

Companion to Intellectual History

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Chapter Eight: Quentin Skinner and the Relevance of Intellectual History

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Introduction

Ludwig Wittgenstein, in his Philosophical Investigations (1958) and in his On Certainty (1969) described language as a phenomenon so intimately connected with human action that the kinds of language available to actors could be said to constrain or to facilitate change; words were deeds. Wittgenstein's claim announced at once a scepticism about some of the grander claims of the positivist human sciences and a relativist attitude to human activity, which henceforth had to be understood in what was likely to be a highly particular and fluid linguistic context. There was little point in chasing down the objective 'meanings' of words. The focus of research had to be the use of words in particular language games. Such an approach suited times characterised by world war and the collapse of civilized values; such circumstances can be said to have been reaffirmed since the transformation of states adhering to the great ideological experiment of the twentieth century, Marxism, through the transition mechanism of the abandonment of the ideology. This is the broadest context from which to view the formation of the Cambridge

School of intellectual history, which has above all been associated with the methodological and substantive writings of Quentin Skinner. Skinner remains the keenest advocate of intellectual history and the person most readily associated with the subject area amongst historians and broader publics. His definition of intellectual history and his view of its relevance to the concerns of the present is the subject of this chapter.

Two moments that can be seen as developments of Wittgenstein's perspective on language and reality were of more specific significance to the establishment of intellectual history in the Anglophone world. The first was the posthumous publication of the philosopher and archaeologist R. G. Collingwood's The Idea of History (1946). Collingwood here stated that history became a science when historians recognized that individuals were free to act, in the sense of thinking through the options open to them in a rational fashion constrained only by the ideological context in which they found themselves (Collingwood 1946, 317). Intellectual history became a subject that entailed speculation about the alternative futures humans had experienced or might seek to experience. Intellectual history could be charted from the time when it began to be recognized that there was nothing essential about human life and that particular experiences generated particular ideas, that might then play their part in shaping lived experience and what followed from it. As Quentin Skinner has written, 'when I began my research he [Collingwood] was I think the most immediate and powerful influence on the direction of my work' (Koikkalainen and Syrjämäki, 2002, 45). It was to Collingwood that Skinner was indebted 'for what remains my fundamental assumption as an intellectual historian: that the history of thought should be viewed not as a series of attempts to answer a canonical set

of questions, but as a sequence of episodes in which the questions as well as the answers have frequently changed' (Skinner, 1988, 234).

Three years after the appearance of Collingwood's book Peter Laslett published an edition of the political writings of Robert Filmer, the seventeenth-century advocate of the divinity of rulership. He spent the following years working on something monumental; a critical edition of John Locke's Two Treatises of Government, which appeared in 1960. Laslett revealed that Filmer's Patriarcha had been composed prior to his other writings, but was only published posthumously, between 1679 and 1680. In turn, Locke's classic work of political thought, rather than being a defence of the 'Glorious Revolution', as it had traditionally been described, having appeared in print from 1690, was shown to have been written around 1681, at a time when Whigs of Locke's stamp were contemplating violence against the Stuart court. Laslett's edition raised questions for historians concerning the relationship between an author's intentions in writing a text and the intentions behind its publication. The message was that the practice of the historical scrutiny of political ideas had to be re-evaluated. The appearance of John Pocock's The Ancient Constitution and the Feudal Law (1957) added to the sense of historiographical iconoclasm. Pocock showed that early modern English lawyers, addicted to a notion of immemorial common law and an immemorial constitution, were inhibited in their historical investigations by comparison with their French counterparts. Pocock made the point that English lawyers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were obsessed with history, but their approach to the past was essentially unhistorical. For the French, such as the monarchomach François Hotman, whose work on feudal landholding appeared in 1572 (De Feudis), the contrast between the legacy of Roman Law and the customary law of the French provinces facilitated a comparative study of

laws through time. Pocock charted the revolution that followed the appearance of Sir Henry Spelman's Glossarium Archaeologicum (1626), which traced the rise and fall of feudal tenures, and in turn facilitated the new kinds of political thinking that could be found in James Harrington's Oceana (1656), where land ownership determined the operation of political structures. In showing that perspectives on the past both shaped and limited political theorising in early modern times, Pocock supplied the most detailed illustration of the fact that new kinds of history were being produced (Pocock, 1987). Pocock and fellow intellectual historians such as John Burrow, whose Evolution and Society appeared in 1965, emphasized discontinuity, unintended consequences, tragic failures and lost traditions of argument; it became vital in order to understand the past to investigate 'minor' figures and use them to illuminate neglected elements of the thought of figures traditionally deemed canonical; and they opposed over-arching narratives or those inspired by philosophers' perspectives upon history, and especially that of Karl Marx. Since this time linguistic contextualists have become the dominant group of intellectual historians. Their enterprise has been successful, as a generation of scholars has confidently described themselves as intellectual historians, formed professional associations, and acquired academic positions. Quentin Skinner, through the particular clarity, force and range of his writings, and the brilliance of his talks and lectures, has done more than anyone else to draw students to study intellectual history.

Defining linguistic contextualism

Methodological defences of linguistic contextualism were published by John Pocock in 1962 with 'The History of Political Thought: A Methodological Enquiry', by John Dunn in 1968 with 'The Identity of the History of Ideas', and by Quentin Skinner in 1969 with 'Meaning and

Understanding in the History of Ideas'. They were all then associated with the University of Cambridge. In Blair Worden's memorable phrase they made Cambridge 'at once the inspiration and the factory of the revolution' (Worden, 1998) As Pocock has put it, as early as 1964 the appearance of Skinner's first essays 'had laid the foundations of an alliance between us, and with others, that nothing seems likely to shake' (Pocock, 2006, 39) In each of their essays, Pocock, Dunn, and Skinner proposed that texts be treated as products of specific historical contexts, by which they meant ideological contexts formed through linguistic practice. In working out the meaning of the texts, Dunn and Skinner identified the intentions of an author as the principal guide to the nature of the text, although neither unproblematic as an intellectual objective, nor sufficient in terms of understanding an author's work. Skinner said that the goal of the historian was to reveal what the author of a particular text 'was doing', encompassing what the author had intended to do and had succeeded in doing as interpreted by the responses of other authors. One of the anticipated consequences of the method was indicated by the original title of Skinner's essay: 'The Unimportance of the Great Texts in the History of Political Thought.' Among the most significant claims asserted by Pocock, Dunn and Skinner, but emphasised especially by Pocock in all of his methodological writings, was that the language or discourse in which an author was working, meaning the set of assumptions that he or she was adopting and employing in the articulation of their arguments, set limits to the argument itself. Language or discourse comprised a grammar and a rhetoric, and sets of assumptions about the use and implications of ideas, which amounted to a complex structure. Authors living within communities of language users could innovate and alter existing languages, but the point was to search for exactly this because existing languages were employed in articulating what was happening in the ideological and material present. The three authors opposed approaches founded on the presumption of fixed

concepts of historical analysis, of meta-theoretical assumptions about human nature, and of opaque or a-historical theoretical vocabularies.

Skinner's 'Meaning and Understanding' of 1969 proved especially influential, and is sometimes called the manifesto of The Cambridge School. Skinner's essay was singularly assertive and confident; it was also the most accessible for readers in clearly articulating the argument that a new method of the study of past ideas was required to put an end to the awful work Skinner perceived to have been undertaken in previous decades. It was far and away the most combative of the justifications of the new practice. Skinner attacked the presumed connections between canonical authors supposedly defining political philosophies still operating today. He argued that historians of political thought were attributing to past authors concepts that could not have been available to them (the sin of anachronism). They were seeking in the work of historic authors anticipations of arguments that could not actually be found in the texts they were studying (the sin of prolepsis). Skinner demanded that the arguments of texts be treated as acts performed in history. Such arguments needed to be related to the discourses of the time; they needed to be related to the background linguistic context. After this a particular argument could be seen to be either adhering to or opposing arguments articulated by people whose work would have been known to the author. Political philosophies that were historicized was one of Skinner's goals in 'Meaning and Understanding'. Proof of the controversial nature of the article can be found in its rejection by several journals, and Skinner's statement that he almost abandoned the work in consequence (Skinner, 2012, 146). Skinner later made the point that he had never felt that he was saying anything novel, acknowledging a debt to Dunn's and Pocock's theoretical writings but also that he had 'merely tried to identify and restate in more abstract terms the assumptions on

which Pocock's and especially Laslett's scholarship seemed to me to be based' (Skinner, 1988, 233). The debts are clear but Skinner was being overly modest. Although he has altered some of his arguments, withdrawn some of his criticisms, and reshaped a new edition of the essay, it remains the text that has to be placed on student reading lists and continues to give budding intellectual historians a sense of their identity. It is therefore worth reconsidering Skinner's original argument, despite the subsequent modifications introduced in the Visions of Politics volume of collected articles published in 2002. Skinner himself would be against this. He has written that 'much of the essay strikes me today as philosophically ill-judged as well as abusive, and when I recently had to revise it for republication I found myself cutting it to half of its original length.' Yet the 1969 version remains a classic statement and an inspiration; the original also gives a sense of the fervour and self-confidence that has accompanied so much intellectual history written in agreement with Skinner's claims.

Skinner's argument began with an attack on two approaches to the understanding of historical texts. The first was that of relating the argument of a text to its economic, social or political context, and explaining the ideas of a text by reference to such factors. The literature scholar identified as advocating such an approach was F. W. Bateson, the editor of the journal Essays in Criticism. Skinner did not argue that such an approach was invalid or could not help in explaining the meaning of historical ideas; his point was rather than focus on the context could never enable a scholar to understand the meaning of the text in question. In other words, it provided second-order support. The second mistaken approach was founded on the view that the text itself was the key to its meaning, so that scholars simply had to read and re-read a text in order to work out what the author was saying at any point in time. Skinner argued that this

approach sustained a search for universal ideas comprising 'a dateless wisdom'. Scholars who adopted the method of studying the text alone believed themselves to be able to identify the great books and great philosophers and writers who merited scrutiny, on the grounds that they were addressing 'abiding questions' and 'fundamental concepts.' A long list of authors were identified as proponents of this approach, including the intellectual historians Howard Warrender and John Plamentatz in addition to the classicist J. B. Bury, the renowned literary critic F. R. Leavis, the international relations theorist Hans Morgenthau, the German psychiatrist and philosopher Karl Jaspers, the philosophers Bertrand Russell, Ernst Cassirer, Allan Bloom, Leo Strauss and A. O. Lovejoy and the political theorists Alan Ryan and Robert Dahl. Skinner stated that their shared focus on the texts alone would result in 'various kinds of historical absurdity' and 'mythologies' because scholars would inevitably ascribe arguments to authors that they could not have possibly held. As such, these authors were peddling myths rather than verifiable truths that could be arrived at on the basis of rigorous scholarship.

The first problem with traditional historiography was what Skinner called 'the mythology of doctrines.' Historians and philosophers identified an idea in the present and proceeded to find related doctrines in diverse texts through time. An example was Alan Gewirth's ascription of the origin of the idea of the separation of powers to Marsilius of Padua in Defensor pacis (1324), or the view that Edward Coke, the Jacobean jurist, had advocated judicial review in Dr Bonham's Case (1610), or that Richard Hooker had favoured the social contract theory in his Of the laws of ecclesiastical polity (1593), or that John Locke was a supporter of popular sovereignty. Skinner's point was that these authors could not have articulated their support for such doctrines because the ideas that formed the doctrine were unavailable to them, being the product of later periods

and subsequent intellectual developments. One negative consequence of the belief that similar doctrines could be found in altogether distinctive historical periods was the claim that great authors were contributing to related debates. This in turn generated an obsession with finding anticipations of arguments that later became prominent, with a view to working out what the contribution of an author to a particular set of ideas had been. The gradual development of ideas that had come to full form in the superior present could be traced and at the same time historical authors could be criticised for failing to fully articulate the ideas that were made clear by their successors. Plato, for example, might be taken to task for failing to consider public opinion, or Locke for not making clear where he stood on the issue of the suffrage, or Hobbes for being vague about his attitude to Christianity. At the same time historic authors could be interrogated for their thoughts on democracy, for example, even if, as in the case of Marsilius, they had not been interested in this form of government. Skinner identified the work of Leo Strauss and his students as being at fault for another project that stemmed from this general approach, in seeking to trace the origin of the contemporary lack of moral standards to Hobbes and Machiavelli, as if they could somehow be held culpable and should be made to stand trial for their views. Skinner held that all such methods and their outcomes amounted to mistaken history and to pointless scholarly endeavour.

Another consequence of the method of studying texts alone and linking them together across the centuries was what Skinner called 'the mythology of coherence', being the assumption that the works of the great authors ought to be evaluated for their consistency and depth in addressing the great conceptual issues that they shared with fellow outstanding thinkers. A corresponding impulse was always to treat the thought of an author in toto, presuming that work published

potentially over a long period of time and in different circumstances was contributing to related questions, amounting to a coherent whole. Again the scholar Skinner found especially wanting was Leo Strauss, who Skinner attacked on the grounds that esoteric writing was singularly difficult to discover and if it was perceived it was impossible to work out what the real truth or coherence of the esoteric doctrine was, because there was no evidence to measure its truth content against. Another result of the flawed method was the 'mythology of prolepsis', which was to conflate the subsequent meaning of an action with the original meaning of the action itself. An example here was to presume that Petrarch, in his ascent of Mont Ventoux, had intended to inaugurate the Renaissance. Another example, exemplified by the prominent work of Karl Popper and Jacob Talmon, was to consider Plato and Rousseau somehow responsible for the totalitarian uses of their ideas, and the evaluation of their writings as contributions either to liberalism or to autocracy. For Skinner, this was altogether mythical because neither Plato nor Rousseau could have had any idea of the subsequent history of any of their ideas, and were certainly not responsible for their possible use in situations they could never have imagined. Other examples were that Machiavelli inaugurated the modern age of political argument, without having had any sense of what this would entail, or that Locke was a liberal, rather than being someone whose work was undoubtedly employed in subsequent liberal argument. As Skinner put it, proleptic arguments were flawed because 'the action has to await the future to await its meaning.'

When Skinner turned to the significance of the social context for the understanding of ideas he acknowledged that this kind of information might be useful in aiding the scholar to explain what was going on in terms of the argument of a text, but denied that the context alone could explain

the meaning of the ideas expressed in particular texts. Marxist and Namierite historians were considered to have adopted the approach of relating texts to social context above all else, with R. H. Tawney and C. B. MacPherson leading figures of the former approach, and Namier himself of the latter. Discussion of this approach to texts let Skinner affirm his alternative method, which was based on the distinction between the meaning of an utterance in a text and the illocutionary force of that utterance. This distinction came from J. L. Austin's How to do Things with Words (1962). Skinner used Austin's idea of an illocutionary force to make the negative argument that the social context of a text might facilitate an understanding of the meaning of an utterance but could never explain the illocutionary force. The example Skinner gave illustrated neatly what he meant, intentionally drawn as it was from the contemporary historiographical controversy concerning the meaning of Machiavelli's The Prince. Skinner stated that if a reader came across the claim in Renaissance argument that 'A prince must learn not to be virtuous' they might be led to a study of the social context of the time that revealed that during the Renaissance there were lots of examples proving that amoral princes made very good rulers. Skinner then asked his audience to assume that such a claim was prevalent in Renaissance texts; this would make the force of the claim to be to give support to a moral commonplace of the times. He then asked his audience to assume the opposite, that it was the case that the statement that princes ought to abandon virtue was in fact rarely found in Renaissance texts. This made the assertion the rejection of a moral commonplace, it being the norm in Renaissance texts to demand virtuous rulers. The methodological point was that working out what Renaissance authors were arguing about the virtue or beneficial lack of it in princes could never be gleaned from the social context or from Machiavelli's text itself. Rather, it was necessary to need to discover 'how what was said

was meant, and thus what relations there may have been between various different statements even within the same general context.’ (Skinner 1969, 47).

Skinner concluded that the key to understanding a text was to seek the author’s intention in writing it. This entailed reconstructing ‘the range of linguistic meanings behind the utterances’. Social context could facilitate an understanding of ‘the force of the meaning’ but could never determine the meaning itself. Skinner was advising scholars to abandon grand claims about creating a human science. He envisaged scholars undertaking much more careful research based on a proven method and in consequence directly building on the work of earlier scholars who had already embraced such a method. Objective knowledge of the intentions of past authors could never be established, but far greater knowledge of historic ideas was anticipated, and a better sense of their meaning and application. Skinner envisaged a dialogue between historians and philosophers on the grounds that historians would for the first time be able to contribute to the sociology of knowledge and the relationship between thought and action, by revealing to philosophers what some of the luminaries of the subject had actually been doing.

Skinner published a series of methodological essays into the 1970s that refined and developed the claims outlined in ‘Meaning and Understanding’. All of them repay re-reading today (Visions of Politics, Volume 1: Regarding Method, 2002), and continue to attract extensive commentary, most recently in a special issue of the Journal of the History of Ideas (Burke et al., 2012). The fascination with Skinner’s method and the ongoing interest in it confirms what James Tully said in 1988: Skinner’s method was transforming the practice of intellectual history (Tully, 1988, 7-8). At the same time the criticisms of Skinner’s approach were voluminous and often vitriolic.

Two criticisms became commonplace. The first was that Skinner's method was invalid. Skinner was too much of a philosopher and not enough of a historian, was not interested in archival sources, was trying to pin down intentions that never could be ascertained in real scholarship, was too narrow in advocating a fix-everything approach, was too ambitious in claiming that intellectual history would become more precise and certain in its claims, was not interested in the history of a text independently from its author, and could never in practice write history that followed the method. Such claims led to the spilling of much ink; yet none of these criticisms have lasted the course. After several decades of argument, the statement that what Skinner was advocating methodologically cannot be justified is now rarely found. The second criticism was that Skinner had made the historic analysis of thought pointless. The reason was that he had severed the relationship between present politics and historical enquiry. Such a relationship had been central to every aspiration to make politics or philosophy a science, and was an obvious rationale for investigators in both of these fields. In times when research in the humanities required justification, and as calls from the harder sciences for funding were becoming ever more vocal, to argue that there would only be indirect benefits from the scrutiny of historical texts seemed like a bout of madness to numerous researchers. Reaffirming the irrelevance of intellectual history to the broader social sciences, which are necessarily interested in the relationship between past and present, turned intellectual history into a subject of 'the dustiest antiquarian interest' accordingly to numerous critics, some of whom described Skinner's methodological work as altogether vacuous, writing between the 1970s and early 2000s (Tarlton, 1973; Gunnell, 1982; Minogue, 1983; Wokler, 2001).

Giving substance to the method

Skinner recognized in writing, as did Dunn and Pocock, that the real test of their arguments about the best method to adopt in writing history was the quality of the written history itself. Pocock's The Ancient Constitution and the Feudal Law, the work of Laslett himself, and that of other Laslettian contextualisers, could of course be drawn upon as exemplifying the new approach. But the statement of the method required new works to justify it and to continue to illustrate its validity in practical terms. Such work was expected to be iconoclastic and controversial. The first example was John Dunn's The Political Thought of John Locke (1969), which challenged the portrayal of Locke as an early or original liberal thinker with the contextual linkage of Locke's arguments about politics to his Christian belief and to his commitment to the radical Calvinist theory of resistance to illegitimate political authority. Pocock's Machiavellian Moment, which appeared in 1975, amounted to a watershed in historical studies because of its breadth, covering changing concepts of time from Aristotle to the American Revolution, and depth, demanding the revision of early modern historiography by plotting the rise and evolution of republican impulses in political argument over four hundred years. Skinner supplied Pocock with the main title of the book. As Pocock has recognised, the book illustrated the method recommended by Skinner in being concerned with Machiavelli's intentions as an author, and with their maturation through his life against the background of the turbulence of political life in Florence in the first decades of the sixteenth century. The subtitle of the work, Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition, indicated broader 'moments' in history that Pocock was concerned with.

It is significant that in 'Meaning and Understanding' Skinner promised that he did 'hope shortly to complete a more systematic discussion of the subject, with particular reference both to the

study of history, and to the use of historical examples' (Skinner, 1969, 45, n. 192). Skinner had been giving lectures at Cambridge from the middle of the 1960s on the history of political thought between 1500 and 1800; a systematic overview of the subject, from Machiavelli to Montesquieu and beyond was anticipated. At the same time he was especially interested in Max Weber's search, in The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (1905), for an explanation of the fact that Protestantism was directly associated with economic development across Germany by comparison with more backward Catholic areas. Weber famously proposed that the rise of capitalism should not be explained by reference to Marxist claims about the economic replacement of feudalism, but had developed across Europe because it could be legitimized by identification with religious values, and especially the Calvinist injunctions to avoid luxury, to be thrifty and frugal, and to invest in the future rather than merely enjoying the goods of the present; Calvinist uncertainty about salvation went hand in hand with the living of a godly life. Skinner wanted to know how living according to providence came to be associated with forms of conduct that were 'provident.' He also sought to question the veracity of the longstanding association of Protestantism and modernity, defended by Michael Walzer in his The Revolution of the Saints (1966), including the forms of liberty presumed to have defined the modern world (Goldie, 2006). Such projects became subsidiary elements of a study of political thought between the twelfth and the seventeenth century that explained the rise of the modern state and of rebellion against the state. Published in 1978 under the title The Foundations of Modern Political Thought in two volumes dealing with the Renaissance and with the Reformation, it was here that Skinner 'tried to exemplify [his] interpretative approach' (Skinner, 2012, 156). The volumes described the gradual identification of the state with an artificial person standing above the unruly elements of political society, being a potential solution to endemic religious conflict.

In Skinner's view the Renaissance could only be defined over a long period of time. Historians such as Hans Baron were mistaken in seeing a sharp break between the medieval period and the Renaissance; in Baron's view (The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance, 1955) it was in 1400 during the conflict between Florence and the Visconti of Milan that ideas about imperial monarchy were abandoned in favour of self-government and political liberty. According to Skinner, the link between liberty and self-government had been articulated much earlier, predating even the reception of Aristotle in the West by several generations, and relying upon the glossators of and commentators upon Roman Law. Skinner's volumes ended with scrutiny of the resistance theories of the early seventeenth century, by which time modern politics were in his view discernable. Skinner's achievement was to challenge claims about Calvinists and puritans having changed the early modern political landscape. Skinner discerned links between the political arguments of the radical Calvinists and the Lutherans of the 1530s, but more controversially he discerned the origins of their ideas in the neo-Thomists of the School of Salamanca, such as Francisco de Vitoria, Francisco Suárez, and Juan de Mariana, and Parisian theologians of the early sixteenth century such as John Mair and Jacques Almain. The origins of liberal modernity were being pushed backwards in time, and the links between Catholic conciliarism and subsequent constitutionalism were being emphasised.

Skinner challenged Pocock's account by emphasizing the differences between the Greek and the Roman political heritage, arguing specifically that Pocock had over-estimated the importance of Aristotle's Politics as a source of Renaissance understanding of what it meant for citizens to live as equally sovereign agents in a law-governed republic. For Skinner, civic humanism was more

heavily indebted to Cicero, who had extolled the life of civic virtue and republican citizenship that was possible under a free government. For Pocock historiography, the writing of grand historical narratives, has been concerned with the story of the transformation of the republic into the empire or of the story of the incompatibility of liberty and empire. By contrast, Pocock contends that political thought in Europe has been pervaded by jurisprudence, contributing to what he has termed 'the ideology of liberal empire'. This distinction informs Pocock's remarkable series of books on Barbarism and Religion, which have appeared since 1998 and the present. For Pocock, Skinner's study of the emergence of the state should be seen as a contribution precisely to the ideology of liberal empire founded on acceptance of the transformation of a republic into an empire, because the Ciceronian virtues Skinner described were capable of being realized under popular rule or the rule of a prince, such as Augustus, Trajan, or Justinian, or indeed the 'sacred' monarch described by Eusebius, because of the existence of law. Pocock has criticized the notion that civic humanist ideas that paralleled the Florentine condemnation of tyrannical princes could be found in Otto of Freising's writings in the twelfth century. Pocock's argument is that none of Skinner's cast take seriously the idea of decline and fall, which became so powerful in European thought, questioning whether liberty depended upon law, and holding that virtues could easily be lost and states distempered and destroyed in consequence. In other words, Skinner has neglected to place texts in a context that is sufficiently broad. This criticism fits with Pocock's own description of the intellectual journey he has undertaken since The Machiavellian Moment. Pocock now states that his own notion of the political employed in 1975 was insufficiently encompassing, especially of the theological ideas that played such a prominent role in seventeenth and eighteenth-century life. Skinner in turn has described The Foundations as a vessel holed below the waterline and limping back to port, in the

manner of the artist J. M. W. Turner's wonderful portrait of the Fighting Temeraire (Skinner, 2006). While he maintains his defence of Roman Law and historiography in the Renaissance defence of the ideal of liberty, Skinner now regrets his earlier use of the definite article in his title, and indeed that he was seeking the 'foundations' of modern political thought at all, acknowledging the widespread criticism that this was at odds with his own method because it was explicitly teleological.

After the publication of The Foundations, Skinner published path-breaking work on Machiavelli (for an example see Skinner, 1990). But the additional focus of his work, which took him beyond the end point of The Foundations, was the political philosophy of Thomas Hobbes. Skinner's book Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes (1996) in particular illustrated the Cambridge method, with the first five chapters devoted to an exhaustive reconstruction of the kinds of rhetoric Hobbes would have been exposed to during his education in Tudor England. Hobbes, Skinner noticed, had initially rejected the tropes of classical rhetoric in his early Elements of Law and De Cive, being part of the more general corruption that Hobbes associated with the overweening influence of Aristotle. Hobbes' had in these works intended that a transparent and scientifically justified set of political axioms would overwhelm what he saw as the fakery and fluidity of the kinds of arguments favoured by orators, for whom the greatest aspiration was to be able to convince listeners with equal force that a claim was true and then that it was false. With the outbreak of the English Civil War, however, Hobbes came to the doleful conclusion that rhetoric was a necessary part of politics. This served as the source of an explanation of why Hobbes' shifted position between the publication of De Cive in 1642 and Leviathan in 1651, where he employed all the arts of rhetoric to convince his readers. Hobbes,

normally associated with the view that self-interest alone has social force, is shown to have acknowledged that arguments had to be persuasively framed in accordance with the canons of classical rhetoric so that he could appeal to the irrational and the egotistical. In other words, Hobbes recognised the short-term nature of the politics that surrounded him, and sought to use rhetoric to push political actors to make the kinds of decisions that accorded with their true longer-term interests.

At the same time Skinner was increasingly concerned about the accusation that he had severed the link between the history of political thought and political philosophy. He had of course been accused of demanding that every philosopher become a historian, and that there were limits to the questions researchers could ask about texts because the only legitimate questions had to be derived from knowledge of the ideological context. In Liberty before Liberalism (1998) and in a number of essays concerned with the origins and nature of modern ideas about liberty, Skinner took steps to refute the accusation of antiquarianism (Skinner, 1984; Skinner, 2002). He did this by making the claim that neglected political arguments of the past that had been forgotten or had declined for a variety of reasons could be recovered and put to use in present-day politics. This was now one of the tasks of the intellectual history. It was the task that most directly underlined how useful the subject was both to those concerned with the present and those concerned with the past.

Intellectual history and present politics

Skinner's illustration of the relevance of intellectual to contemporary argument came from the 1640s. During this period Skinner identified two antagonistic conceptions of political freedom.

Early modern history was largely an argument between exponents of the 'Roman' view of liberty, describing the life of the active citizen who makes the law and seeks to live in accordance with a set of virtues, and the 'Gothic' view that liberty is an attribute of an owner of land whose rights are protected by law, who did not make the law, but who seeks to live under the law with minimal state interference. In the seventeenth century, the major exponent of the Gothic view was Hobbes. A party of neo-Romans, including the writer Marchamont Nedham, the poet and civil servant John Milton, the soldier and country-gentleman James Harrington, the politician Algernon Sidney and the author and satirist Henry Neville, sought to combat Hobbes. Both groups derided the 'monarchomach' camp of Henry Parker, the English barrister and defender of the parliamentary cause, who argued that the sovereign people delegated their liberty to those who ruled them (Skinner, 1998, 12, 21).

The essence of the neo-roman theory was nicely captured in Skinner's view by James Harrington's response in his The Commonwealth of Oceana (1656) to Hobbes' famous claim that the liberty proclaimed on the turrets of the Italian city of Lucca was illusory, because the extent of the citizens' freedom within the law was no greater than that enjoyed under the Sultan. Harrington stated that 'even the greatest bashaw in Constantinople is merely a tenant of his head' because of his power to kill any of his subjects, even though the existence of such a power created a threat so great that murder might only rarely need to be exercised. The capacity of the Sultan to kill was as great a problem as his exercise of that power. Skinner concluded that an obsession with certain civil rights to be asserted against governmental power characterized the thought of the neo-Romans. As such it constituted a significant classical legacy to modern politics. That someone is not free unless they are free from direct coercion, or indeed from the

threat or likelihood of coercion, is a perspective that Skinner continues to seek to reassert today.

With philosophers such as Philip Pettit, whose Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government (1997) made a similar argument, Skinner has asserted that those living today needed to guard against the presumption that we are in actual fact free. There are a large number of instances where, for Skinner and for Pettit, we are not free because of the coercive potential of state power, or that of corporate bodies more generally.

Skinner was certain that his recovery of a lost tradition of liberty could rectify the tendency in contemporary Western political theory of distinguishing between two concepts of positive and of negative liberty in the manner of Isaiah Berlin's famous University of Oxford lecture of 1958. According to Skinner this led to the adoption of a polarised liberal or left wing position in political argument. The neo-Roman tradition that Skinner was describing was intended to cut through the division, teaching both Marxists and Hobbesians the importance of the protection of civil liberties that were in jeopardy even if the threat of using coercive power was rarely exercised. Skinner's historical labours thereby neatly dovetailed with his commitment to ideas about civil liberty in a more encompassing sense than classical liberalism. Skinner and Pettit justified more pointedly the view that to be unprotected by law or by the mechanisms of parliamentary representation and consent is to be in the condition of a slave.

A historical narrative backed up Skinner's intervention in debates about liberty in the contemporary world. In Skinner's opinion neo-Roman theory had been 'the most formative influence' upon the republicans who had challenged the rule of Charles I and who inaugurated the short-lived English republic. Neo-Roman theory had, Skinner claimed, influenced the

revolutionary movements of the late eighteenth century in North America and in France, through the writings and actions of Henry St John, 1st Viscount Bolingbroke, Richard Price and Thomas Jefferson. The neo-roman perspective on liberty largely disappeared, however, in the nineteenth century. Part of the reason was due to social change. Those who supported neo-Roman ideas were largely independent country gentlemen, and their own decline in an increasingly commercial world meant that fewer individuals were concerned with the threat to liberty posed by the potential threat of executive action by the state. More significantly, neo-Hobbesians like Jeremy Bentham assaulted neo-Roman claims as illogical. If people were not being coerced in practice Bentham held both that they were in fact free and were not living in conditions of dependence (Skinner, 2002, 84-85).

Skinner has affirmed that the neo-roman theory was not a branch of liberalism. He has further stated that it is important to reconstruct the story of its rise and decline, because it provides a perspective on the history of liberalism which might lead us to question our presumption of its supremacy among potential political doctrines. Part of this has entailed revealing the extent to which Hobbes was an opponent of Roman ideas about liberty, and of underlining the extent to which Hobbes' ideas evolved up to the publication of the Latin edition of Leviathan in 1668 (Skinner, 2008; Skinner, 2012). Skinner's meticulous textual and manuscript scholarship has in itself refuted the jibe that intellectual historians only need to remain in their studies and to be concerned only with published books. The volume of Skinner's publications underlines his missionary zeal to prove the relevance of labour in intellectual history, both for adding to historical knowledge and to provide ammunition to challenge the dominion of liberal ideology in modern political thought. As he has written:

The intellectual historian can help us to appreciate how far the values embodied in our present way of life, and our present ways of thinking about those values, reflect a series of choices made at different times between different possible worlds. This awareness can help to liberate us from the grip of any hegemonic account of those values and how they should be interpreted and understood (Skinner, 1998, 116-117).

Skinner's work in recent times has been summarized as having moved 'from method to politics', as it was put in a 2009 symposium devoted to Skinner's work at the Graduate Centre of the City of New York University. He remains an indefatigable advocate of intellectual history as a subject and the subject's best-known exponent across the globe. Skinner's work has become notorious for the good reason that it has always generated controversy, and this is only increasing as time passes (Bevir, 1992; Bevir, 1997; Dosse, 2003; Levine, 2005; Perreau-Saussine, 2007; Lamb, 2009). Methodological criticisms in recent times have tended to centre on the possibility of explaining historical ideas without reference to linguistic contextualism, in the manner of Jerry Cohen's Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence (1978) or Jeremy Waldron's God, Locke and Equality (2002). Skinner's response is always that analytical philosophical methods are unproblematic if they stick to problem solving and avoid ahistorical claims about the history of philosophy. This was the argument he made with Schneewind and Rorty in 1984, which Rorty pursued in his own distinction between what he considered to be the perfectly valid analytical study of issues in philosophy and intellectual history (Skinner, 1984; Rorty, 1984). At the same time, however, Skinner contends that all philosophers will always benefit immeasurably from intellectual history; they gain from a sense of the difficulties the historical actors faced in solving

problems and from knowledge of the different options available to historical agents making political decisions. In short, philosophers who become intellectual historians acquire a sense not simply of the meaning of an utterance but its historic practicality, its worth to contemporaries, its depth by comparison with the arguments of the day, and of the extent to which it convinced those it was intended to influence. Philosophers have responded by asking what is wrong with anachronism, given the different concerns and aspirations of philosophers? (Rée, 1991) Others have decided to 'say no to the history of philosophy'. If Skinner has failed to bring the two sides together, he has at least helped to stimulate work in the history of philosophy, which is indisputably flourishing (Haakonssen 2006; Catana, 2008).

Intellectual historians, by contrast with philosophers, have tended to question the application of Skinner's method to historical problems. Skinner's concern with a fixed 'concept' of liberty defining a developing historical school of thought identical with Skinner's personal political philosophy, and deemed to be of direct relevance to modern problems in politics, has been likened to the approaches founded on prolepsis that Skinner attacked in 'Meaning and Understanding'. The fact that none of Skinner's cast called themselves neo-Romans, or identified themselves or their fellow travellers as defenders of a particular perspective upon liberty, has led to the accusation that Skinner's categories are ahistorical, or at best misleading, because they were not used by the historical actors concerned. Despite being the person who has done the most in recent years to bring philosophers and intellectual historians into dialogue, Skinner has been accused of being too much of an historian and too much of a philosopher by members of each tribe. His definition of politics as comprising precise but narrow concepts, explicable by means of a critique of Isaiah Berlin's discussion of liberty in the mid-twentieth century, has also

been described as too blunt an instrument of early modern historical analysis, in part because of Pocock's success, and that of Colin Kidd and others, in studying early modern politics together with theology. Skinner's claim in Liberty before Liberalism that the neo-Romans' idea of 'civil liberty' was 'strictly political' is odd in that it implies that the neo-romans were employing a narrow notion of politics that is difficult to find in any of their writings. That they were in consequence uninterested in the nature of the Christian polity, and in the forms of international competition considered vital to maintain security, implies that their notion of the political was not being employed to address issues of direct concern, or that cease to be neo-Romans when they did so.

Some of these criticisms can be seen to have missed their target once it is accepted that Skinner's main aim has been to make sense of a complicated controversy over the meaning of liberty in seventeenth-century England, while valuably reminding his audience that liberalism is itself an historical construct. Skinner remains the master of the contextual reading of historical arguments, as his on-going work on the concept of the state and his new work on Shakespeare underscores (Skinner, 2008; Skinner, 2014). Yet as the rise of the impersonal state remains central to Skinner's interpretation of modern political thought, a genuine question for him is the nature of the response, from the late seventeenth century, to the great change in attitude that accompanied the rise of commercial monarchies that were able to use public credit to fight wars. John Dunn himself identified this difficulty some time ago, arguing that Skinner's definition of the political is too narrow, and largely irrelevant to the modern world of commerce and luxury (Dunn, 1994). Dunn has argued that Skinner does not take seriously the economic limits to modern politics, in the form of national debts and their consequences for national security, which have dominated

political discussion since the early eighteenth century. Pocock, always attuned to the transformation of politics that accompanied the financial revolution at the beginning of the eighteenth century, has made a similar point (Pocock, 2004). It is certainly the case that when Skinner reaches the eighteenth century his categories become problematic. Pitting neo-Hobbesians against neo-Romans, with the example being Jeremy Bentham against Richard Price, makes little sense because the two men saw themselves as altogether in agreement during Price's life, and not in conflict about the nature of liberty or the political programme of their patron, William Petty, 2nd Earl of Shelburne. Applying the category of neo-Roman to French thinkers such as Benjamin Constant, or Genevans like Simonde de Sismondi, has led to criticisms that have caused Skinner to alter his argument (Garsten, 2012; Urbinati, 2012). The conclusion is not that all of Skinner's work is invalid from the eighteenth century and after, but that something happened in the eighteenth century to change the nature of politics in the West. It is here that we need to start, with the relationships between politics, political economy and theology, if we want to understand the nature of the ideologies that continue to shape politics today.

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Abstract

Quentin Skinner has done more than any other historian to establish intellectual history as a field of study; his work both methodological and substantive continues to inspire researchers and students. This chapter looks at the origins of Skinner's approach, its philosophical exposition in 'Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas' (1969), and the works that have come to be seen as illustrating what is often termed the 'Cambridge' method. The chapter summarises some of the differences between the work of Skinner and that of John Pocock, who is rightly placed alongside Skinner as the most important intellectual historian of recent decades. The chapter goes on to examine Skinner's defence of the relevance of intellectual history and some of the criticisms that have been directed against his views.

Keywords

Quentin Skinner; J. G. A. Pocock; Peter Laslett; R. G. Collingwood; Cambridge School; philosophy of history, Renaissance; Reformation; Liberty; Liberalism; Ancients and moderns; Roman legacy