



Review: The Historian and the Ideologist

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THE HISTORIAN AND THE IDEOLOGIST

VISIONS OF POLITICS by Quentin Skinner. 3 vols. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

QUENTIN SKINNER: HISTORY, POLITICS, RHETORIC by Kari Palonen. Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2003. 207 pp.

The three volumes of *Visions of Politics* are the documents of an intellectual epoch, written by one of its leading figures. They offer an extraordinarily vibrant picture of the *longue durée* effects of the innovating spirit of the 1960s in history, philosophy, and the social sciences in English-speaking universities as well as in Europe. Quentin Skinner's project and that of the Cambridge School he helped to establish can be seen as an attempt to disprove Peter Laslett's 1956 diagnosis of the death of political philosophy, "a British variant of the 'end of ideology' thesis" as Kari Palonen writes in his monograph on *Quentin Skinner* (p. 12). The analysis of political languages and ideologies has been the distinctive mark of Skinner's project of freeing historical understanding from antihistorical parochialisms. His main concern has been the study of linguistic conventions and conceptual distinctions in the work of both minor and major authors.

The most important theoretical context for what Palonen calls the "Skinnerian revolution" is the British tradition of the philosophy of language. There, conceptual analysis is an instrument of communication, a means to solve or create disagreements, to shape traditions of meaning or break them down, to, finally, inaugurate "shifting vocabularies." Whether in Cambridge or in Oxford, the renaissance of political philosophy in England after World War II began from within the framework of linguistic analysis, both when it took the form of clarification of the evaluative meaning of political concepts, as in the case of Brian Barry (*Political Argument*, 1965), and when it sought

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to understand political ideas as constitutive events in the historical transformation of a system of beliefs, as in the case of J. G. A. Pocock (*Politics, Language and Time*, 1971). Skinner's antianalytical turn was the result of his encounter, first, with Collingwood's legacy (which viewed a text as "an attempt to solve a problem" and the hermeneutic enterprise as the reconstruction of the dialogue between authors and environments of meanings) and, second, with Wittgenstein's and J. L. Austin's linguistic and semantic analysis. Skinner used these two traditions to redesign historical inquiry and politicize the philosophical attitude toward language. This approach gave historical studies a transformative function because the moment historians posed the question, "What was this or that author doing when he wrote this or that?" they asked a constellation of questions that concerned the context of meanings for the author in question as well as for themselves. While providing for a new understanding of past events or beliefs that had until then seemed contradictory or irrational, the Skinnerian methodology also played a kind of therapeutic role in relation to several mythologies that were driving historiography; it was, in this regard, a check on the hubris of explanation.

Skinner's project belongs also to the broader philosophical *renovatio* that crossed the Continent and the United States. His work should be read together with the works of Derrida and Foucault, Ricoeur and Geertz, Quine and Rorty, Feyerabend and Kuhn. In Skinner's own recollection, his anti-analytical move was radicalized in 1970s at the Institute for Advanced Study, "a veritable hotbed of anti-foundationalism." During the years Skinner spent at Princeton, between 1974 and 1979, Richard Rorty (then a member of the Philosophy Department) was completing his *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* which was published in 1979, the year after Skinner published the two volumes of *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*. Thomas Kuhn (whose 1962 *Structures of Scientific Revolutions* "deeply impressed" Skinner) meanwhile was a fellow at the Institute and a member of the social theory group that met under the aegis of Clifford Geertz, the most radical representative of the pluralist and relativist theory of culture. The word "foundations" that Skinner deliberately included in his title was meant to call attention to the fact that he was "trying to identify the most basic concepts out of which we in the modern west constructed the legitimizing theories we continue to deploy in talking about the duties of citizens and the rights of states."¹ History appeared as the work of reconstructing the conceptual foundations and political vocabularies of a specific age, here the age of the modern state.

Skinner has fought his battle over method (the subject of the first volume of *Visions of Politics*) on three fronts: against the various forms of positivism and the objectivist mythology (the myths of facts and of eternal concepts); against immanentism and teleological historicism (the myth of depersonal-

ized agents in both its Hegelian and Marxist mode); and against the transformation of the text, uprooted and de-contextualized, into a metaphorical event (the myth of the “irrecoverability of meaning”). He developed at least two sets of arguments with regard to these debates. First, in changing the focus of historical work from “deeds” to the “doer,” Skinner placed human activity at the center of political ideas—he gave speech acts the status of “facts.” This allowed him to counter several kinds of anachronistic approaches, including analyses of canonical texts designed to reveal the Sisyphean fatigue of answering a set of perennial questions, and the idea that the history of political thought involves only isolated thinkers, or “unit ideas” floating above history like Platonic forms, or the impersonal work of structures and institutions. To locate a text in its *linguistic* context is, rather, to understand it as an act of communication whose aim is to realize a (historically specific) intention.

The distinction between *motives* and *intentions* is perhaps one of the most important theoretical achievements of Skinner’s application of linguistic analysis to historical study. Intentionality is the strategic reasoning presupposed by a speech act (an author’s “plan or design to create a certain type of work”) and motives are the personal standards of rationality “antecedent to, and contingently connected with the appearance” of a specific work (vol. I, p. 98). The former is the object of historical interpretation that, like detective work, consists in a complex decoding of linguistic strategies because the actor’s intention is not necessarily contained within the text or made explicit by the author (vol. I, pp. 140-144). Viewing texts as contextual speech acts allowed Skinner to reject both objectivism and subjectivism.

This brings me to the second set of arguments that Skinner employed in the debates about foundationalism. Whereas traditional historians criticized him for reducing “facts” (political institutions and social relations) to linguistic acts and dissolving political action into contextually contingent utterances, poststructuralist and continental philosophers charged him with falling into the “intentional fallacy” and logocentrism (vol. I, p. 91). Actually, although the paradigm of “ideas in context” has been a fellow-traveler of poststructuralism, Skinner’s project should be distinguished from philosophical perspectivism. His linguistic turn, it is true, bridged the British new course and the two main antianalytical avenues in continental philosophy: on the one hand, that forged by Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Derrida (deconstruction of the metaphysics of “presence”), and on the other hand, that defined by Benedetto Croce, Reinhart Koselleck, and Hans-Georg Gadamer (hermeneutic overcoming of the metaphysics of “facts”). Bridging traditions is not the same as merging traditions, however.

Skinner's antianalytical turn reflects a style of rationality distinctive to the Anglo-Saxon tradition. His argument for contextual rationality against metahistorical standards of interpretation does not bring him to relativism or the demise of rationality. As it appears from his debates with Derrida and Rorty, Skinner's method of historical understanding is meant to bolster weak rationality, rather than to celebrate or even accept it. Contextualism empowers knowledge insofar as it allows the interpreter to understand better both the linguistic context of ideas and her own beliefs and shared meanings. If anything, it is the positivist, analytical, and structuralist approaches that exhibit weak rationality because of their inability to account for phenomena that do not accord with their model of reason and explanatory methods (for instance, the belief in witchcraft in sixteenth-century Europe). One might say that Skinner's "ideas in contexts" paradigm is part of the Enlightenment project, if by this we mean a project that seeks to expand opportunities for understanding. This makes sense of Skinner's main 'enemy': anachronism, in the form of the history of ideas as puzzle-solving and of presentism (ad hominem judgment of past texts and ideas that are "relevant" to us in proportion to how much "we can use" them as a "mirror to reflect our own beliefs and assumptions") (vol. II, p. 195).

Political modernity from the Renaissance to the British revolution is the main subject of *Visions of Politics*. To understand it, Skinner has not only redefined the method and identity of the history of political thought but has also reconstructed the titanic battles between the two visions of liberty (political or natural) and sovereignty (self-governing peoples or the state). *Visions of Politics* collects what Skinner himself regards as the essays most representative of this comprehensive project. The first volume offers a substantive account of his vision of political agency and historical understanding as well as his view of thinking as political action through speech. The second and third volumes involve an exhaustive synopsis of his philosophy in action through the exemplary cases of, respectively, the neo-Roman vision of freedom or republicanism as it reemerged in modern political thought (freedom as an artificial or political construction that calls for a legitimate law) and the successful counterattack upon it by the liberal (but actually Hobbesian) vision of liberty (freedom as a natural fact that exists prior to and in conflict with law). The relationship between volume one and volumes two and three, writes Skinner in the introduction, is the same as "one of theory and practice" (vol. I, p. viii).

Visions of Politics brings to the fore two Skinners: *the historian* and *the ideologist*. Palonen, who is resolute in linking Skinner's work to the German tradition of political philosophy, draws parallels between Skinner's performative use of language and Hannah Arendt's distinction between "fabrica-

tion and action," between Skinner's antianalytical turn and Max Weber's action theory and the autonomy of politics and the state, and between Skinner's contextualism and Koselleck's view of the historical contingency of concepts. Although these parallels are perceptive, *Visions of Politics* seem to suggest a Skinner that pivots on humanism and rhetoric in a deeper sense. Certainly, rhetoric is the Archimedean center that gives balance and unity to these three volumes because on the one hand, it is consistent with Skinner's linguistic turn, and on the other, as a form of political reasoning it is consistent with his civic vision of liberty. The enemies of eloquence are the Platonist fallacies of making politics into a science and a political order that expunges dissent from public life. *Ars rhetorica* is both an instrumental use of language and a model of rationality that presumes a political order open to ideological battles; hence, it encompasses both political liberty and politics as performative speech act. Furthermore, rhetoric unifies the ancients and the moderns, and keeps alive the neo-Roman vision of liberty, which, like a Carsic river, finds its way out from time to time against the recurrent attempts to submerge or dam it. "Fear and dislike" of *ars rhetorica* is what links the several projects of political and ideological pacification that have grown up in modern times beginning with the *Leviathan*.

The centrality of rhetoric links the two Skinners and makes *Visions of Politics* a living example of the unavoidable interplay between the historian and the ideologist. Skinner alerts us at the beginning that when he restates arguments previously made, he does not "hesitate" to update the original article by "removing allusions to yesterday's controversies and relating my conclusions to the latest research" (vol. I, p. vi). He recontextualizes his work and thus invites us to read *Visions of Politics* as a speech act, or an ideological-as-rhetorical text. The reader is made aware that the neo-Roman vision of liberty is an "evaluative concept" whose genealogy reveals it to be an engine of "social changes" (vol. I, p. 178). Concepts and linguistic practices are, have been, and can continue to be used as rhetorical strategies to transform existing political beliefs and moral values. A linguistic shift succeeds when "a whole society . . . eventually come[s] to alter its attitude towards some fundamental value or practice" (vol. I, p. 181). The neo-Roman view of liberty is an ideology of this kind.

Skinner the *historian* has reconstructed several cases of linguistic shift. By far the most important are the ones brought about by Machiavelli with his vision of political virtue and liberty and by Hobbes with his conceptions of sovereignty and liberty. Skinner the *ideologist* acknowledges that although he does not dispose of (nor seems interested in developing) a general theory about "the mechanisms of social transformation," neither does he think that the neo-Roman vision of liberty is an antiquarian object. Born before

Hobbes's concept of negative liberty, it is the only vision of liberty that is truly alternative to the former one, which was in fact invented to bury it. The dual scheme of negative-political liberty and negative-natural liberty shapes Skinner's entire reflection on modernity, and guides his relationship to, and analysis of liberalism.

Is there any tension in the decision of the historian to make ideological use of what he has 'discovered'? Skinner gestures towards this question when he touches on the place of his *Liberty before Liberalism* in his historical studies. His answer is straightforward: "I do not consider these studies to be in tension with anything I have written about the need to understand what can be done with concepts as an element in the process of recovering their meaning and significance" (vol. 1, p. 178). However, to explore the past in order to indicate what can be done with a concept might mean to suggest that what was done in the past can be redone. This is an intriguing inference that Skinner does not explicitly make and that moreover violates the contextualist rule. It would, however, deserve a deeper discussion. In the remaining part, I shall contain myself to one example of the dual role of the ideologist and the historian.

Skinner has developed his argument for the neo-Roman vision of liberty mainly in opposition to Isaiah Berlin's *Two Concepts of Liberty*. The history of the enormous impact of Berlin's 1958 article on contemporary political philosophy, and the vision of liberalism in particular, is still to be written. Undoubtedly, Berlin was the author of a "vocabulary shift" in the Skinnerian sense: he succeeded in giving an analytical cast to a dualism that had until then remained mainly ideological, the remnant of several battles liberalism had fought against equality (both democratic and socialist) from the age of the French Revolution to the Soviet Revolution's. Thanks to Berlin, negative liberty came to denote liberty in the "true" sense while positive liberty came to denote something that had nothing to do with liberty but was, at most, a condition for it (effective equality of the opportunity to be free, thus distributive justice and self-government). Berlin was able to put a halt to a more than century-old dispute by concocting a definition of liberty that claimed to be neutral, analytical, and categorical and that both the 'friends' and the 'enemies' of negative liberty would have to accept, as they actually did. Berlin's was a hegemonic operation, or, in Skinner's language, a rhetorical move. He acted as an ideologist, not a historian, as Hobbes (or Machiavelli) did before him. Berlin tried, like Hobbes, "to discredit and supersede" a rival conception. But which rival conception?

In his discussion of Berlin, Skinner the ideologist prevails, as it were, over Skinner the historian. He does not ask the Skinnerian question, "What was Berlin doing in writing as he wrote?" but seems to be more interested in rescuing the neo-Roman vision of liberty from oblivion. He treats Berlin's essay

as a text of conceptual history. He criticizes it for its “serious limitation of coverage” of the meanings of liberty and for neglecting the republican vision of negative liberty that Hobbes effaced and that Skinner wants “to try to lift . . . back to the surface.” Yet one might wonder whether Berlin intended to give a complete historical survey of negative liberty or whether he wanted instead to eliminate the possibility that liberty could be conjoined with power (self-government) or with the condition of its actualization (equality), something that radical democrats and social-democrats were proposing to do in England and in Europe during the period of postwar reconstruction. Skinner does not pay much attention to the linguistic context of Berlin’s essay (the cold war), a context that was characterized by its own rival couples of liberty—democratic and liberal, rather than republican and liberal. Does Skinner’s rhetorical use of the idea that the neo-Roman vision of liberty is the only original alternative to negative liberty allow us to understand the comprehensive linguistic tradition of liberalism, which forged itself in the course of numerous battles against several contextually determined ‘enemies’, the neo-Roman vision of liberty being the first but not the only one? This is not to say that Skinner the ideologist is less valuable than Skinner the historian. To the contrary, the link between the two is extremely important: it reminds us that the historical work of the discovery of a concept can have ideological power and contribute to a normative use of ideas.

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NOTE

1. P. Koikkalainen and S. Syrjämäki, “On Encountering the Past: An Interview with Quentin Skinner,” *Finnish Yearbook of Political Theory* 6 (2002): 52. But see also Skinner’s “Reply to My Critics,” originally in *Meaning and Context* (1988) and now readapted and developed in Volume I of *Visions of Politics* with the title “Interpretation, Rationality and Truth.”

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