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Author(s): Palonen, Kari

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QUENTIN SKINNER

by Kari Palonen Professor emeritus of Political Science University of Jyväskylä, Finland kari.i.palonen@jyu.fi

Abstract

Quentin Skinner (1940-) is a British intellectual historian, who since the mid-1960s has revised the study of political thought. His work is indebted to Friedrich Nietzsche, Max Weber, Robin George Collingwood, Ludwig Wittgenstein, J.L. Austin and Peter Laslett. In his methodological essays, Skinner directs attention to the thinkers' speech acts in their contemporary context. In *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, he reinterprets European political thought from the Thirteenth to the Seventeenth century by analysing the vocabularies and moves of theorists like Machiavelli and Hobbes as political actors. In *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes*, he turns to classical and renaissance rhetoric as a political language based on debating *in utramque partem*. In *Liberty before Liberalism*, Skinner introduces the 'neo-Roman' concept of liberty from dependence as opposed to the Hobbesian freedom from interference.

'I am the last of the amateurs. In England I am regarded as an historian, in France as a philosopher and in the United States as a political scientist', Quentin Skinner remarked to Finnish students in 1999. Skinner is a trained historian, who was professor at Cambridge from 1978 to 2007 and at the Queen Mary, University London from 2008 to 2022. Skinner's main work focuses on Renaissance and early modern Europe with implications for contemporary politics.

Following Collingwood, Skinner regards the historical context as a critical tool against perennial problems and anachronistic mythologies of coherence, doctrine, prolepsis and parochialism. Scholars should identify the conventions of the context and what the actors 'are doing' with them (1969). Sharing Wittgenstein's views on the meaning of concepts being in their uses, Skinner demands that scholars study the histories of concepts as their 'uses in argument' (1988, 283).

In *The Foundations* Skinner proposes a programme for studying politics: 'For I take it that political life itself sets problems for political theorist' (p. xi). He polemics against the fashion of studying politics as the application of theories from more advanced fields, such as economics, and discards the widespread academic contempt for politics and politicians. For him theories are neither independent entities nor *ex post* rationalisations, but rather tools for

legitimisation. A political actor is 'tailoring his normative language in order to fit his projects' as well as 'tailoring his project in order to fit the available normative language' (ibid. xii-xiii).

Skinner deals with Machiavelli or the Huguenots as political actors in time (1978) and recommends reading Hobbes's *Leviathan* as if reading 'a speech in parliament'. He regards theorising as 'intervention in pre-existing debates...trying to recover the problems they were originally designed to solve' (2018, 11). He extends the textual genres into studying political thought (for paintings 2002b/II, chapters 3-4 and 2018, chapter 10; for theatre, 2014).

In *Reason and Rhetoric*, Quentin Skinner emphasises the contingency of political thought and action, present in the regular possibility to argue for or against a move (1996). He offers a new perspective on conceptual change with the scheme *paradiastolic* redescriptions, altering the normative value of concepts by modifying naming, range, significance or meaning of concepts (1996, chapter 4). Against the structuralists Skinner insists: 'We may be freer as we sometimes suppose' (2002b/I, 7).

Skinner provides a genealogy of the state as the 'master noun of the political argument' (1989, 123). For him, the state implies a double abstraction, from both the rulers and the ruled, an impersonal 'entity with a life of its own' but which is 'able ... to call allegiance of both parties' (ibid. 112). This is fully realised by Hobbes, for whom the state is 'an artificial person' (2002/2, 404). 'Hobbes wishes us to recognise' the state 'not merely as "one person in law" but as the seat of power' (ibid. 41). For Hobbes, 'the battle to unify Europe was eventually lost ... by the emergence of individual nation-states' (ibid. 317) – today an argument for Brexit.

Furthermore, Skinner has 'recovered lost treasures' in the neo-Roman concept of liberty, classically formulated in Justinian's *Digest*. A person is free, when not being dependent on the arbitrary powers of others (1998), including depending on the slavish mentality (2002a). The English republicans extended paradigms of slavery and servitude to royal prerogatives, to which they opposed the 'free state' (2018, 157-61). Against the dominant Hobbesian view on freedom from inference (esp. 2008), Skinner considers the neo-Roman view as being relevant for contemporary politics. The persistent value of freedom from dependence is illustrated with the parliamentary principles of free speech, free mandate, freedom from arrest as well as free and fair elections.

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