

Theories as Social Action

An interview with Quentin Skinner

By Florent Guénard

By insisting on the need to consider philosophical works as interventions in the general, ongoing political debates of their time, Quentin Skinner has profoundly renewed the history of ideas. In this interview, he revisits the main themes of his work.

Quentin Skinner

A professor at Queen Mary University in London, Quentin Skinner is a historian of political ideas. He is considered as the founder of what is called “Cambridge School”, according to which the works of moral and political philosophy must be understood in the historical context of their emergence. These works are above all acts of speech, which have a practical aim—an aim the interpreter must bring to light if he does not want to be mistaken about their meaning. Like any utterance, the studied texts have an intentional force, and the task of the history of ideas is to re-grasp it.

Quentin Skinner lays out the principles of this method of reading in a collection of articles published in 2002, *Visions of Politics. Regarding Method* (Cambridge University Press). This volume is now available in French (*Visions politiques I. Sur la méthode*, translated by Christopher Hamel, Paris, Droz, 2018).

Books&Ideas: In the early 1970s, you published a number of articles underlining the need to understand the social and political context in which philosophical texts were written, in order to grasp their scope. In 2002, these articles were included in *Visions of Politics. Regarding Method*, a book now translated into French. These texts were a milestone in the understanding of the history of ideas. In your view, is this contextualism now well established, to the point that it no longer has a major adversary? Or is this methodological requirement still a subject of debate?

Quentin Skinner: May I first say how pleased I am that these articles have now been published in French. I should add that they have been beautifully translated by Christopher Hamel, and of course everything reads more elegantly in French, so this version now constitutes the best statement of my views.

My basic hermeneutic assumption is that we can speak of two complementary but separable dimensions of language. One is concerned with what have traditionally been described as meanings—the meanings of words, statements, texts. The other is concerned with language as a form of social action. I take from Wittgenstein the suggestion that one of the questions to be asked about any utterance is what the speaker or writer is doing in issuing it. We should think, that is, of our concepts and their verbal expression essentially as tools—or perhaps as weapons, as Nietzsche preferred to put it.

During the past generation, many doubts were raised about the difficulty of recovering the meaning of statements. I share these doubts, and I benefited greatly from the deconstructionist moment when it was strongly emphasised that, in Derrida's fine phrase, language writes itself over any specific intention to communicate, so that textual interpretation is left in effect with the task of managing ambiguities.

Notice, however, that these doubts apply only to the first of the two dimensions into which language can and should be separated. If we are interested in understanding utterances, we also need to treat speech and writing as forms of social action. I argue that this has large implications for the interpretation of all kinds of texts—although I have myself been principally concerned with philosophical and literary texts. To understand any kind of text, we need to be able to recover what is going on in it. Does it constitute a denunciation or a defence of some existing argument? Is something being commended or denounced? Are we being warned or instructed or assured about something? Is something being satirised or parodied or ridiculed? And so on, in a wide range of possible speech acts that may be being performed.

My central claim is that we can hardly be said to understand any text unless we can answer such questions, and that this kind of understanding can only be acquired by placing the texts we are studying within the discursive contexts that enable us to work out what is going on in them. We need to treat the texts we study essentially as interventions in existing

discourses and debates, and we need to make it central to the interpretative task to identify what kind of interventions they constitute in any particular case.

You ask if this approach has ceased to have any serious adversaries. I can only hope to answer in the case of the Anglophone academic world. Here I think it would be fair to say that this general approach is by now well-established. One indication has been the huge success of the *Ideas in Context* series published by the Cambridge University Press, which was set up in the 1980s to promote this kind of history, and has by now published hundreds of titles. But there is still a lot of debate. Some of it is about the notion of 'context'. Many have argued, with some justification, that to concentrate on linguistic contexts is too narrow, and that what is needed is a more social history of ideas. Some have questioned the very idea of 'context' and whether it can ever be satisfactorily established. And some have dismissed the project of trying to explicate philosophical texts in relation to their historical contexts as of nothing more than antiquarian interest.

Books&Ideas: You are a specialist in the political philosophy of the Renaissance and 17th century. Does this contextualist approach not erase what is specifically philosophical in these texts, which are not political pamphlets?

Q.S.: This is a doubt that seems to me to connect closely with the last criticism I have just mentioned. Let me try to answer by offering, as an example, the work I have published on the philosophy of Thomas Hobbes. I have tried among other things to show that, in order to understand his theory of political obligation, we need to recognise that it was worked out in part as a response to the crisis of the English revolution. Many opponents of the English commonwealth established in 1649 objected that it was based on an act of conquest rather than consent, and consequently lacked legitimacy. This explains, I argue, why Hobbes was so determined to insist that conquest and consent are compatible, and that political legitimacy depends not on some anterior right but rather on the power of the state to protect us. One of the things Hobbes is *doing* in *Leviathan*, in other words, is vindicating the right of the new republican regime in England to be obeyed.

To this extent, I would say, Hobbes's *Leviathan* is in fact a political pamphlet, and it can be situated very precisely on the spectrum of debate about the abolition of the English monarchy in 1649. But I do not see why this claim prevents us from going on to ask about the philosophical significance of Hobbes's argument. His contention that the extent of our duty to obey the state correlates with the extent of the state's power to protect us seems to me well worth examining in itself. Nothing in my historical approach prevents us from going on to consider the merits of that argument. I am only objecting to those who assume that our sole purpose in studying a work of philosophy is to ask what arguments it contains and what we should think of them. By following this purely textual approach, I would say, we can never hope to *understand* the text in question—that is, to appreciate why it argues as it does and to recognise what ends its arguments were designed to serve. I am pleading for us to try to grasp the identity of the texts we study rather than merely appropriating them. But this is when

some critics begin to complain that I am a mere antiquarian. And here I have no interesting response to offer. There really is no arguing with people who find the past of no interest in itself; it would be like trying to explain the point of music to someone who admits to being tone deaf.

Books&Ideas: In your work, you insist a lot on the specificity of modern political thought, namely by showing what its foundations are. Some contemporary thinkers have wanted to break away from this modernity. Do you feel that we have definitively turned our back on it?

Q.S.: Here I take it that you are referring specifically to my first book, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, originally published in 1978. Since then I have given up talking about modernity, and I now regret the extent to which this category provided the organising principle of that book. It is true that my analysis was not I think completely misguided. I argued that, in political theory, we may be said to arrive at our modern condition with the acceptance of two commitments. One is that the core concept in political analysis is that of the state. My book traced the process by which a multiplicity of jurisdictions—local as well as national, ecclesiastical as well as political—were gradually subsumed under the idea of the sovereign nation-state. The other commitment I examined was the idea that religion can and ought to be regarded as part of the private sphere of life. I saw the acceptance of this value as emerging out of the growing conviction in early-modern Europe that the only pathway to civil peace lay in accepting a plurality of faiths so long as they did not claim any power over public life.

Thinking now about these two arguments, I still—to some degree—endorse the first one. The world still remains largely organised into separate nation-states. There was a moment, a generation ago, when it looked as if these might be swallowed up into supra-national entities, but of late this movement seems to have gone into reverse. The world's leading nation-states remain the principal actors on the international stage, and such states remain by far the most significant political actors within their own territories. But the second argument—the claim that religion needs to be treated as essentially a private matter—now seems to me a relic of a discredited form of liberalism. Nothing prepared my generation for the extent to which the world's religions have returned to demanding a role in shaping the policies of states.

I should add that there are other reasons for wanting, as a historian, to avoid writing about the category of modernity. One is that there is no agreement about what counts as modern and thus how the term should be used. But the most obvious objection is that, by focusing on the emergence of allegedly modern trends, one is condemned to writing a grand narrative of a teleological kind, and thus to ignoring many other equally valid narratives that could equally well have been written about the same historical period. As you say, during the present generation we have broken away from talking about modernity, and this seems to me on the whole a gain. We are nowadays used to the idea that we are living in a post-modern age.

Books&Ideas: The 17th century republican conception of freedom is the subject of much of your work. You namely highlight its critical force against the partisans of absolutism or liberalism. How do you analyse the weakening, or even the disappearance of the republican way of thinking in the contemporary age?

Q.S.: You are absolutely right that there has been a remarkable change in our way of thinking about the concept of civil liberty. The view that nowadays prevails, at least in Anglophone political discourse and practice, takes liberty to be a predicate of actions. More specifically, the distinctively liberal claim is that freedom consists in having the power to chose and act without interference. But if we turn back to the early-modern period of European history, we encounter a strongly contrasting account. The so-called ‘republican’ way of thinking about civil liberty that then prevailed was based on assuming that, when we speak of being free, we are referring not so much to our freedom to perform individual actions but rather to enjoying a particular status in society. The republican theory centres, in other words, on what it means to be a free person. The distinctively republican claim is that a free person is someone who is not subject to the will of anyone else. The contrast is not with interference, but rather with domination and dependence.

This so-called republican theory went on to make two further claims that carried it even further away from contemporary orthodoxies. The first is that you can never act freely unless you are already a free person. Here the republican writers argue as follows. If you are not a free person—if instead you are subject to the will of someone else—then your actions will at all times be performed subject to the will, and hence subject to the permission and the goodwill, of the person at whose mercy you live. But that is to say that you are never capable of acting entirely according to your own will and doing what you want. This is because all your actions will have the character of permissions. The person at whose mercy you live may not happen interfere with your choices, but it will always be within his power to do so should he choose. So even if you happen to enjoy a measure of *de facto* liberty, you will nevertheless be living the life not of a free person but a slave.

The other claim central to the republican tradition is that it is possible to live as a free person only in a self-governing state. Here the reasoning runs as follows. If you are to remain free while living in a state, then the laws must be a reflection of your will, or at least your represented will. Unless this is so, the laws will be the expression of someone else’s will, and to be subject to the will of someone else is what it means to live as a slave. It follows that, to live as a free person while remaining subject to law, you must have the right for your will to be heard in the making of the laws by which you are ruled. But as they correctly observed, this is possible only under some system of democratic self-government.

Here, then, we come upon a major conceptual transformation. Liberty used to be defined as absence of subjection but is now defined as absence of interference. With this change, the link between freedom and democracy is at the same time severed. If liberty simply means non-interference, there is no reason to suppose that you will be able to enjoy greater

freedom under a democracy than under any other form of government. Rather it begins to look as if the best form of government will be the one that makes the fewest laws. Hence the value of freedom comes to be strongly associated, especially in neo-liberal regimes like that of the United States, with the ideal of the minimal state.

The question you ask is what has caused the virtual disappearance of this ‘republican’ way of thinking about civil liberty in the contemporary age. When and why this transformation came about is a complex historical question to which no satisfactory answer has yet been given. I ought perhaps to add that this is the question I am trying to address in my current research. But it is easy to see why the theory has little appeal in the contemporary age. One reason is that it is an ideal of equal freedom. One of the main duties of the state is held to be that of ensuring, by legal means, that no one falls into a condition of dependence on the arbitrary will of anyone else. But ours is a culture in which the ideal of equality has largely been given up, so that social and economic inequalities have been left unchecked for many years almost everywhere. A further reason for the disappearance of republican arguments is that the securing of equal freedom requires a strong state. But most of us live nowadays—in Europe and even more obviously in the United States—under neo-liberal regimes in which the powers of the state are viewed with suspicion. We are instead told (despite everything that happened in 2008) to place our faith in free markets as the best guarantee of liberty and prosperity.

Books&Ideas: You have shown that modern political thought was largely constituted in the Renaissance around the concept of sovereignty. Do you see Brexit as the manifestation of a desire for national sovereignty? Or is it rather the sign of a malfunctioning of contemporary democracies?

Q.S.: The decision of the British people (or rather, the decision of 37.5% of those eligible to vote) to leave the European Union has many causes, some of which are still not well understood. Some information about social demography is undoubtedly relevant. Those who voted *not* to leave were in general city-dwellers and the young, and those *most* likely to vote against leaving were people with University degrees. You may be right that an assertion of national sovereignty is involved. There has certainly been resentment about the regulatory powers of the European Commission and some decisions of the European Court. But since the Referendum of 2016 two very different lines of argument have been prominent. Some dislike what is seen as the Union’s preference for neo-liberal economics and its unwillingness to allow individual states to offer help to industries. But an even larger group express strong dislike of the Union’s commitment to freedom of movement. One reason for this is that, after the enlargement of the Union, the resulting large-scale immigration into the UK probably helped to depress wages. But it has to be admitted that there is also an element of insularity, even xenophobia, in this reaction—as foreign nationals currently living in the UK increasingly complain.

You also refer to the malfunctioning of contemporary democracies. There is no doubt that one serious weakness in the constitution of the UK has been laid bare since we voted to leave. This is that the satisfactory functioning of government depends on the Executive being formed from a party with a majority in the House of Commons. With a two-party system, and no proportional representation, this has usually been easy to achieve, and then the Government simply tables legislation which it knows will pass. But the current Government has no stable majority, and its attempts to pass highly contentious legislation have produced nothing but chaos. The British think of themselves as a politically stable people, so an added element in recent hostility to the Union probably stems from the fact that we have made ourselves look ridiculous in the eyes of Europe.