Quentin Skinner and His Critics: Some Notes on a Methodological Debate

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Introduction

In writing his monumental work *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought,* Quentin Skinner, the noted Cambridge political theorist,[1] professes three main aims. First, he wants "to offer an outline account of the principal texts of late medieval and early modern political thought." This is done by a thorough analysis of the most important works of writers like Dante, Marsiglio of Padua, Machiavelli, Erasmus, More, Luther, Calvin, Bodin, and others. Second, Skinner's aim is "to use the texts of late medieval and early modern political theory in order to illuminate a more general historical theme." In doing so, he hopes to show how the modern concept of the state was formed.

Third, Skinner wishes "to exemplify a particular way of approaching the study and interpretation of historical texts." This approach or method does not focus exclusively on the leading theorists of the age but rather on "the more general social and intellectual matrix out of which their works arose." The emphasis is thus more on "the history of ideologies," the purpose being none other than "to construct a general framework within which the writings of the more prominent theorists can then be situated."[2]

Many reviewers have greeted Skinner's study with enthusiasm and even with gratitude.[3] One of them states that Skinner has accomplished his goals and praises the author's "wide reading" and "methodological sophistication."[4] Another reviewer is impressed with Skinner's "impartiality and scholarly decorum,"[5] while a third also lauds the book's "elegance of style," which at times is even said to become "literary art."[6] And so many of them go on.[7] Rarely has a work by such a comparatively young writer – Skinner was just thirty-seven at the time – been so highly acclaimed by the critics.

The Foundations of Modern Political Thought was Quentin Skinner's first full-length book. But is was by no means his first scholarly attempt. As early as in 1964, he published the first in a long series of articles on Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan,*[8] presenting an analysis that has been termed "altogether new" and "an important contribution" by experienced scholars in the field.[9]

The thrust of Skinner's argument has been that Hobbes's political ideas must be viewed in their proper ideological context, i. e., the political and intellectual climate of mid-seventeeth-century England. Modern interpreters who have not done so, particularly A E Taylor, F C Hood and Howard Warrender, have come to "historically absurd" results. By focusing exclusively on the texts, these writers (and others like them) have misinterpreted Hobbes's intentions and seriously underestimated "his contemporary following, his recognition abroad, and the fears of his opponents at his popularity."[10]

Such an attack on some of the most eminent of British historians could not go unnoticed. As a matter of fact, long before the appearance of his magnum opus, Skinner, due to his diligence and originality, was well known among serious students of political theory. His complete scholarly writings up to the present day have centred around three broad and closely related areas: "interpretation of historical texts, surveyance of ideological formation and change, and analysis of the relation of ideology to the political action it represents."[11] One may also say that his voluminous papers over the years have dealt with methodological, philosophical, and historical issues of great interest, generally, to the scientific community.

In this essay I will focus primarily on Skinner's *methodological* writings, a part of his work which has spurred an intense international debate in various scholarly journals over the last 20 years.[12]

Alluding to a general observation made by J G A Pocock on academic debates, we may say that the discussion on Skinner's methodology has been more of a dispute than a dialogue,[13] more of a controversy than calm, rational reasoning. This does not make it less interesting, however. On the contrary, following this debate makes one aware of Skinner's pivotal position within the humanities and social sciences today and the importance of the methodological issues that he has raised.[14]

My aim in what follows is twofold. First, I present Skinner's main ideas as regards the methodology of history and social science.[15] Second, I focus on some of the leading topics in the ensuing debate (to be specified later). Skinner's critics are many, and they have produced a multitude of objections, arguments and alternatives. Space, naturally, permits me to deal with only the most interesting ones here.

Skinner's critique and method

What are the appropriate procedures to adopt in the attempt to arrive at an understanding of a past work of philosophy or political thought? This simple but basic question opens Skinner's seminal article,[16] which started the methodological controversy and immediately established its author as the foremost representative of what has been branded the "revisionist school" within the study of intellectual history.[17] It is still Skinner's most elaborate methodological statement, and although he has refined, and in some respects modified, his position in later papers, we will begin by considering some of the main critical points and ideas in this "marvellously iconoclastic article."[18]

The starting-point of Skinner's analysis is the existence of what he calls "two orthodoxies" in the study of past texts, be they works of literature or of philosophy, including some exercises in ethical or political thought. The first of these orthodoxies claims that it is the *context* of various socio-economic factors which determines the meaning of any particular text. The other view, still more common, "insists on the autonomy of the *text* itself as the sole necessary key to its own meaning." Both of these methodologies are erroneous, according to Skinner, since they commit some basic philosophic mistakes and are unable to achieve a proper understanding of any given historical work.[19]

In order to demonstrate the fallacies and inadequacies of textualism, Skinner argues against the

notion that past works contain "timeless elements" or "universal ideas." For Skinner, trying to recover the "timeless questions and answers" posed in the classical books is in itself a meaningless task. The classic texts have no modern relevance whatsoever; they "cannot be concerned with our questions and answers, but only with their own." There is no determinate idea to which various writers have contributed over the years, he continues. Furthermore, there is "no history of the idea to be written, but only a history necessarily focused on the various agents who used the idea, and on their varying situations and intentions in using it."[20] This critique naturally affects a whole series of historians and political scientists, including some of the most reputed ones.

Skinner's fierce polemic is primarily directed towards those historians who tend to project their own views, frameworks, and preoccupations onto the authors they are currently discussing. To exemplify this, Skinner presents a typology of errors that the textualists, according to him, have committed over the years. He calls these errors "mythologies," and discusses in turn the mythologies of doctrines, of coherence, of prolepsis, and of parochialism (the terminology is Skinner's own).[21]

The "mythology of doctrines," first of all, results from the expectation that each classic writer must "enunciate some doctrine on each of the topics regarded as constitutive of his subject." The mythology takes two principal forms. The first form consists of "mistaking some scattered or incidental remarks by one of the classic theorists for his 'doctrine' on one of the themes which the historian is *set* to expect." The second form means that a writer who clearly *fails* "to come up with a recognizable doctrine on one of the mandatory themes is then criticized for his failure to do so."[22]

The "mythology of coherence" is of another kind. It often happens, Skinner notes, that a given classic writer is not wholly consistent in his argument; indeed, he may even fail together to give a systematic account of hiw views. In spite of this, historians have an unfortunate tendency to find coherent "systems of thought" where there is no coherence, a particular "message" where there is no such thing, and so on. Thus, if there is no coherent system in the political works of David Hume, the exegete's duty is to read his books a number of times untill they have assumed the coherence that was originally looked for. In the same vein, if one assumes that Edmund Burke

never contradicted himself or even changed his mind during his entire life span, then it becomes only natural to treat his collected writings as a single coherent body of thought.

In all cases of this kind, Skinner says, the coherence found (or the absence of it) bears no resemblance to what these writers originally thought. "The history thus written becomes a history not of ideas at all, but of abstractions: a history of thoughts which no one ever actually succeeded in thinking, at a level of coherence which no one ever actually attained."[23]

The "mythology of prolepsis" means that the analyst focuses on the historical significance of a writer or his work instead of analysing what the authour himself was trying to say and do. It may be legitimate to call a writer a "founder" – for example, Locke of liberalism, or Machiavelli of modernity – but not to call that the writer's "intention."[24] Lastly, the "mythology of parochialism" occurs when a historian mistakes an author's references and falsely attributes influence on the basis of random similarities between different texts.[25]

In particular, Skinner criticizes the textualists for disregarding the fact that the literal meanings of important terms sometimes change over a period of time. Further, the textualist approach also disregards the problem of "oblique strategies," i. e., the ways in which a writer may choose to set out and to disguise what he means by what he says about a specific subject or doctrine. The whole methodology is incapable of dealing with this problem as well.[26]

So much for the weaknesses of textualism. One might expect, after this harsch criticism, that Skinner would be more prone to accept the contextual approach. This is only partly the case. He concedes that knowledge of the "social context" may help in understanding a given text. He also states that at least a part of such an understanding "must lie in grasping what sort of society the given author was writing for and trying to persuade." Contextualism, however, though a necessary part of any sound methodology, also has its faults and pitfalls, the main one being its determinist bias. Some historians tend to view texts as reflecting or mirroring certain societies or class positions. This assumption that "the ideas of a given text should be understood in terms of its social context," is, according to Skinner, clearly mistaken. Such a perspective can only serve as "the source of further very prevalent confusions in the history of ideas."[27]

All of these deficiencies clearly point to the need for an "alternative methodology," and Skinner is more than happy to provide one. The general philosophical background is obtained from the later Wittgenstein and from J L Austin.[28] Already in this article Skinner makes use of Austin's well-known theory of speech-acts, later developed by other scholars.[29]

Austin began with the observation that to say something is obviously also to do something; speaking or writing involves actions on the part of the speaker/writer. Hence, by *saying* something a given agent will be *doing* something and may thus also be said to *mean* something in or by the act of issuing a particular utterance.

Austin further identified three different senses or dimensions of the use of language: locutionary, perlocutionary and illocutionary acts. When we perform a *locutionary act* we utter a sentence with a certain sense and reference, roughly equivalent to "meaning" in the traditional sense of that word.[30] *Perlocutionary acts* are what we bring about or achieve *by* saying something, like persuading, convincing, deterring, surprising, and the like. We also perform *illocutionary acts* such as informing, warning, ordering, etc., in other words utterances which have a certain conventional force. Thus, what distinguishes the three dimensions is that the locutionary act has a specific *meaning,* the illocutionary act a certain *force* in saying something, whereas the perlocutionary act is the achieving of certain *effects* by uttering something.[31]

Skinner finds Austin's theory "crucially relevant" to his own argument. In particular he employs the distinction between locutionary and illocutionary acts. Understanding a statement – any statement – correctly is, for Skinner, tantamount to uncovering its "intended illocutionary force."[32] It cannot be enough simply to grasp what was said, to study the meaning of the statement or even its social context. What must also be grasped "is what was said was meant, and thus what *relations* there may have been between various different statements ... within the same general context."[33]

The "essential aim," therefore, in any attempt to understand a past utterance, must be to recover the "complex intention" on the part of the writer in question. The proper methodology for the history of ideas must first be "to delineate the whole range of communications which could have been conventionally performed on the given occasion

by the utterance of the given utterance," and, second, "to trace the relations between the given utterance and this wider *linguistic* context as a means of decoding the actual intention of the given writer." This may seem, to the ordinary reader, to be an excessively ambitious undertaking,[34] but Skinner assures us that it is a necessary one. Moreover, such an approach could also help in furthering a "dialogue between philosophical discussion and historical evidence," for the mutual benefit of historians and philosophers alike.[35]

The methodological article just presented was Skinner's second,[36] and both of them were, as he later admitted, "avowedly polemical,"[37] in tone as well as in substance. In a series of subsequent articles, some of which are mainly philosophical in nature, Skinner tried to develop his central claims in what he later would call a "more careful and less polemical" way.[38]

The first of these essays examines and extends Austin's idea of the illocutionary force of utterances. Skinner here further underlines that in order to establish the meaning of an act – social acts in general and speech acts in particular – it is necessary to know the intentions of the given actor. He is especially concerned with what Austin called the "uptake" by an audience of a speaker's meaning and the conditions surrounding this phenomenon. In more technical language he writes:

The point is that any intention capable of being correctly understood by A [the audience] as the intention intended by S [the speaker] to be understood by A must always be a socially conventional intention – must fall, that is, within a given and established range of acts which can be conventionally grasped as being cases of that intention. It must follow that one of the necessary conditions for understanding in any situation what it is that S in uttering utterance x must be doing to A must be some understanding of what it is that people in general, when behaving in a conventional manner, are usually doing in that society and in that situation in uttering such utterances.[39]

The analysis is brought one step further in a 1971 article, where Skinner defends the thesis that linguistic actions can be explained by grasping "the conventions governing the illocutionary force" of the utterance itself.[40] The term "convention" is used heuristically by Skinner to refer to a number of linguistic commonplaces like a shared vocabulary, similar principles and assumptions, etc. By focusing on the idea of a convention he hopes to provide a more effective means of what

he later called "closing the context" on the meanings of different texts.[41]

Skinner also makes a distinction between "the study of an author's motives in writing and the study of his intentions in writing," claiming that the recovery of the intentions, whatever the motives may be, is "essential" in any attempt to explain the meaning of a work.[42] This last point is reiterated in later articles,[43] where the question of motives, intentions, and the interpretation of texts are further discussed. First, Skinner insists that the main aim of the interpreter must be to establish the meaning of a text. Next, he grants that the meaning may, at least to some extent, go beyond the purely literal sense of the work or, in a popular metaphor, lie *below the surface* of the text. Further, Skinner tries to specify – by asking three simple questions – the meaning of the term "meaning" in this particular discussion. The questions are:

1. "What do the words mean, or what do certain specific words mean, in this text?"
2. "What does this work mean to me?"
3. "What does the writer mean by what he says in this work?"

By making these distinctions he is able to demonstrate that writers have oscillated between different senses of the term, sometimes within one and the same work.[44]

It is at all possible, he then asks, to develop some general rules about how to interpret the text in question? The answer, it seems, is in the affirmative and follows Skinner's methodological programme to the core. Two general recommendations are put forward, both extremely broad and unspecified. The first is to "focus not just on the text to be interpreted, but on the prevailing conventions governing the treatment of the issues or themes with which that text is concerned." The second, even more general rule is to "focus on the writer's mental world, the world of his empirical beliefs."[45]

Again, Skinner criticizes the view that the analyst should disregard the writer's intentions and not pay any attention to biographical or other matters. Wimsatt and Beardsley's famous critique of the "intentional fallacy,"[46] the view that it is a deadly sin to move away from the text itself in trying to interpret a work, has no supporter in Skinner. "It may be," he writes, "that a knowledge of a writer's motives and intentions is irrelevant to elucidating 'the meaning' of his works in every sense of 'meaning' I have discriminated."

But this does not mean that the critic should disregard this knowledge altogether.

To know a writer's motives and intentions is to know the relationship in which he stands to what he has written. To know about intentions is to know such facts as whether the writer was joking or serious or ironic or in general what speech-act he was performing. To know about motives is to know what prompted those particular speech-acts, quite apart from their character and truth-status as utterances.[47]

To highlight his argument, Skinner uses Machiavelli's *The Prince* as an empirical example. In chapter 16 of this famous – or infamous![48] – work, Machiavelli offers the following advice to a certain (limited) group of people: "Princes must learn when not to be virtous." What does this piece of advice mean? The crucial question to ask, Skinner says, is what Machiavelli may have meant by offering this particular advice. This is equivalent to asking about the author's intentions (and the illocutionary force of the utterance) in writing this section of the book.

The appropriate route to follow, in answering these and related questions, is to try to disclose the meaning of the text by focusing on the work's relation to the existing conventions of the time. Failure to do so may lead to distorted and flawed results. The fact that *The Prince*

was in part intended as a deliberate attack on the moral conventions of advice-books to princes cannot be discovered simply by attending to the text, since this is not a fact contained in the text. It is also clear, however, that no one can be said fully to understand Machiavelli's text who does not understand this fact about it. To fail to grasp this fact is to fail to grasp the *point* of Machiavelli's argument in the latter Chapters of his book.

What is needed, then, is to decode the intentions of the relevant author(s) by studying the "general conventions and assumptions of the genre."[49]

It is important to notice, in summarizing the argument thus far, that the key words in Skinner's terminology – above all intention, convention and meaning – are intimately intertwined; the intentions can only be discerned in terms of the existing conventions, and the meanings of different acts can not be separated from the intentions of the different actors.[50] It is likewise important to understand that Skinner's method of "linguistic contextualism" has its emphasis on the *intellectual* setting, which in practice boils down to the study of an array of historical texts from a certain period

with similar themes and viewpoints.

In his more recent methodological papers[51] Skinner again emphasizes the importance of recovering the *historical* meaning of the text in order to understand it properly. "We can hardly claim to be concerned with the history of political theory unless we are prepared to write it as real history – that is, as the record of an actual activity, and in particular as the history of ideologies," he continues. A history thus conceived would have many advantages, such as enabling us "to begin to establish the connections between the world of ideology and the world of political action."[52]

However, Skinner warns against the adoption of a "completely sociological approach," where the object of analysis is, as Pocock, in particular, has advocated, the whole range of languages used in a society over time. Trying to produce "the full picture" in the history of political ideas, for example, is a hopeless endeavour, bound to lead the researcher astray in a vain search for innumerable and unsorted facts. What is needed, instead, is an idea of what should be studied and what should best be ignored. And the important decisions "about what to study must be our own decisions, arrived at by applying our own critera for judging what is rational and significant."[53]

Now let me try to summarize briefly what I take to be the gist of Skinner's methodological programme. There are no "universal truths" or "perennial problems" in the sphere of social and political life. Every historical situation or utterance is unique, and should be viewd in its specific context in order to be properly understood. To write about the classical thinkers as though they were our contemporaries is a fatal mistake, leading to various absurdities and misinterpretations. Instead we must use an historical approach, accepting that the great thinkers created their works in particular situations and traditions very different from our own. In order to arrive at a "real understanding" of a past statement, furthermore, it is necessary to recover the intention(s) of the writer in question. What was he or she doing in writing a particular text? It is not enough, if one is interested in the historical meaning of a certain work, to focus on the text alone. One must also, and this is perhaps the most important point of all, "consider factors other than the text itself."[54] These factors will, it is hoped, become more discernible as we proceed to a confrontation between Skinner's ideas and the views of his critics.

Skinner and his critics

In this section I propose to discuss primarily two sets of problems, which have figured prominently in the debate following Skinner's methodological articles. They are in turn (1) the question of the relation between text and context and how the latter, in particular, is to be conceived; and (2) the question of the relation between past and present, which in itself embodies several interesting issues.[55] In a concluding remark I will try to offer some overall comments on the debate and on Skinner's research programme.

Text vs. Context

A first objection to Skinner centres on his distinction between a textualist and a contextualist approach to the study of past works. The distinction has been criticized for being "an artificial abstraction"[56] and even "a false dichotomy."[57] The idea seems to be that the distinction is too loose a construction, unable to discriminate between various writers and reflecting the researcher's own limited perspective more than actual reality. Preston King, among others, has argued that none of the writers discussed by Skinner fits into any of the two categories.[58]

This does not strike me as a very convincing argument. It is difficult to see why the proposed distinction should be either "false" or "artificial." As an analytical construct, which is precisely what it is, I find it quite clarifying. One may always argue, as David Boucher does, that each history of political thought exhibits an interplay between the extremes of textualism and contextualism. Seldom are these approaches found in a pure form. But to state, at the same time, that the distinction is invalid just because past writers did not make it themselves[59] is a strange way of reasoning, and certainly not an argument against an interpreter who wants to analyse or categorise these authors today.

It may be said, furthermore, that Skinner has to some extent simplified an enormously complex discussion. But this does not mean that he has distorted it. Contrary to what some critics seem inclined to admit, there are writers who openly and willingly espouse only one of the two alternatives. J P Plamenatz is a case in point. In the introduction to his well-known *Man and Society*, Plamenatz explicitly writes that the best way to understand the meaning of an author's work is by reading the text "over and over again."[60] And these are not just empty words. The analysis

offered in his book corresponds fully with the favoured methodology.[61]

However, there are other obscurities and oddities to note in this connection. In a rejoinder to the critics Skinner admitted that although his early critique and ideas were intended to be "revisionist," he took it for granted that "the classic texts were worthy of study in themselves, and that the attempt to understand them ought to be treated as one of the leading aims in any history of political thought."[62]

A closer look at Skinner's texts – textualism may actually be of some help here – reveals that his relation to the classic works is much more ambiguous than he seems prepared to concede. For example, his 1969 *tour de force* was originally titled "The Unimportance of the Great Texts,"[63] a formulation which corresponds rather well with the disrespecful aura of the whole article. More important, in his rejoinder five years later Skinner stated both that a "certain primacy still deserves to be assigned to studying the traditional canon of classic texts" and that these same texts "impose a distorting perspective" when it comes to writing about the development of political ideas over time. And he added, as if to confuse us further, "I do not say that they [the classic texts] represent the sole or even the most interesting focus we might choose."[64] When reading these inconsistent statements one is reminded of an attempt, as Nathan Tarcov duly notes, "to have his cake and eat it too."[65]

It is also surprising that Skinner nowhere is his methodological articles explicitly states the researcher's task to be to study not only the principal or important texts, but also the minor writers of the period in question.[66] The connection is highly evident in Skinner's empirical work,[67] but strangely absent in his methodological statements.

Another objection deals with the term "context" itself and what Skinner's position is, really, on the text-context dichotomy. Parekh and Berki note that Skinner does not explicitly define what he means by "context"; obviously, they say rather truistically, the term might refer to "a number of different things."[68] Ian Shapiro laments the lack of discussion on how to decide what specific context we should analyse when studying a particular text.[69] Others emphasize the need for "a broader historical context"[70] and even "a full contextual study" (whatever that means).[71]

It is quite true that Skinner's discussion concerning the elusive term "context" is not satisfactory. The critics are on safe ground when criticiz-

ing him for not having been more elaborate and precise on this point. A context, several commentators point out, is not something given or obvious; it has to be constructed – indeed created – by the researcher. Further, there is no such thing as *the* context; an assertion that a specific context "is especially significant in a given case has to be argued and not simply assumed or surreptitiously built into an explanatory model or framework of analysis."[72]

One gets the distinct impression, when reading Skinner, that he takes the context for granted, that he assumes somehow that it is already "out there" in a distant past, just waiting for the ingenious scholar to use it for his particular ends. But one does not simply run across a suitable context during the research process; one actively looks for it and penetrates it according to the general design of one's scientific enterprise.

It is appropriate here, I think, to make a distinction between two different kinds of contexts, one *narrow* and the other more broad and *inclusive* (in various respects). The former has to do with the individual writer in question and his or her written texts, intentions, social and phsychological background, etc. The latter kind of context refers to "the surrounding society" in a very broad sense – the social and political world, economic structure, power pattern, culture, intellectual tradition, including the texts of other writers, contemporary or not.[73] One must also, I further believe, pay attention to *the time span* of a context, i. e., whether it comprises a certain, very limited period, a couple of years, or maybe a whole generation or more.

Skinner's own position, as I conceptualize it, may be stated as follows (see figure 1). He clearly makes use of the narrow context and of parts of the more inclusive one. Further, he is definitely interested in the writer's own intentions, biography and – although to a lesser degree – motives. But he is also interested in the relation between the writer's texts and the intellectual milieu in which they arose. Examining the ideological context of a thinker is of prime importance to Skinner's project. Furthermore, he also pays attention to the *political* structure of the surrounding society, trying with meticulous care to describe laws, decision-making, forms of government, and existing power structures.[74]

The social and economic spheres, however, are seldon discernible in his empirical work, nor are references to the sociology of knowledge or to the

socioeconomic positions of the theorists and their clientele. This is so for a very natural reason. Focusing on these aspects of research implies an interest in providing motive or causal explanations for actions which Skinner evidently does not have. His sole interest lies in elucidating the meaning of various texts.[75]

Furthermore, the researcher always has to make some hard choices as regards the scope of the investigation, what questions and data should be included and what should be left out. Being involved in serious research implies being aware of what *could* be done as well as what *should* be done. No one is, regrettably, capable of doing everything, even though the "younger" Skinner may have nourished hopes to that effect. For instance, in an early statement of his position he wrote, in a discussion on the proper way to conduct historical research, that the historian should make the categories of historical analysis "as wide and as inclusive as possible," and examine and describe "the context itself in the greatest detail." "The primary aim" he concluded, "should not be to explain, but only in the fullest detail to describe."[76] This would be more in accordance with the views of some of his contemporary critics,[77] but it still represents, in my opinion, an extremely unrealistic methodological recommendation.

It is a striking fact that Skinner, in the discussion of what constitutes the proper context for a given text, has not tried to specify in any detail why some factors – for example, the political scene – are more important than others. What is lacking here, I think, is a more judicious argument in favour of his own particular brand of contextual analysis. It is easy to concur with Judith Shklar, when she states that Skinner's programme does not comprise "any explicit principles of selection."[78]

Another noticeable feature of the programme is the short time span. Skinner's interest lies, as we know, in scrutinizing past statements in their concrete historical situations. He is less interested – if at all – in looking at the development of an author's ideas over a longer period of time. This seems to exclude the possibility of making comparisons between different works by the same writer during his lifetime (and also, consequently, between different writers from different periods).[79]

Type of context

Narrow   Inclusive

Short   Q. Skinner
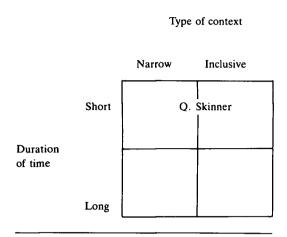
Duration
of time

Long

Figure 1: The Scope and Duration of Different Contexts.

In his earlier critique of the "two orthodoxies" in the field of intellectual study, Skinner somehow gave the impression of opposing textualism and contextualism with equal rigour; both entailed, in their extreme variants, certain serious faults and defects. Looking at Skinner's complete writings over the years, however, be they methodological or empirical, it becomes quite clear that his own approach is akin to the contextualist position, albeit not identical with it.[80]

Skinner and his followers maintain, as we have seen, that the best way to recover the meaning of past political thought is to construct methods for "closing the context" on old ideas in ways that are historically reliable. The ambition is, as Tarlton has put it, "to limit the range of alternative interpretations to which any past writing is open."[81] This is done by placing the text in its proper context (whatever that may be). Relating the text to its context, then, is the important procedure, not studying the text *per se*. Thus, John Gunnell obviously has a point when he notes that Skinner's approach "tends to depreciate the text in favor of the context."[82]

The foregoing raises a difficult problem. If we assume that there is some kind of important relation between the whole and its parts, or between statements made and the context in which they are made, how are we to determine, in any reliable way, the concrete nature of that relation?[83] Skinner's method is of little help here. It tells us *why* we should construct ideological contexts of conventions, but not *how* this is to be achieved.[84] We are not even told how a given writer's contemporaries

are to be understood[85] or what are the most interesting connections to look for in relating their writings to the "great" author.

Does Skinner's view of context imply a kind of contextual or linguistic determinism? So some critics decidedly argue. It has been stated that the differences between the sort of determinism which merely extracts the meaning of an act from its setting and Skinner's strategy for locating meaning in an historical surrounding "are of degree only." The linguistic context is said to operate as a limitation on a writer's intentions and meaning. It cannot follow, this critic says, that some peoples' way of using language limits what they actually could have meant.[86]

Skinner's theses on language and communication, it has been further said, mean "the denial of the possibility of new insights and new experiences." Language is not something static; it constantly changes in complex ways rendering "some words and meanings obsolete and others novel." Since there is a "necessary indeterminancy" about what constitutes a language at a given point of time, the Skinnerian notion of a "supposedly definite entity," a "range of descriptions," is both "narrow and misleading." We must acknowledge the possibility that major philosophers or political theorists could articulate novel thoughts beyond the reach of ordinary citizens. Skinner's approach cannot account for these "creative artists," who teach their contemporaries and constantly" defy the available range of descriptions."[87]

Skinner himself has repeatedly made a distinction between what I would call a "weaker" and a "stronger" version of contextualism. The former is open to the possibility that a study of the context may *help* in understanding the meaning of a text, a position which Skinner endorses. The latter assumes that the ideas of a text should be understood *in terms of* its context, a version which Skinner rejects. What he opposes, evidently, is the idea that a specific work should be regarded as 'caused' (or even 'influenced') by a set of antecedent conditions.[88]

Skinner further denies that his approach is in any way blind to changes and innovations. The critics' accusations here rest on "a confusion." Being limited by the "prevailing conventions of discourse" is one thing, he says, assuming that authors were limited to "*following* these conventions" is quite another. "I have obviously never intended to commit myself to the absurdity of denying that it is open to any writer to indicate that

his aim is to extend, to subvert, or in some other way to alter a prevailing set of accepted conventions and attitudes."[89]

This is all very well and wise. The problem, as I see it, is that some of Skinner's methodological passages and sentences come close to endorsing the "stronger" contextualist position without acknowledging this or even bothering to discuss it. "There seems no question that for every statement there must be *some* explanatory context, for every action *some* set of antecedent causal conditions," he wrote in 1969. In a footnote he added casually, "I am aware that this comes very close to raising one of the traditional difficulties about determinism. I am content, however, that it does not in fact raise the issue, and that I do not here need to do so."[90] It is only to be expected that astute critics, when confronted with these and similar statements,[91] have found the argument – or parts of it – inadequate and incomplete. Had Skinner been more precise and less meagre on this issue, the alleged "confusion" on part of certain observers might perhaps have been avoided.

Past vs. Present

Two closely related questions are of special interest in the past vs. present controversy. First, are there any "universal ideas" or "perennial problems" in the history of ideas? Put differently, is there any point in talking about "traditions" or "canons" of political thought? Quentin Skinner, as we have seen, does not think so. Referring to R G Collingwood he states that "there are only individual answers to individual questions, with as many different answers as there are questions, and as many different questions as there are questioners."[92]

Several critics take issue with Skinner on this point. His contention is simply not correct, writes Gordon Schochet. Books by great writers like Hobbes or Machiavelli are admittedly read by later generations that could not care less about the authors' intentions. To explain our continued interest in the "great" texts och help us detect their true qualities, we must read them "from a historical perspective that succeeded them in time," in other words, "as contributions to a tradition of political discourse."[93]

Parekh and Berki point out that even the great writers of political thought were indebted to their classic predecessors. Hobbes's views on human nature, for example, may have been suggested to him by his own tumultuous society, but "neither

their interest nor their validity is confined to seventeenth-century England. They are of universal application."[94]

Some problems must surely be considered perennial, according to Joseph Femia. Questions like "*who* should rule, *why*, and *in what manner*" are particularly good examples. Problems of social order and social change as well as issues related to conceptions of man and the good life have also been enduring themes among Western political theorists ever since Plato and Aristotle.[95]

Skinner's thesis is, as these comments indicate, an excessively strong one. Historians in general tend to view the history of political thought as a series of perennial questions to which most great thinkers have addressed themselves over the years. Sheldon Wolin, to mention Skinner's antipole, argues that the Western intellectual tradition must be seen as one long conversation in which perennial problems are perpetually addressed by writers in terms of "a fairly stable vocabulary and set of categories."[96] This may also be an extreme position, the implication being that language and concepts hardly change at all through time.[97]

Few would deny, though, that there are in some sense perennial issues and problems in the history of political thought. However, much depends on what level of abstraction we are talking about. Even Skinner acknowledges the possibility that there may exist "apparently perennial *questions*," provided that these are "suffic[i]ently abstractly framed."[98] What this means is not entirely clear. Skinner, unfortunately, does not give us any examples to illustrate his point. Nor does he specify what level of abstraction he considers reasonable in order to talk about "timeless questions" in the history of ideas.

Although Skinner denies it, texts have both concrete and universal meanings, i. e., they may refer to a specific historical situation but also illuminate similar circumstances elsewhere.[99] Accordingly, a given writer may very well, when constructing the text, be operating on different levels of discourse. He may address himself, as Parekh and Berki suggest, to a limited audience and to the particularities of his own society. But he may also intend to ask questions or pose problems to a larger audience beyond his own day and age, maybe even to "the whole of human society."[100] Theoretically, at least, this could not be ruled out. (That such an assertion raises some tricky questions concerning the recovery of the author's in-

tentions is another matter.) Skinner, however, seems to ignore this possibility and assume that writers in general are only concerned with particular ideas during a particular period of time.[101]

Joseph Femia has effectively pin-pointed the flaws in Skinner's position:

Skinner writes of the history of political thought as if it were merely a series of disconnected intellectual events. But if every historical utterance and action is a unique event, historical inquiry itself becomes impossible. The historian must, unavoidably, pursue analogies, make comparisons, identify regularities, and use general concepts. If all historical events are *sui generis*, then we cannot write history; we can only pile up documents.[102]

Interestingly enough, in his historical work Skinner does not strictly abide by his own methodological principles. As Boucher has shown, Skinner, in his volumes on the foundations of modern political thought as well as in a short book on Machiavelli, explicitly concedes that there are perennial questions and timeless elements to be found in the classic texts. For example, Machiavelli is said to have devoted himself "to exactly the same range of themes" as writers who lived several centuries before him. Also, in the "main tradition of Italian political theory" we suddenly find two "perennial issues," namely, "the need to preserve political liberty and the dangers to liberty represented by the prevalence of standing mercenary armies."[103] Here, obviously, we have an example of how difficult it may be to reconcile rigid theory with historical practice.

This brings us swiftly to the second question of interest here, which concerns whether we should seriously contemplate today what old thinkers said *anno dazumal*. Do past ideas and texts have any relevance or significance for the present? Do the "great masters" of political thought have anything to say about problems or issues pertinent to our societies today? Is it advisable, in other words, to study the classics "with one eye on the present"?[104]

Skinner has been quite adamant on this point. He insists that we cannot learn anything by studying the "timeless" questions and answers provided by the classic works. The writers of the past are not our contemporaries, and the sooner we realize it the better. Instead, he adds in a memorable phrase, "we must learn to do our own thinking for ourselves."[105]

The critics, not surprisingly, take a different view. Margaret Leslie claims that Skinner's approach represents an "historical ascetism which

rules out all but the scholarly uses of the writings of the past." She finds it odd that he begins by stressing the value of understanding the classic texts, but ends by offering a method "which seems to destroy the very treasure that we seek, leaving only the dust of scholarship." Using Antonio Gramsci's *Notes on Machiavelli* as an empirical example, Leslie argues that it is indeed a worthwhile endeavour to make connections between the past and the present in historical inquiry. The effort may actually prove to be doubly rewarding. Modern scholars can use their contemporary concerns as means to a better understanding of the past. But they may also, as a result of this process, find "help in working out their ideas for the present."[106]

Ian Shapiro makes a similar point when he states that the study of the history of ideas is commonly, though not necessarily, "rooted in the present." Understanding the present historically is desirable for many reasons. We may learn, for instance, "where our beliefs came from and what functions they serve in the contemporary world."[107]

Much of this criticism is, I believe, pertinent and correct. However, several of the opponents discuss things as if Skinner, because of his critical stance, finds no value in studying the history of political thought at all.[108] This is clearly not correct. Skinner's opinion is that such a study can be highly educative, illustrating the vast differences between past societies and our own, and providing a valuable lesson in self-awareness.[109] The issue, then, is not whether studying the classic texts is a worth-while preoccupation,[110] but rather *how* this should be done and what lessons we can learn from it (if any).[111]

Still, Skinner's refusal to acknowledge any connections between past and present in the study of political thought is untenable. Andrew Lockyer, for one, reminds us of the fact that authors often take issue with and address themselves to previous writers;[112] indeed, one might interpose, this is precisely what we encourage our students to do when they are asked to write essays on various subjects. The idea must be that different writers over the years, who profess an interest in related (but not necessarily identical) issues and problems, are involved in a continuous, rational discourse, sometimes using their predecessors as a source of inspiration, sometimes as the starting-point for critical intellectual ventures into the unknown.

Lockyer writes:

What we have in the Western tradition of political discourse is not a contemporaneous debate where participants give contradictory answers to 'timeless questions', but a series of attempts to deal with a series of different but related questions; where the terms of the debate acquire subtly different meanings in changing contexts and where the questions and answers of previous authors are confronted and reinterpreted.[113]

The big problem with Skinner's view is that it seems to cut us off from our philosophical ancestors, and from our intellectual heritage as well. Surely our predecessors, with all their faults and errors, have at least some knowledge and wisdom to convey to us today. We *are* dependent on them in various ways, whether we like it or not. What we must do is to examine their works critically, to refute what is silly and dated and seize upon what may be of lasting value.

Naturally Aristotle, among many others, espoused certain views that today strike us as plainly ridiculous. Here I am referring to his convictions that Greeks in general were superior human beings, that slavery was a sound basis of social organisation and that the sole role of women was to give birth to children. At the same time one can detect, with no apparent difficulties, that he also enunciated ideas and modes of thinking that are still features of social research, for example, his way of collecting data about the surrounding world and making connections between various social and political phenomena. Thus, we cannot simply, like Skinner, dismiss these writers out of hand just because they wrote in a time very different from our own. Neither can we, like Skinner, *apriori* assume that their ideas are entirely without contemporary relevance. This has to be investigated and critically examined before we doom their work to eternal dissolution.

Political ideas, as Femia notes, "cannot be created *ex nihilo*." "Innovation in political thought rarely, if ever, consists of unprecedented originality."[114] Skinner's genteel advice that we should "do our own thinking for ourselves" is witty and well put, but it grossly underrates, I fear, the contributions of past thinkers and the difficulties involved in articulating new insights and ideas for the further enlargement of our fragile knowledge.

Conclusion

It is an undisputed fact that the opinions about Skinner's methodology vary considerably. One commentator sees it as "an attempt to accomplish the impossible," namely to resolve the conflict between history and philosophy.[115] Another simply concludes that it is, along with Michel Foucault's genealogy, "the most original and promising form of political analysis available."[116] There is nothing strange or alarming about these diverse judgements. It makes perfect sense to try to pin-point the more dubious elements of Skinner's approach and still, at the same time, to be almost overwhelmed by the *grandeur* of it all.

Disagreement about the nature and fruitfulness of a scientific methodology is, on the whole, a sign of health, something which should be welcomed. What has struck me when reading this debate is that so many of the participants argue as if there is only one way of studying the history of political thought, preferably the one they advocate themselves. Diversity, they imply, is deplorable; it would be far better if every student of political theory decided to embrace one all-encompassing method. I disagree. Methodological pluralism has a value of its own. Reality is immensely complex, and the more approaches and methods we use in trying to describe and explain it the better. We should beware of those who favour a unitary scientific ideal.

True, there are some major difficulties with Skinner's research programme. The most telling critique here comes from David Boucher. Not only does he show that there is a discrepancy, in certain respects, between theory and practice in the work of Skinner. He also suggests, convincingly I think, that Skinner in quite a few instances fails to avoid the very mistakes that he criticizes others for making. In his empirical studies, Skinner himself actually tends to subscribe to the mythologies of doctrines, prolepsis and parochialism.[117] It is also true, echoing Richard Bernstein's poignant critique of Habermas, that Skinner "is far more trenchant in posing relevant questions than in providing clear, unambiguous answers."[118]

What we should do, in conclusion, is laud Skinner's efforts but at the same time pay close attention to all the apparent flaws and pitfalls involved. Applying his methodological programme fully may prove to be a task beyond what is humanly possible. It is all very well to reach for the stars. The sky is the limit, as we are sometimes told. But those of us with less ambitious projects will still be content to aim at the local mountain top, knowing that excursions into outer space may occasionally end in dismal failures.

Notes

1 In 1978, the same year that his major work was published, Skinner was appointed Professor of Political Science at the University of Cambridge, England.

2 Skinner 1978a, ix-xi. Volume one of this work deals with the Renaissance, while volume two (Skinner 1978b) studies political thought and action during the Reformation.

3 Cf. Keane 1981, 175.

4 Trinkaus 1980, 79.

5 Shklar 1979, 549.

6 Franklin 1979, 555. See also Boucher 1980 and Pocock 1979. Even reviewers who are quite critical of certain features of the book concede that its value "can hardly be over-emphasized" (Black 1980, 452).

7 Kelley 1979 is a case in point. I do not wish to imply, however, that Skinner's book has not also received its share of criticism; in fact, all of Skinner's work has, which this essay will hopefully demonstrate.

8 Skinner 1964.

9 Schochet 1974, 262, and Wiener 1974, 251.

10 Skinner 1966a, 313, 317. See also Skinner 1965a, 1965b, 1965–66, 1969b and 1972c. For a critical examination of Skinner's historical articles on Hobbes, see Wiener 1974, Warrender 1979 and King 1983, 303–15.

11 Tully 1983, 489. Cf. Schochet 1974, 263–64, and Liedman 1979–80, 280–84.

12 Skinner is one of the principal participants in this debate, which started in the 1960s, after the development of a profound dissatisfaction among younger scholars with the prevalent methods and procedures of enquiry into the study of political thought. Boucher 1985, ch. 2.

13 Pocock 1972, 4.

14 The debate on Skinner's methodology has now been summarized in a book edited by Tully 1987.

15 It should be stated at the outset that reproducing, concisely and accurately, Skinner's views, is not an easy task. First of all, his articles are scattered in many different journals, some of which are difficult to locate. Second, much of their force derives from the voluminous empirical examples, which can only be suggested here. The reader interested in a complete picture of Skinner's methodological writings should consult the primary sources (see the reference list). For useful reviews, see Tarcov 1982, esp. 692–701, and Tully 1983.

16 Skinner 1969a, 3.

17 Femia 1981, 113. Apart from Skinner, Femia here also refers to the writings of J G A Pocock and John Dunn. It is quite common to treat the ideas of these three researchers as closely kindred; see, e. g., Tarlton 1973, Shapiro 1982, and Janssen 1985. See also Gunnell 1979, 22–23, 96–103. Skinner himself has generously acknowledged his dependence on other writers; besides Pocock and Dunn he has mentioned R G Collingwood, W H Greenleaf, Alasdair MacIntyre and Martin Hollis. See Skinner 1966b,

139; 1974, 283–84; 1978a, x, n. 2.

18 The statement emanates from Tully 1983, 489.

19 Skinner 1969a, 3–4. A third allegedly mistaken methodology, which Skinner treats more in passing, is the "history of ideas" proper.

20 Ibid., 4–6, 38, 50. It has been stated that Skinner, in The Foundations of Modern Political Thought, partly ignores this view since one of his aims is to delineate the development of a particular idea, namely the modern concept of the state. See Shapiro 1982, 547–48 and Boucher 1985, 239–240. Cf. Gunnell 1982, 324–25.

21 The various "mythologies" are presented and discussed in Skinner 1969a, 7–39.

22 Ibid., 7–16 (quote on 7 and 12).

23 Ibid., 16–22 (quote on 18). See also Dunn 1968, 87–88 and Pocock 1972, 6.

24 Skinner 1969a, 22–24.

25 Ibid., 24–28.

26 Skinner 1969a, 31–35 (quote on 32). The problem of oblique strategies is, I think, more complex than Skinner seems to recognise. It is one thing to establish, for instance, that an author purposely disregards or neglects a conventional mode of discourse. But this is no solid evidence for ascribing a particular intention to him, as Skinner often does. If the text lacks information as to the reasons for the omission, there does not seem to be any way of knowing what the oblique intention was. Cf. Boucher 1985, 203.

27 Ibid., 39–43 (quote on 40 and 43).

28 For a note on Skinner's philosophical and linguistic debts, see Skinner 1980, 577, n. 3.

29 The key works here are Austin 1962; Grice 1957 and 1969; and Searle 1969.

30 We will return to the meaning of "meaning" later in this section.

31 Austin 1962, esp. lectures VIII–X, 94–132. Austin has been criticized – rightly, I think – for not having distinguished clearly between the perlocutionary act and the illocutionary act. For a discussion and criticism of Austin, see Skinner 1970, esp. 118–22; Shapiro 1982, 539–42; King 1983, 285–90. Cf. Vedung 1977, 105–06.

32 Skinner 1969a, 46. Apparently he here equates illocution with intention. For this he is criticized in Shapiro 1982, 542–43 and in Boucher 1985, 220–23, 230–31.

33 Skinner 1969a, 45–48 (quote on 47). Skinner also argues that Austin's own discussion of illocutionary force needs to be extended "to deal with the identification of less overt and perhaps even non-avowable illocutionary acts." As an example he mentions the need "to deal with the obvious but very elusive fact that a failure to use a particular argument may always be a polemical matter, and thus a required guide to the understanding of the relevant utterance" (47).

34 Cf. Tarcov 1982, 697.

[35] Ibid., 48–53 (quote on 49). Cf. John Dunn's argument that "both historical specificity and philosophical delicacy are more likely to be attained if they are pursued together than if one is deserted for the other at an early stage of the investigation." Dunn 1968, 86. This article by Dunn, also published in Dunn 1980, 13–28, has been of great importance to Skinner and, according to his repeated statements, contributed considerably to his own thinking. See, e. g., Skinner 1969a, 53 and 1984, 193, n. 2.

[36] The first was Skinner 1966c, where the author made a tentative case for a contextual approach (esp. 213–14). Cf. the similar way of putting it in Pocock 1967, 194, 201–02.

[37] Skinner 1974, 279. Cf. the remark in Tarlton 1973, 311.

[38] Skinner 1974, 278.

[39] Skinner 1970, 133.

[40] Skinner 1971, 14.

[41] Skinner 1972a, 154; 1974, 284–85 (quote on 284); Tully 1983, 491–92. Cf. Dunn 1968, 98: "The problem of interpretation is always the problem of closing the context."

[42] Skinner 1971, 14–16 (quote on 15 and 16); 1972a, 146–47.

[43] Skinner 1972a, 146–47, 149–50; 1972b, 393–95.

[44] Skinner 1972b, 396–97. See also Boucher 1985, 210. In 1972a, 149–50, Skinner also tries to consider some practical implications of his argument. One of these implications or recommendations is that it is vital to "raise questions about the agent's ritual *beliefs* in order to be able to explain" those actions which Austin called "ritual and ceremonial." Another implication is the need to ask questions about the *rationality* of the agent's beliefs. The importance of the concept of rationality is further emphasized in an unpublished paper (Skinner 1977, esp. 22–24).

[45] Skinner 1972b, 406–07. See also Gunnell 1982, 322 on this point.

[46] The phrase was coined in Wimsatt & Beardsley 1946.

[47] Skinner 1972b, 395–401 (quote on 400).

[48] Cf. Skinner 1981, 1.

[49] Skinner 1972a, 144–45, 154–55 (quote on 144 and 155). This example is also used in Skinner 1969a, 46–47. Skinner has analysed Machiavelli and his contemporaries in greater detail in Skinner 1978a, esp. chapters 5–6, and in Skinner 1981.

[50] Cf. Schochet 1974, 265.

[51] Skinner 1974 and 1976 respectively.

[52] Skinner 1974, 279–80 (quote on 280).

[53] Ibid., 280–81 (quote), 287–89. I should add here that Skinner, Pocock and Dunn, while agreeing on most basic issues, sometimes differ on certain points, often only in terms of emphasis. For some of these differences, see Tarlton 1973, 308; Boucher 1983, 114–15, n. 9; Janssen 1985, 115, n. 1. See also Boucher 1985, passim.

[54] Skinner 1972b, 408. See also Skinner 1974, 285.

[55] I have chosen these subjects as foci for discussion,

fully aware that such a choice covers only parts of the extensive debate. One important point, which I do not deal with at any length here, is the problem of how to recover the intentions of a given author. For an thorough discussion of this issue, see Boucher 1985, ch. 5. See also Parekh & Berki 1973, esp. 169–71; Mulligan et al. 1979, passim; LaCapra 1980, 254–56; Femia 1981, 130–34; Shapiro 182, 542–54.

[56] Boucher 1983, 112.

[57] Lockyer 1979, 216.

[58] King 1983, 290–95. See also Boucher 1985, 231–32, 236.

[59] Boucher 1985, 236–37.

[60] This famous passage is quoted by Skinner in 1969a, 32 and in 1978a, xiii.

[61] A Swedish writer who claims to adhere to the textualist method (albeit within a slightly different area, namely literary biography), is Olof Lagercrantz. In a recent book he states: "För mig har, då jag skrivit levnadsteckningar, dikten varit utgångspunkten. Att läsa texten åter och åter tills den börjar leva inom en, som hade man svalt den, är metoden." Lagercrantz 1985, 55.

[62] Skinner 1974, 279.

[63] Leslie 1970, 433, n. 1; Lockyer 1979, 205, n. 13.

[64] Skinner 1974, 280–81.

[65] Tarcov 1982, 700. See also LaCapra 1980, 269 and Liedman 1979–80, 286–87.

[66] Cf. Schochet 1974, 268.

[67] Antony Black, for instance, in his review of *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, lauds Skinner's "heroically detailed surveys of minor authors" (Black 1980, 452).

[68] Parekh & Berki 1973, 181.

[69] Shapiro 1982, 575. See also Tarlton 1973, 318.

[70] Wiener 1974, 256.

[71] Mulligan et al. 1979, 97.

[72] Parekh & Berki 1973, 1982–84; LaCapra 1980, 254 (quote); Boucher 1983, 118; King 1983, 302. On the notion of "context," se also Janik 1985, 8–9.

[73] Cf. LaCapra 1980, 254–72, who singles out six different contexts, namely intentions, motivations, society, culture, the corpus, and structure. See also Parekh & Berki 1973, 181–82.

[74] This focus on the political context is criticized – with rather shaky arguments, I think – in Wiener 1974, 255–56, 258 and in Trinkaus 1980, 79–80.

[75] Cf. Boucher 1985, 211.

[76] Skinner 1966c, 213–14. Cf. King 1983, 298.

[77] See especially Mulligan et al. 1979.

[78] Shklar 1979, 550. See also Tarlton 1973, 312, who criticizes Skinner and his followers for advocating a method "that is misleading, given its lack of adequate operational specification."

[79] This is part of the critique in Wiener 1974, 255–58.

[80] Thus, it is somewhat misleading to say that Skinner occupies a "middle position" in this *Methodenstreit* (Liedman 1979–80, 281).

[81] Tarlton 1973, 308. See also Skinner 1974, 283.

[82] Gunnell 1982, 322. Preston King goes too far, however, when he remarks that Skinner's practice reveals "either an evasion or a turning away from textual analysis" (King 1983, 296). The analysis is there all right, but it is framed in a contextual mould.

[83] So the problem is presented in Tarlton 1973, 313. See also LaCapra 1980, 254.

[84] For this point, see Boucher 1985, 212, 214.

[85] Shapiro 1982, 549.

[86] Tarlton 1973, 313–18, (quote on 313), 322, 325–26.

[87] Parekh & Berki 1973, 167–169. See also Tarlton 1973, 326; Schochet 1974, 270, 272; and Lockyer 1979, 206–07.

[88] Skinner was earlier a vocal opponent of any attempt to trace influences and establish connections between various writers. Later, and especially in his more mature empirical work, he has modified his views on this issue considerably. See, especially, Skinner 1966c, 206–10; 1967, 163 and 1969a, 25, n. 106. See also Black 1980, 454–55; Boucher 1983, 118 and Boucher 1985, 195–97, 225–26.

[89] Skinner 1974, 287.

[90] Skinner 1969a, 43, n. 183.

[91] Se also ibid., 49–50.

[92] Ibid., 50.

[93] Schochet 1974, 270.

[94] Parekh & Berki 1973, 170–71.

[95] Femia 1981, 122–23 (quote on 123).

[96] Wolin, *Politics and Vision*, quoted in Boucher 1985, 233.

[97] Cf. Lockyer 1979, 206–210 and Pocock 1984.

[98] Skinner 1969a, 52. Skinner 1974, 287–89, is also of interest here.

[99] Boucher 1985, 235.

[100] Parekh & Berki 1973, 171.

[101] Cf. Black 1980, 453.

[102] Femia 1981, 127.

[103] These examples are quoted in Boucher 1985, 238–39.

[104] Leslie 1970, 434.

[105] Skinner 1969a, 52.

[106] Leslie 1970, 433, 436, 446. Howard Warrender, the famous Hobbes scholar, presents a similar view in a critical response to Skinner. "The classic texts in political philosophy are more than tracts for the times. However much they are involved with and illuminate the author's immediate context, they continue to be studied for what insight they offer in new and changing situations. To consign them to their contemporary milieu, with whatever honours, is to bury them." Warrender 1979, 939.

[107] Shapiro 1982, 577. This closely resembles Croce's famous dictum: "every true history is contemporary history." Femia 1981, 128.

[108] Leslie 1970, 435, is an exception to the rule.

[109] Skinner 1969a, 52–53.

[110] One may safely assume, as Richard Ashcraft does, that most political scientists attach at least *some* value to the study of traditional political theory (although they may differ as to what this value really

consists of). Ashcraft 1975, 7. See also Weldon 1953, 15 and Haddock 1974, passim.

[111] On the last page of his book on Machiavelli, Skinner gives the following account of his own research strategy: "The business of the historian ... is surely to serve as a recording angel, not a hanging judge. All I have accordingly sought to do in the preceding pages is to recover the past and place it before the present, without trying to employ the local and defeasible standards of the present as a way of praising or blaming the past." Skinner 1981, 88. Cf. Boucher 1985, 220.

[112] Lockyer 1979, 210.

[113] Ibid., 216.

[114] Femia 1981, 134. Cf. Boucher 1985, 243: "It is impossible to start afresh; you can alter the tradition, but you can never totally ignore it."

[115] Schochet 1974, 269.

[116] Tully 1983, 507.

[117] See Boucher 1985, 238–43.

[118] Bernstein 1976, 220.

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