution in the UK in this field).

My first take on the illiberal East-liberal West divide was through religion, which was the most salient dimension of difference, at least in the public discourse I grew up with, in Greece. So, my initial angle was to consider how the origins of Christianity (from which Christian Orthodoxy claims direct descent) might offer an indigenous bridge to modern ideas. My undergraduate thesis examined religiosity in Late Antiquity—to show that women, up until at least the 6thc, were represented as being able to bear equal witness to God, including via martyrdom. I used images ranging from Ravenna to Coptic Egypt.

The key problem, however, was that I was not interested in culture per se, only as a means. I wanted politics, historiography, and sociology. I was accepted by the University of Chicago for a PhD, that had a strong medievalist group, but I left the program that accepted me to go to the Committee on the History of Culture, where I constructed a program to give me a foundation in the history and historiography of the transition from Hellenism to Early Christianity. My proposal talked about the Roman concept of representation (I have not strayed very far…) That involved extensive work in both the History department and the Divinity School and historiography in the Momigliano tradition.

As I had been warned, I was left to fall between the cracks and ended up having to put multiple syllabi together on my own for whole semesters when I was effectively a 4th year undergraduate (no one had warned me what American reading courses were like, I thought they were like English tutorials). Not a happy experience at all, you get blamed in such circumstances—I’ve had two more of them, one at Chicago and of course at UVA, and I guess it’s been the heavy price of intellectual independence…(I’ve gone from “she’s a brilliant star” to “she’s really not” or even “she’s a bad person,” typical in blame situations, twice already, and each time I’ve built myself up again; this is my third time, and hopefully last…).

Nonetheless, the second installment in my quest was a thesis on the cultural and theological appropriation of Judaism by early Christian writers, focusing on the emergence of Jerusalem as a center of worship. The initial intuition was that maybe looking at early Christianity, one could discover trends where the anti-Semitism that is rampant in the Orthodox Church would not be present, that it was a late, modernist reaction. That we could, in other words, construct a bridge by turning back to the roots of tradition, we could discover a version more compatible with modern liberal norms—or so I hypothesized. Sadly (and maybe predictably) that intuition was crushed under the weight of overwhelming textual evidence that anti-Semitism was constitutive of early Christian thought. This was the first step in my disenchantment with religion as a subject—it seemed rather irredeemable. Nonetheless, Walter Kaegi, the Byzantine historian, called it a “tour de force.”

This still felt too far away from politics. So, I then took some time off and worked in Greece, to gain experience in a related field, working in a European think-tank. I reapplied, entered the Committee on Social Thought, with Francois Furet as my adviser, one of the highlights of my graduate career (maybe you’ve heard of him, one of the biggest historians of 20th c France)! I spent three years of intellectual bliss, taking 35 courses (not all for credit of course, but almost), on every topic I’d been yearning to learn, but mostly history, religion, classics, philosophy, political theory and political science. Nathan Tarcov, the Straussian (but educationally genuinely liberal) political theorist who advised me after Furet passed, used to joke that I made it sound as if the whole University had tailored offerings to my interests. But that was not hard: I was just educating myself in both the theory and history of liberalism.

The theme was the same: the relation of east to west and the adaptation of liberalism to non-western contexts. So next to everything offered on liberal political theory, I took classes on Aristotle and other Greek philosophy, a lot on the history of the 17thc., as well as the rise of secularism and the quest for certainty from a theological perspective in the Early Modern period in the Divinity School and a philosophical one on Kant. Ironically, I took no class on Smith; that was my own reading. I also took all the required classes in Political Science for a degree in the dept, in IR and CP, all within three years, including some methods.

My original dissertation plan was to look at the political implications of the Christian Orthodox religion. [I will say a few words on this, as I do want to return to these themes, from a social science perspective.] The conventional assumption is that Orthodoxy has a “natural affinity” with authoritarianism, especially due to its mystical, i.e. non-rational theological strain. But the ecclesiology of the Orthodox Church is exactly the opposite. Unlike the Catholic Papacy, Orthodoxy is fundamentally conciliar in nature: dogma is decided by a council of equals (of whom the Pope is only primus inter pares). And the mystical tradition draws on an Aristotelian, communitarian tradition, going back to Dionysius the Areopagite (6th c). This resurfaced in Western philosophy, especially in the critique of metaphysics culminating in Heidegger and recently re-discovered by quite a few Western philosophers and theologians, unfortunately though, most of a very conservative bent. Orthodox theologians consider this trajectory a distortion, however, stemming from the Western “rule of the mind”—when the Aristotelian common reason is meant to be more experiential. The cooptation of the church as a social institution thus does not result from some inherent authoritarian affinity; instead, it’s a natural consequence of the purism of the Church, which leaves earthly matters to earthly powers. I do want to turn this into an article at least, as much writing on religion takes a linear approach which does not do the ideas justice (typically by finding that ideas don’t matter that much).

This paradox is really the germ of the idea I have in the book about what I call the “normative/empirical inversion:” the very, very common pattern where the theoretical perspective in a given context is inversely related to the empirics on the ground. The classic example is the theory of absolutism—typically developed in contexts, like France’s, where social conditions were fractured and absolute power most strongly contested. As I tell my students, when you see people focusing on ideological labels, you should start with the hypothesis that the reality out there is pretty much contrary. If we are fixated with “rights” in the Anglo-Saxon world, it’s because the state is so efficient in threatening them! Works the other way as well.

But the dissertation topic was leading me in some uncomfortably conservative (and in Orthodox circles, outright nationalist and bigoted) company, so this was the second and final step in my disenchantment with religion as an academic focus. I also concluded that this topic would leave me without an audience in political science (except for one very devoted Divinity professor committed to the Oecumenical project in the Church!).

So I dropped this, and directed myself squarely to the study of liberalism and its foundations. I also moved to political science, as people simply did not get jobs out of Social Thought, plus I already had more classes than required there by their program—this was another very unpleasant experience, however, as I had no natural “mentor” to protect me. I am, as you may have noted, a contrarian, and that does not make things easy in grad school, especially with no allies. In Social Thought, Furet had been my backer, but he passed away and I was orphaned. Many knives appeared then…

All of my subsequent work stems from the engagement with the nature and historical origins of liberalism.

In my **balance of power piece**, I show that balance of power theory, the supposed core of “Realism” in IR, is out of the arsenal of liberal mechanisms and the realism it claims is the realism of the classical liberal tradition. It was clear to me that the literature simply misunderstood classical liberal theory. And though I started with a rather horrified approach to the work of Kenneth Waltz, after I placed him in the liberal tradition, things came together—I became a defender of sorts. This was all part of the process of making peace with liberalism. Interestingly, initial reactions by the IR crowd to my argument were equally horrified—for Realists, being called a liberal was an insult! Until Kenneth Waltz read it and said it was “the best paper he’d read on any topic for a long time” and that, since I distinguished classical from rationalist liberalism, I was right. This changed the view of people like Mearsheimer, but made it clear that IR was not intellectually the best mix for me.

The **Adam Smith paper** came out of the reading of the TWN, which I did to understand “where the trouble begun.” Like your garden variety social democrat, I considered him the root of the evil. I was not very sympathetic to liberalism at that point. And then you pay attention and that’s not it at all. This is maybe a case of intellectual Stockholm syndrome, as I joke. But I find the dialogue on the market, even at the highest level, very misguided and so have become a big defender of Smith. A big opportunity is lost from failing to grasp the full extent of the radicalness of Smith’s position. This is especially troubling, since you read everywhere about the failure of the left to come up with an alternative vision. This reactionary resistance to the market only ensures it dominates. We need to come to terms with the paradoxical role of profit in a market economy and to transform public perceptions into ones that reflect elementary economic truisms: excess profit is not a sign of hard or business success, it’s a sign the market is not clearing. High returns mean high risk. If you take it to its logical conclusion, it’s quite subversive and unsettling (how do you motivate economic actors if you tell them that the harder they work, the harder will the competition be, and the lower their profits?), so will be hard to get across, but it is the next frontier I think.

The **book** is in fact an outgrowth of my master’s thesis (written in one’s second field). If focusing on the East to show that conventional stereotypes were wrong was not strategically wise, I shifted to the West. Trying to understand how liberalism emerged in England kept producing doubts about the conventional narrative there too. Meeting every standard claim I came across with a “but is it true?” led me to a hunt, the result of which is the book you’re about to read. It’s far from perfect; my dream had been to build strong enough relations with historians so that the analysis could incorporate synthetic insights from the mountain of knowledge about the local level, whilst integrating them into a theoretical framework. If the historical reality is close to the ground and social science was far up on mountain peaks, I wanted to bridge the distance. I’ve done much of that, but not with all the back-and-forth with historians I hoped for—but I think the theoretical framework is there and it is sound. The bottom line is that the reasons we think underlie the “success” of the West are not really what distinguishes it at all. It is not a surfeit of rights, justice, rationalism etc., all the high-minded constructs we invoke to build a narrative of superiority; it is the more efficient and often more unfair and unequal in its incidence application and systematization of power. There is a strong Weberian slant there, of course, but it’s less intellectual than practice-based.

All the other pieces are further reflections on the same theme: the reasons we *think* gave the west a head start are actually *consequences* of the real reasons. The normative framework that we privilege in our explanations, mainly narratives of rights and civil society, is actually a consequence of the real differential: a more systematic organization of power. It is the more successful *suppression* of rights of individuals that both produces western outcomes and the normative framework itself. There is, however, something about the ideational principle along which this organization and suppression occurs that is quite distinctive and this point that I would like to return to in future work.

A few words on the other articles, which are in progress.

I have a two-part paper on **Tilly and state-building in general**. The main thrust of the first part (“[The More War, The Less State: The Inverse Relationship between War, State Size, and “Stateness](http://dboucoyannis.weebly.com/uploads/1/3/9/3/13938365/stateswarborderssize.docx)”), under review, is that the more war was involved in shaping the borders (and size) of the state, the more it departed from the unitary type that is the focus in this literature (as I carefully show by analyzing definitions)—and the more it veered toward the composite type (e.g. federations or empires). The second part takes on the ratchet theory of the impact of war: that it increased fiscal extraction and thus the size of the state. I focus on England and show how it does not work there, with comparative data on France (there is not enough original data on the early period for the other cases to draw sound conclusions from). This is the part I mentioned Mann responded to.

I have three more articles that are off-shoots from the book.

One is a [collaboration with Ana Arjona](NULL) (at Northwestern), who does fascinating work on the Columbian guerillas and paramilitaries and came to near-identical conclusions to mine regarding the primacy of judicial functions. We hope to make this a programmatic piece for the state-building literature in general to take courts and justice seriously. If Colombian and Islamic warlords see their value, surely the discipline must be missing a major component…We presented at APSA this fall.

[Another](NULL) elaborates on the implications of my argument on the role of inequality in democratization. Of course, my claim appears to go against the conventional wisdom about the role of increasing equality, but I show that this is only if we don't make some crucial distinctions. First, it’s the state that has superior power in my argument: outcomes depend on the state being able to compel the most powerful social actors and competitors. Second, this inequality matters in is how *institutions* emerge: you need this concentration of power for constitutional structures to emerge. For broader representation, you need the spread of social power to broader groups, as conventional theory has it. However, we typically miss the first step, the institutional one, and assume it responds to the same logic as the spread of representative, or democratic, practice. I argue that the two processes are not collective organization-extensive, which accounts for the great difficulties encountered in the real world trying to replicate the western experience.

My piece on the [security of property rights](NULL) suggests that the Northian paradigm again misstates the Western experience—in fact it inverts it. It is not greater security of property rights that accounts for western growth; it is the more rigorously enforced conditional dependence of property rights on a central authority capable of extracting and subjecting all to a broadly uniform regulatory frame—which is the argument in the book.

Finally, I have two follow ups to my Smith and balance of power pieces. On Smith, I show how international trade theory has drawn the wrong lesson from Smith in its assumptions about urbanization. It has long been touted, even after the collapse of both Marxist and modernization paradigms, as the road to economic and democratic development, assumed to follow on the footsteps of England. But for Smith this was the *unnatural* path to progress, one that took longer and was steeped in pathologies. His model is more about the organic development of the countryside (a point apparently now the focus of Chinese economic thinking).

Though this literature has died out a bit, my argument on the democratic peace theory draws on balance of power argument to intervene in the rather unproductive IR debates, with Realists scathingly dismissing democratic peace. I show that the idea is a natural extension of balance of power theory, specifically defensive Realism. This will have to wait for when these arguments come back, as they surely will.

Apart from getting out this backlog, the plan is to pursue two main lines: one is to examine the implications of my taxation piece for contemporary practice. There is an anti-state ideology that permeates many states facing dire economic circumstances and the circular logic is that first the state has to deliver and then citizens will agree to pay taxes (and stop tax-evasion, for instance). But this guarantees societies remain in stagnation. The overall project would aim to crack the nut of how societies have moved from such suboptimal equilibria to proactive ideological positions. This is the other side of the move from corruption, nepotism, and patrimonialism to one of impersonal rules and accountability. Looking at concrete historical episodes, in the light of my previous work, may yield some conclusions.

The second line has to do with returning to religion and offering a reconsideration of the various debates that draw on it, whether the unfortunate clash of civilizations line or the more “social scientific” one, which looks at the impact of religion on concrete outcomes, like war. There is certainly a good article there, maybe more. A number of other ideas exist too, but I just mention these.