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Introduction

. . . there is a awful lot of books, and if our books are not going to say
something new, then we certainly ought not to be publishing them.
Forests tremble as it is at the onset of authors.

Skinner 2001b, 21

A Revolution in the Study of Political Thought

The epigraph is a spontaneous remark made by Quentin Skinner
during a debate with Yves Zarka in Amsterdam in May 1996. This
remark not only expresses Skinner's attitude towards publishing
books but also the proposal that novelty should be used as the main
criterion for assessing the quality and significance of scholarly con-
tributions. Historical novelty always signifies a rewriting, a revision
of the interpretation of the phenomenon in question (cf. Koselleck
1988b, 37–51). The term 'revisionism' attributed to Quentin Skinner
already in the 1970s rather aptly describes his project as he empha-
sizes the role of reinterpretation as a criterion for historical studies.
The significance of the novelty may be emphasized by contrast-
ing it with another criterion in the academic legitimation rhetoric,
namely truth. In 'A Reply to My Critics' Skinner writes:

> I am convinced, in short, that the importance of truth for the kind of
> historical enquiries I am considering has been exaggerated. . . . Take
> for example . . . Machiavelli's fervently held belief that mercenary
> armies always jeopardize political liberty. Perhaps there is nothing to
> stop us from asking whether this is true. But the effect of doing so

will be somewhat analogous to asking whether the king of France is bald. The best answer seems to be that the question does not really arise. (Skinner 1988c, 256)

Opposing the roles of truth and novelty in historical studies is distinctive to the work of Quentin Skinner. This contrast situates him outside the style of analytical philosophy and empiricist historiography and questions the frequently held opinion of him as a typical English thinker (for example, Miller & Strong 1997). Skinner's views on truth and novelty, rather, help us to situate him in a wider European tradition of a perspectivist view of knowledge and scholarship that is present, for example, in the works of Friedrich Nietzsche and Max Weber.

In a classic account of the perspectivist view, Weber, in his article on 'Objectivity' in 1904, takes as his point of departure the claim that no analysis is independent of definite and one-sided perspectives (Weber 1904, esp. 170, 181). It is always possible and desirable to propose a number of different perspectives on the study of the 'same' phenomena. The history of the human sciences is a history of constructions, revisions and dissolutions of perspectives. There are no 'objective' criteria for assessing research except for the competition of the perspectives themselves. The significance and the validity of 'facts' can always be assessed differently when judged from another perspective. Empirical analysis is a possible means of challenging a definite perspective or changing the constellations between concurrent perspectives, but as such it is never sufficient. Nor, in the Weberian view, does 'approaching the truth' make sense, and a convergence between perspectives indicates stagnation. We cannot even define the questions and fields which should be considered to be central, because even they are determined differently in various perspectives. Moreover, they change historically from one situation to another (Weber 1904, esp. 184).

With this perspectivist view of the history of the human sciences we can better understand Quentin Skinner's point about truth and novelty. When analysing past beliefs, an assessment of their 'truth' would tend to obstruct the understanding of their historical point and value. Novelty-claims, by contrast, can be considered as moves that change the current constellation through altering the positions and perhaps creating a new 'participant' in the competition.

With Reinhart Koselleck we can distinguish three strategies of rewriting history: new sources, new modes of reading them and new perspectives on interpretation (Koselleck 1988b, 45–7). In his

revision of the history of political thought, Quentin Skinner has practised all of these strategies. The first point is related to Skinner's conscious use of non-canonized sources in political thought, which has also contributed to a revision of the views of such canonized thinkers as Machiavelli and Hobbes. The use of such intellectual resources as speech act theory and classical rhetoric has enabled Skinner to alter the mode of questioning, for example, by emphasizing questions of 'linguistic action' in contrast to merely asking questions about 'meaning' (Skinner 1996a, 7–8).

Quentin Skinner's distinctive mark in intellectual history and political theory lies, however, in his shifting perspective towards the entire subject matter. It is Skinner who most uncompromisingly argues for an inversion of the perspective in the study of political thought. In the Preface to *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought* he writes: 'For I take it that political life itself sets the main problems for the political theorist, causing a certain range of issues to appear problematic, and a corresponding range of questions to become the leading subjects of debate' (Skinner 1978a I, xi).

This is a paradigmatic formulation of what I would like to call 'the Skinnerian revolution' in the study of political thought. Revolution should be understood in the old literal sense of revolving the study in a new direction. The point of the Skinnerian revolution is that this very formula is reinterpreted: he does not analyse thought 'applied to the sphere of politics' but 'thinking in a political mode'. Thinking politically is an aspect of the activity of politics itself.

The history of political thought, as practised in universities of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, still tended to start from the view that politics is a dirty subject that can be improved only by certain philosophical principles. In his classic study *Die Idee der Staatsräson*, Friedrich Meinecke presumed that for the foreign policy of a state there exists an ideal line of action that only has to be detected by the leading statesmen (Meinecke 1924, 1–2). In this view, politics is reduced to the application of some existing principles in the best possible manner.

To take 'political life itself' as the point of departure rehabilitates the political agents. They are not devalued or functionalized into bearers or representatives of some principle, but their words and deeds are taken as the first level of interpretation of the activities that, then, can be reinterpreted by scholars without devaluing the activity itself. Theorizing about politics renders explicit and reflects on the character and significance of the activity by focusing on the shifting problems of the political agents themselves. Considerable

inventiveness is required from politicians in their situations of judging and struggle with one another: they are the persons obliged to face crises, the dead ends of policies, as well as threats of being played out of the situation. One condition of the study of political thought is to understand this special inventiveness of politicians.

In his *Liberty before Liberalism*, Skinner writes that one effect of the attempt to render intellectual history closer to 'real history' has been 'to make intellectual history . . . a subject of more general interest' (Skinner 1998, 106). I think the Skinnerian revolution has had similar effects in political science. If 'political life' sets the problems for the study of political thought, the explication and reflection of political activities forms the key to the study of politics. If we can make 'things with words' (Austin) or if 'words are deeds' (Wittgenstein), then analyses of the use of words, of rhetoric, is a constitutive part of political 'reality', and so is political thought.

This is also to recognize and to use the inherent contingency of politics-as-activity (cf. also Pocock 1975). Skinner insists on the heuristic value of contingency in understanding, as he remarks in retrospect about his critique of A. O. Lovejoy's style of studying the history of ideas:

> Against this contention I tried once more to speak up for a more radical contingency in the history of thought. Drawing on a suggestion of Wittgenstein's, I argued that there cannot be a history of unit ideas as such, but only a history of the various uses to which they have been put by different agents at different times. There is nothing, I ventured to suggest, lying beneath or behind such uses; their history is the only history of ideas to be written. (Skinner 1999c, 61–2)

Such an insistence on contingency can be traced to Max Weber's nominalist view of interpreting human actions in terms of the chances and unanticipated consequences (cf. Palonen 1998). However, the instruments of speech act theory and rhetoric lend to Skinner's view a linguistically sophisticated tone in the understanding of politics-as-activity and the modes of theorizing about it. We can also detect a Weberian rehabilitation of the value of politics as a contingent activity in Skinner's work, at least as a critique of depoliticizing tendencies in political theory. The pro-political orientation serves as a heuristic instrument also in Skinner's seemingly pure historical studies and, consequently, turns them into a mode of political theorizing (cf. Palonen 2002c).

A Political Reading

A perspectivist view of historical understanding and the criterion of novelty also serve as guiding principles for this volume. My 'Quentin Skinner', as a shorthand title for a certain complex of texts, has a definite profile of its own. As opposed to a common tendency to accuse Skinner of one-sidedness, I want to present a perspective that, according to Weber's suggestion (1904, 194), one-sidedly accentuates some aspects of Skinner's work at the cost of others. It is only within such a specific perspective that I can hope to reach an improved understanding of Skinner's work.

A clue to the perspective is contained in my subtitle *History*, *Politics*, *Rhetoric*. The words indicate a multidisciplinary profile to Skinner's work. He was trained as a historian, then became a political theorist in his own right, and since around 1990 his 'turn' to ancient and Renaissance rhetoric has given a further profile to his work, both as historian and as political theorist.

To me politics is the crucial word in the title. I am using Skinner's contributions to historiography and rhetoric as contributions to the understanding of politics. This is partly due to my lack of knowledge of his period, the fourteenth to the seventeenth century, as well as the immense number of primary sources from that time which are handled by Skinner. Moreover, my awareness of the specialist debates among the 'ordinary' historians and scholars of rhetoric is insufficient to enter into them myself. Nevertheless, having studied the history of the concept of politics for two decades, I am competent to detect debates on politics in which Skinner's contributions have not been sufficiently considered and from which I can also read a 'surplus meaning' implied in the texts of Skinner (cf. Skinner 1988c, 272).

I will consider Skinner to be a 'theory politician' in contemporary academic culture, which consists of a complex of polities at the level of universities, disciplines, debates, approaches and other kinds of conventional practices. I intend to explicate Skinner's moves of politicking within the existing complex of polities as well as politicizing moves altering the constellations within this complex. As he says in 'A Reply to My Critics': 'the types of utterance I am considering can never be viewed simply as strings of propositions; they must always be viewed at the same time as arguments' (Skinner 1988c, 273).

In Weberian terms I consider politicking as the search for new power shares within an existing polity, while politicization concerns

the redistribution of such shares in a polity-complex in a manner that opens new *Spielräume* for politicking (cf. Weber 1919a, 36). Weber regards power-chances as a necessary medium to achieve any political aims or purposes. Analogously, I think that the rhetorical moves and strategies of Skinner are a condition for understanding his theoretical contributions, always related to a situation, constellation and an audience to be 'moved' (cf. Skinner 1974a and b). Theories and interpretations are for Skinner arguments in specific controversies. The historical moment aims at identifying those controversies to which such theories and interpretations intentionally contribute, and explicating the rhetorical tropes and figures he is using. The moves in politicking attempt virtuosity within the range of the acceptable, whereas the politicizing moves provoke the audience or attempt to create new chances to power by opening a new dimension in the debate.

According to Nietzsche's well-known formula, there are 'no facts, only interpretations' (Nietzsche 1981, 904), or in Skinner's words, 'the social and political world is interpreted through and through' (Skinner 2001a, 22). Within a perspectivist view the disputes about the facts, as presented by Skinner, are part of the specialist debates, which are not my concern in this volume.

As a scholar outside the Anglophone academic provinces, I hope that I can provide a detached reading of Skinner. This allows me to take a fresh look at his work and to avoid the usual labels, attributions and classifications. I will, above all, not write a reception study. I will, however, mention some tendencies in reception and occasionally go into a detailed discussion, if it serves my own point on that occasion.

A distance from Skinner's work is also gained by my studies in continental twentieth-century political thought. Presenting both the contrasts and parallels between Skinner and some German and French scholars is a key device in this volume. Skinner himself has on various occasions acknowledged his debt to Weber's historical and methodological views. In my interpretation this link has been further accentuated.

This book is, of course, no apology. Already our different backgrounds, research interests, and lifestyles make discrepancies between Skinner and me obvious. When readers use this volume as a guide to Skinner's own work, they will see that I have presented my critiques mainly as remarks and suggestions, without disturbing the main task of interpretation.

Today, the inclusion of contextual evidence has become a commonplace in the history of political thought. But how to contextu-

alize Skinner's work? I have avoided the temptation to write a political-cum-intellectual history of Europe or Britain from the 1950s to today with a focus on Skinner. I have presented the contextual evidence as far as possible as already known to the readers and complemented it with remarks, notes or explications. I think that my perspective as a continental scholar has helped me to discern where explications are needed.

In rhetorical terms, my reading of Skinner's work both does justice to the internal history of his work and looks for certain recurrent *topoi* in different writings of Skinner. The internal history of the *œuvre* serves as a point of departure for the presentation, analysis and assessment. By means of such *topoi*, I occasionally want to detect in the Skinnerian *œuvre* contributions to political theorizing which he himself has not accentuated (cf. Skinner 2001a, 15). My point is to make use of the 'freedom of the reader' (Sartre 1948, 95–9) to underline some aspects in Skinner at which he merely gestures.

In order better to assess Skinner's contribution, I have selected for each chapter some other works of related interest, mainly those written earlier than Skinner, as a basis of comparison. My point is to accentuate the work of Skinner by referring to that which he has, intentionally or not, left out of his own discussion.

In each of the chapters I will present a single main argument to support my general thesis on the novelty and singularity of Skinner's work for political theorizing. Skinner's intellectual profile is thus constructed through thematic layers, partly historical, partly analytical, which, if considered together, render his *œuvre* inimitable. Although to some extent a 'mythology of coherence' is a necessary condition of the intelligibility of the profile of an *œuvre*, I want to leave the reader tools to discuss parts of Skinner's work without subscribing to my highly personal interpretation.

In the second chapter I have thematized the intellectual and political situation and the Cambridge milieu which shaped Skinner's education, experiences and early work. My interest is neither to present Skinner as a paradigmatic example of 'the Cambridge school' nor to discuss the formation of such a school through his work. Rather, I want to discuss the history of those distinctive moves that have given Skinner's work its individual profile and, at the same time, made it interesting for readers from widely different backgrounds.

When discussing the situation of political theory and intellectual history in the world that Quentin Skinner was entering, I want to illustrate the rise of a historical approach to political thought, especially at Cambridge. My point in this chapter is to analyse the use

of 'history' as a normative value in the work of Skinner. The normative usage of history is strongest in Skinner's early studies on Hobbes, but the accentuation of the historical dimension remains a critical tool throughout his work.

One of the instruments through which Skinner, in the late 1960s, began to transcend the argument of a strict historian is the performative perspective of linguistic action, used both as a means of critique of existing scholarship and as a tool of historical analysis. My argument in the third chapter is that Skinner constructs an approach that transforms Wittgensteinian and Austinian philosophy into an instrument in historical analysis. As transformed by Skinner, the reality of action gains a political dimension, dismissed by both the philosophical and sociological approaches of the time.

Politics is explicitly thematized by Skinner when he transcends the discussion of the role of ideas as principles or as merely rationalizations by invoking their significance for the legitimating of action. In the fourth chapter, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought* is read as exemplary of the mode in which Skinner makes political agents revise their theories to make them more strongly support the legitimacy of their activity. The 'modernity' of political thought consists in attributing a priority to political action, while the 'foundations' refers to those elements of the history of thought which remained unquestioned by contemporaries.

In the fifth chapter, Skinner's studies will be read as recovering 'lost treasures' from the past, as illustrated by the history of the concept of liberty. Since the early 1980s, Skinner has written on republican, later neo-Roman theories of negative liberty, partly in order to illustrate the one-sidedness and 'provinciality' of the distinctions and classifications in the current philosophical debate. He does not advocate a definite view of political liberty, but, rather, warns against contemporary tendencies to depoliticize controversies surrounding the concept.

The history of losers is also key to Skinner's turn to rhetoric as a pluralistic intellectual and political culture that is based on arguing *in utramque partem*, which is analysed in the sixth chapter. An insight into the presence of rhetorical problematics in Renaissance and early modern authors allows him to revise the intellectual history and character of the political controversies of the period. By generalizing the idea of the *paradiastole* of Roman rhetoric to a perspective of the rhetorical redescription of concepts, Skinner interprets conceptual change through rhetorical shifts. Here Skinner offers us a valuable complement to the continental studies of

Begriffsgeschichte. At the same time, he considers rhetoric as a more pluralist, historical and political style of thought, as compared to the ideologies of science and philosophy.

Quentin Skinner is an 'innovating ideologist' (Skinner 1974b) who has contributed to the political and intellectual debates of the twentieth century. In the final chapter I shall treat Skinner's historical studies of Renaissance and early modern political thinking as an indirect mode of political theorizing, making systematic use of a kind of Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt* (cf. Palonen 2002c). This also leads me to the conclusion that Skinner is also a contemporary thinker in a strong sense, with a priority of present over both the future and the past in his *Weltanschauung*.

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This book has grown out of a larger manuscript in German, *Die Entzauberung der Begriffe*, which compares the approaches of Quentin Skinner and Reinhart Koselleck to conceptual change. After completing the present book, I reread my German manuscript and noticed that I have managed to write two different books largely on the same subject. Not only are the language and the audience different, but also the approach and the narrative, although I have not altered my main theses. Furthermore, the consideration of Skinner's revised versions of his articles in the volumes of *Visions of Politics* and new contributions on the concept of liberty could be included in this volume. The comparison with Koselleck and the focus on conceptual changes lend a profile to *Die Entzauberung der Begriffe*, which, I hope, can alter the rather reluctant reception of Skinner in the German-speaking world.

In this volume I have followed certain practices, or conventions, as Skinner would probably say, of my own, that are perhaps not so evident and thus require explanation.

I have preferably quoted from the first versions of Skinner's publications, using the formulations presented there. I have only referred to later versions if Skinner's formations alter or complement my interpretation, which is rather rare.

For the quotations I have used the author-date system with two modifications. I have referred to the original date of publication in the text and noted any more accessible modern editions only in the references. To refer to *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* as Weber 1980 has always sounded anachronistic to me. Secondly, for Skinner's publications I have modified the alphabet in so far as I have introduced a hierarchy between (a) monographs, (b) articles and (c) reviews,

prefaces and other minor contributions: referring to *Reason and Rhetoric* as 1996a and the essay 'From Hume's Intentions to Deconstruction and Back' as 1996b. Furthermore, I have chosen not to refer to Skinner's sources, to Hobbes or Machiavelli, but have used only Skinner's quotations. The case is different with authors, such as Berlin or Pettit, whom I have discussed separately as a background for Skinner.

Finally, emphasizing my interpretation of Skinner as a European scholar, I have both referred to the original editions in French and German and quoted short passages from them in the original language. I have done this even in the cases such as Weber or Wittgenstein in which Skinner himself has used the English translations. One reason for this is that, at least in the case of Weber or Sartre, I know that the translations are usually miserable, another is to resist the provincialist self-sufficiency of the Anglophone world.

As my references indicate, Quentin Skinner himself has been extremely helpful to me. He has been ready to discuss his own work in detail on various occasions. With these discussions and answers to my queries he has, in particular, provided me with references to his lesser known writings, clarified the context and the point of his various publications and offered formulations that are not so explicit in his published works. I have profited from Skinner's comments both with new and publicly unknown information as well as with a tacit encouragement to write my own interpretation, without playing down its profile. Finally, he obliged me to check myself the quotations from his work.

Quentin Skinner has been a key subject in my discussions with colleagues in recent years. My debates with Reinhart Koselleck, Tuija Pulkkinen and Melvin Richter deserve a special mention. For a careful reading of and comments on the manuscript I am especially thankful to Jussi Kurunmäki, Suvi Soininen and Tapani Turkka. Finally, Kris Clarke's (University of Tampere) corrections of my English are crucial to the present book.