

Ideas in Context: Conversation with Quentin Skinner

Interview conducted by Hansong Li



Photo by Hansong Li

Quentin Skinner is an intellectual historian known for his pioneering work on early-modern European political thought. He was educated at Bedford School and Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge. Author of such works as *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought* (1978) and *Visions of Politics* (2002) he served as the Regius Professor of History at the University of Cambridge, and currently as the Barber Beaumont Professor of the Humanities and Co-director of The Centre for the Study of the History of Political Thought at Queen Mary University of London. Professor Skinner has traveled worldwide to share his philosophical insights. Recently, he delivered a lecture at the University of Chicago's Neubauer Collegium, entitled "How Should We Think about Freedom?" And on September 9th 2016, Professor Skinner discussed his intellectual journey and political visions with the *Chicago Journal of History* at his house in London.

Chicago Journal of History (CJH): Thank you for joining us in this conversation. Let's begin with a question about the discipline itself. How would you distinguish the work of an intellectual historian from that of philosophers, political theorists, and historians of ideas, among others, who employ different methodologies to study the same texts?

Quentin Skinner (QS): I would say that the intellectual historian is someone who studies bodies of texts and aspires to understand them so far as possible in their own terms. Such an historian will consequently be recognizable as someone who respects certain technical constraints: not using translations, avoiding the modernization of texts, always taking care to use the best editions, and so forth. The distinctive task of such historians seems to me that of trying to situate the texts they study within whatever contexts help to explain what gave rise to the texts in question, and to identify what specific problems they were designed to solve. I should add that in speaking of texts I am using the term in a familiar but extended sense that encompasses not merely philosophical treatises and works of literature, but also films, paintings, buildings and other such artifacts, all of which for me count as texts.

You ask how I would distinguish this approach from that of philosophers and political theorists who often study the same texts. If we are speaking of historians of philosophy, I would say that nowadays many of them respect the same constraints and undertake similar tasks. But if we are speaking of social and political theorists, then some by contrast focus almost exclusively on the internal logic of texts and how their specific concepts and arguments should be understood. This kind of analysis can of course be highly illuminating, although the examining of such arguments without reference to the circumstances that gave rise to them sometimes looks to me strangely disembodied. There is also a danger of what my colleague Lea Ypi likes to describe as the sanitizing of texts. Suppose, for example, you offer a purely analytical account of John Locke's theory of property and his views about the labor theory of value. Isolating the contents of his discussion in this way, you can hardly fail to occlude the extent to which his analysis was at the same time connected not merely with the denial of property rights to women but with slavery and imperialism. Such an approach, to repeat, inevitably sanitizes the text.

You also ask about historians of ideas, although I am not sure that many scholars would nowadays want to describe themselves in those terms. There have been many histories of ideas, some of them celebrated in their time: for example, histories of the idea of progress, the great chain of being, the social contract, the perfectibility of man and so on. But in my mind this

approach raises many doubts. What do we mean by writing the history of an idea? Do we mean the history of the verbal expressions of a concept, or of the concept itself? If we simply link together those who have invoked some particular idea, how do we convey a sense of its role and place—marginal or central, agreed or contested—in different historical periods? Are we happy with the devaluation of agency involved in this approach? Is there really a history of ideas to be written at all, as opposed to a history of the changing ways in which ideas have been debated and put to use?

CJH: In what ways do you think the field of intellectual history has changed since you first published “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas” in 1969?¹

QS: The discipline has been transformed in so many ways that it is impossible to survey them briefly. But I think the most important change is that intellectual history is much more widely studied than it was when I started out in the 1960s. One obvious reflection of this increasing popularity has been the emergence of new journals in the field: *History of European Ideas* in the 1970s, *History of Political Thought* in the 1980s, *The Intellectual History Review* in the 1990s, *Modern Intellectual History* about a decade ago, and several other similar initiatives. With this expansion, a number of sub-disciplines have risen to greater prominence. Perhaps the most important has been the history of science, which has also been the site of some of the most sophisticated methodological debates ever since Thomas Kuhn’s pathfinding work of the early 1960s.² We have also seen the development of what might be called a democratized form of intellectual history, in which the focus of attention is not on professional thinkers but on the outlook of ordinary people. Carlo Ginzburg, Natalie Davis and Keith Thomas have all written masterpieces in this genre.³ Meanwhile, everyone has been influenced by feminist intellectual historians, who have raised new questions as well as expanding the range of texts routinely read by students. A more recent development is that, like so much historical scholarship, intellectual history has increasingly become global in its reach. Among new approaches to canonical texts, I need to mention the important work done by Reinhart Koselleck and his associates in tracing the genealogies of key concepts in western thought.⁴ I should also like to speak up for what has come to be called the Cambridge School approach, with which I have been associated. We have been attempting to situate classic texts within the circumstances of their production, and in doing so to question

the canon itself. Some major historians have worked in this idiom, such as my friends John Dunn and John Pocock,⁵ and a younger generation of scholars is now carrying this approach along new paths.

CJH: In retrospect, what have you judged to be the strongest criticisms of your method in the past few decades, and how have you responded to them?

QS: One of the recurrent criticisms to which I was originally subjected—for example by Howard Warrender—was that my questioning of the ‘perennial wisdom’ supposedly embodied in our philosophical traditions, and my insistence on the need for a contextual approach even to the most canonical works, rendered the study of the history of social and political ideas pointless.⁶ This criticism always seemed to me to embody a depressingly philistine view of the value of historical understanding. The suggestion appears to be that, unless the past can be used as a mirror in which we can see our own values and attitudes reflected, then it cannot be of any interest to us. But I don’t believe that many people think in these terms nowadays; our culture seems to have become much more historically-minded. I should add that there have been two main philosophical criticisms – if I may speak so grandly – that have repeatedly been levelled at my work. One is that I try to defend an indefensible equation between intended meanings and the meanings of texts. The other is that my approach commits me to a self-defeating form of conceptual relativism. Neither of these judgments seems to me warranted, but both need to be properly addressed—so far as I am competent to do so. I don’t want to give an excessively long answer to your question at this stage, but I very much hope we can come back to these objections at a later point in our conversation.

CJH: What in your formative years first sparked your interest in early modern intellectual history, and for what reason did you focus on Anglophone political theorists such as Thomas More and Thomas Hobbes, and later the Italian Renaissance—notably Machiavelli?

QS: My special interest in early-modern history was initially sparked at school. We were taught that there were two formative periods in British history, the sixteenth-century Reformation and the seventeenth-century constitutional revolution, and we studied both in considerable depth. This involved some examination of the intellectual background to politics, which is how I first came to read Thomas More’s *Utopia* as well as Thomas Hobbes’s *Leviathan* and John Locke’s *Two Treatises of*

1 Skinner, Quentin. “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas”. *History and Theory*, Vol. 8 (1969)

2 Thomas Samuel Kuhn (1922 – 1996), American physicist, historian and philosopher of science, author of the 1962 book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.

3 Carlo Ginzburg, (1939—), Italian historian; Natalie Zemon Davis, (1928—) Canadian and American historian; Sir Keith Vivian Thomas (1933—), British historian.

4 Reinhart Koselleck (1923-2006), German historian

5 John Montfort Dunn (1940—), political theorist; John Pocock (1924—), historian of political thought

6 Howard Warrender, (1922-1985) Professor of Political Theory and Institutions at the University of Sheffield. He authored “Political Theory and Historiography: A Reply to Professor Skinner of Hobbes” in *The Historical Journal* Vol. 22. No. 4 (Dec. 1979) pp. 931-940

Government. You ask how my interests then broadened in the direction of the Italian Renaissance. This development initially arose out of my teaching obligations at Cambridge. I was appointed to a University Lectureship in 1965, and asked to give a course on early-modern political theory, which in those days meant starting with Machiavelli. I had of course read him as an undergraduate, but as soon as I began to study him in depth I found myself instantly hooked. This didn't by any means happen to me with some of the other theorists on whom I was asked to lecture, and I cannot satisfactorily explain what it was about Machiavelli that I found so riveting. But perhaps there is no great puzzle here, because finding Machiavelli riveting is not an uncommon experience.

CJH: That brings us to our next question, which attempts to situate your work in historical polemics. In *Visions of Politics* you speak of the “performativity of texts and the need to treat them intertextually,” and suggest that the performativity of texts can “validly be treated as a property of the texts in themselves.” Is there also performativity in your intellectual work? In what way is your scholarship not only words but also deeds, to invoke your speech-act theory, and what kind of “intervention” have you intended to project into today’s ideological and intellectual polemics?⁷ In other words, what do you *do*, in thinking and writing?

QS: One kind of intervention I’ve tried to make is methodological. If I were to express it in speech-act terms, as you ask me to do, I would say that in my early essays I was trying to raise doubts and to issue warnings about some prevailing ways of studying intellectual history, especially the history of political thought, and even to satirize and ridicule them. By the way, you refer to speech-act theory as if it were my own intellectual property, but my thinking about this aspect of the philosophy of language has at all times been overwhelmingly indebted to Wittgenstein’s insight that words are also deeds, and to Austin’s theory of performative utterances, especially as developed by Strawson and Searle.⁸

More recently, however, I have become more interested in what I might call substantive interventions. I have come to feel that the range of concepts we currently deploy in talking about political issues has become unduly limited. Sometimes it looks as if the vocabulary of rights is being asked to do all the work. So, I have become interested in the project of trying to enrich our vocabulary by reference to the past. For example, we habitually speak about freedom as if it means nothing more than absence of constraint. I attempt to show in my book, *Liberty Before Liberalism*, that in earlier times the concept was far more broadly understood as the name of a status, the status of independent persons by contrast with slaves.⁹ To take another example, when we speak about the state, we usually treat the term as a synonym for government. I have tried in a number of recent essays to comment on the significance of the fact that, when the concept of the state first entered our political discourse, it was used to denote a particular kind of moral person distinct from both rulers and ruled. These are not merely historical excavations on my part; I want to ask how these and other rival conceptualizations came to be expunged from our political vocabulary, and to consider whether the outcome has involved gain or loss.

CJH: In “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas,” you say that the study of classical texts should reveal “not the sameness, but the essential variety of viable moral assumptions and political commitments,” and in *Reason and rhetoric in the philosophy of Hobbes*, you say that “the study of the past need not be any the less instructive when it uncovers contrasts rather than continuities with the present.”¹⁰ In general, do you think that we could learn about human conventions and intentions from history without taking straightforward lessons on the so-called timeless truths? On the other hand, how should we read authors such as Thucydides and Machiavelli who believed they were indeed presenting timeless truths as gifts to humanity for all times?

9 Skinner, Quentin. *Liberty before Liberalism*. Cambridge: 1998.

10 Skinner, Quentin. “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas” P. 52;

Skinner, Quentin, *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes*. P. 15, introduction.

Skinner, Quentin. *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes*. “I am unrepentant in believing that the attempt to gain acquaintance with Hobbes’ intellectual world is an undertaking of far greater interest than the attempt to use his texts as a mirror to reflect back at ourselves our current assumptions and prejudices. One reason is simply that...Hobbes’ world is so rich and strange that, if we turn to it merely for answers to our own questions, we shall needlessly impoverish our own intellectual lives. A further reason is that, if we allow ourselves to approach the past with a less importunate sense of ‘relevance’, we may find our studies taking on a relevance of a different and more authentic kind. We may find, in particular, that the acquisition of an historical perspective helps us to stand back from some of our current assumptions and habits of thought, and perhaps even to reconsider them. P. 15, introduction.

7 Skinner, Quentin. *Visions of Politics*, general preface; “Interpretation and understanding of speech acts”, in *Regarding Method*, P. 118; Skinner, Quentin. *Hobbes and Republican Liberty*. “I approach Hobbes’ political theory not simply as a general system of ideas but also as a polemical intervention in the ideological conflicts of his time”; Hobbes thinks it is absurd to talk about ‘unfreedom’ without pointing at specific ways in which an impediment is imposed; Wittgenstein: words are also deeds (1958, 546, p. 146); Skinner: “...not merely what Hobbes is saying but also what he is doing in propounding his arguments...my governing assumption is that even the most abstract works of political theory are never above the battle; they are always part of the battle...seeing polemics underlying the deceptively smooth surface of his argument.” preface, xvi.

8 Sir Peter Frederick Strawson (1919-2006), English philosopher; John Searle (1932—), American philosopher; John Langshaw “J. L.” Austin (1911-1960), English philosopher.

QS: As I said in answer to your opening question, my basic approach consists of trying to recover the concepts used by the writers I study, and then trying to grasp how they put those concepts to work. If you adopt that approach, you will find that the concepts invoked by our forebears, and the meanings they attached to the terms expressing those concepts, sometimes look largely familiar to us. There have been major continuities, in other words, in our ways of thinking about political values and practices. But I am more interested in the fact that, as L. P. Hartley remarked in a much-quoted epigram, the past is a foreign country. The discontinuities, that is, often strike me as more instructive than the similarities. An obvious illustration is provided by the history of the concept of a right. It is doubtful whether, in classical antiquity, there was any 'subjective' understanding of rights by contrast with the idea of what is right. But at some later stage there emerged a view of rights as possessions, and later still as moral claims against others. Wouldn't it be interesting to reflect on what it might be like to think about justice in the absence of any such theory of subjective rights? Given that, in contemporary political theory, the discourse of rights sometimes seems—as I've already said—to be doing too much work, might this perhaps be the most instructive question of all?

I am even more interested in the possibility that, while our forebears may have shared much of our political vocabulary, they may sometimes have expressed unfamiliar concepts in familiar terms. Answering your previous question, I gave the example of individual liberty. We tend to think of liberty as a predicate of actions, arguing that people are free unless they are constrained in the exercise of their powers. But almost nobody thought in those terms before the age of the Enlightenment. As I've said, they thought of liberty as the name of a status, that of independent persons by contrast with slaves. What if we were to try to see things from that sharply different angle? We would be led to ask different questions about freedom and forms of government, and about the relations between freedom and social justice. We might even come to feel – as I have done myself – that this way of thinking about the concept is more fruitful and potentially useful than our current ways of talk.

You are right to say that some political writers have sought to insist that their work should instead be seen, in Thucydides' phrase, as a possession for all time. There is a sense in which Thucydides' ambitions for his history have been realized, for many people still read Thucydides. But this is not to say that his modern readers necessarily endorse anything he says about politics and war. My whole point is to insist that, when we say that Thucydides remains worth reading, this need not be because his work contains any timeless truths.

CJH: This is another methodological question on a theme central to your research. What is a historical context, and what are the particular things a historian studies in order to grasp a context to the fullest extent? On the one hand, you

have criticized the attempt to solve “perennial problems” by transcending the contexts of ideas as “not merely a methodological fallacy, but something like a moral error” in the 1960s; on the other hand, you agree that there are “apparently perennial questions,” perhaps in another sense.¹¹ Why do we ask the same questions, even in completely different time periods and circumstances? And in this case, which one should concern a historian first and foremost, the same questions or different contexts? And do different forms of life, as Wittgenstein calls them, require a relativist approach to the study of human civilizations?

QS: That is a very rich question, and indeed there seems to be three different issues here. So, I hope you will not mind if I try to separate them out. First of all, you ask about the idea of historical context. I would say that the context is whatever you need to reconstruct in order to understand some meaningful item in that context. This is circular, of course, but I am speaking of a hermeneutic circle. You need to think of texts as answers to questions, and the context as the source of the questions. I think of social and political life itself as setting the problems for social and political theorists. So, I'm much concerned with what one might call social contexts. But I also think of texts as always concerned with other texts. So, I tend to be even more concerned with linguistic contexts, and indeed some critics, like Mark Bevir, have described my approach as 'linguistic contextualism'.¹² I am saying, however, that both these contexts always need to be reconstructed.

You also ask why we keep asking the same questions. But do we? Surely philosophy is a subject in which the questions as well as the answers continually change. But insofar as we do, this is surely owing to the fact that—as I've already intimated—western moral and political life has exhibited some astonishing continuities. You can go to an Italian city and visit the town hall, which in some instances will have been built as early as the thirteenth century but is still serving the same purpose. Sometimes the conceptual continuities are no less striking. We still ask, as Aristotle did, about the best constitution of the polity; about the grounds and limits of political obedience; and about other connected questions that, even if not perennial, have been meditated for a very long time.

The third issue you raise is whether the different forms of life we study as historians require us to be conceptual relativists. This is what used to be called the sixty-four-thousand-dollar question, and obviously, it plunges us into deep philosophical waters. But perhaps I can try to make two contrasting points. One is that there is a sense in which historians do, I think, need to be relativists. They need, that is, to relativize the notion

11 Skinner, Quentin. "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas". P. 52.

12 Bevir, Mark. "The Errors of Linguistic Contextualism" in *History and Theory*, Vol. 31, No. 3 (Oct., 1992), pp. 276-298

of rationality. Here I dissent from the approach recommended by a number of philosophers of history and social science—I am thinking of Martin Hollis, Steven Lukes and Philip Pettit in some of his earlier work.¹³ They invite us to begin by asking whether the beliefs we investigate as historians are true or false. The underlying suggestion is that true beliefs require to be explained in a different way from false beliefs. There is held to be no special puzzle about why people hold true beliefs. But false beliefs are said to point to failures of reasoning, so that the explanatory task becomes that of enquiring into the various forms of social or psychological pressure that may prevent people from recognizing the falsity of their beliefs. This approach seems to me nothing less than fatal to good historical practice. The reason is that it involves equating the holding of rational beliefs with the holding of beliefs that the historian judges to be true. This leaves no space for the possibility that there could have been good and rational grounds, in earlier historical periods, for holding a number of beliefs to be true, even though there would be no grounds for holding the same beliefs to be true in our own society.

The contrasting point I want to make is that it is easy to carry this relativist thought too far. I do not think, that is, that historians should simply adopt a coherence theory of truth, as Thomas Kuhn sometimes appears to do, and likewise Richard Rorty in his *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*.¹⁴ Rorty argues that, if we ask whether it was or was not rational for someone to hold a certain belief in a society very different from ours, we are simply importing, in a kind of imperialist manner, a purportedly neutral and trans-temporal conception of rationality to which we cannot possibly have access. Rorty wants to say, for example, in the case of the debate between Galileo and the Catholic Church about the heliocentric hypothesis, that the point of view adopted by Galileo's opponents was no less 'objective' than that of Galileo himself. But it seems to me important that the Churchmen's contention that the sun travels round the earth was false, and thus that it is correspondingly important to ask whether it was rational for them to believe it to be true. Perhaps it was, but perhaps it wasn't, and part of the historical task is to try to find out the answer. But this is not to impose an alien or anachronistic conception of rationality on the past. It is merely to ask whether the Churchmen were applying the criteria for the formation and criticism of beliefs current in their own society, or whether they were in some way ignoring or defying them.

I am proposing, in short, that historians need to be relativists with respect to the idea of rationality, but not with respect to the idea of truth. We want to find out whether it may have ra-

tional for the Churchmen to deny the truth of the heliocentric hypothesis, even if such a denial would not be rational for us. But we don't want to end up by saying that the heliocentric hypothesis was false for the Churchmen although it is true for us. It has never been true that the sun goes around the earth, although it may have been rational for the Churchmen to believe it.

CJH: And in light of both this method of contextualization and your focus on intertextuality, you are certainly opposed to treating thinkers in intellectual isolation. For example, you have expressed skepticism toward the canonization of classical texts, and have refused to ignore the seemingly minor thinkers. But with regard to those reputed by many to have been “beyond their time”—that is, in your words, inventors of new “semantics” and “normative vocabularies,” those who created paradigms that are later followed by others—what is their special relationship with their historical contexts? Are they relatively unbound by them? Do you think there have been “masterminds” that have transcended or at least led their time, thus permanently influencing and even altering the direction of intellectual history, or do you think their “extraordinary” thoughts were after all generated out of ordinary debates, and are therefore not extraordinary?¹⁵

QS: I'm inclined to say that there may be a *non-sequitur* somewhere hidden in this question, because my prejudice is to suppose that even the most startling intellectual discoveries must of course have an explanatory context. The discovery will stem from the fact that something has been overlooked, or some implication of what is already known hasn't been noticed, or some explanatory hypothesis simply hasn't been entertained. For example, Copernicus's heliocentrism picked up an ancient hypothesis and gave new evidence for it.¹⁶ Likewise, Einstein's special theory of relativity supplied a new answer to an existing puzzle, the puzzle raised by the Michelson-Morley experiment. The experiment had been designed to establish how the direc-

15 Skinner, Quentin. *Hobbes and Republican Liberty*. “Most recent studies have focused exclusively on Hobbes' texts, without asking what might have prompted him to formulate and reformulate his distinctive arguments, and thus without attempting to identify the nature of the disputes in which he was taking part. By contrast I have tried to show how Hobbes' successive attempts to grapple with the question of human liberty were deeply affected by the claims put forward by the radical and parliamentary writers in the period of the civil wars, and by Hobbes' sense of the urgent need to counter them in the name of peace”. Preface xiv.

16 3rd century BC, Aristarchus of Samos; Archimedes, Ψαμμίτης: Ἀρίσταρχος δὲ ὁ Σάμιος ὑποθέσιων τινῶν ἐξέδωκεν γραφάς... Ὑποτίθεται γὰρ τὰ μὲν ἀπλανέα τῶν ἀστρῶν καὶ τὸν ἄλιον μένειν ἀκίνητον, τὰν δὲ γὰν περιφέρεσθαι περὶ τὸν ἄλιον κατὰ κύκλου περιφέρειαν, ὅς ἐστιν ἐν μέσῳ τῷ δρόμῳ κείμενος, τὰν δὲ τῶν ἀπλανέων ἀστρῶν σφαῖραν περὶ τὸ αὐτὸ κέντρον τῷ ἀλίῳ κειμέναν τῷ μεγέθει τηλικαύταν εἶμεν... microform, Oxonii: E theatro Sheldoniano, 1676.

13 James Martin Hollis (14 March 1938 – 27 February 1998) was an English rationalist philosopher; Steven Michael Lukes FBA (born 1941) is a political and social theorist; Philip Noel Pettit (born 1945) is an Irish philosopher and political theorist.

14 Rorty, Richard. *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Princeton: 1979.

tion of light affects its speed, but it turned out to have no effect at all. There had to be an explanation, and Einstein supplied it. This is not in the least to say, however, that because Galileo's and Einstein's thinking arose out of a context of existing discussion and debate their discoveries were any the less remarkable. The effect in both cases was nothing less than the creation of what Kuhn would call a paradigm shift, and indeed these were the two major paradigm shifts that Kuhn liked to single out.

CJH: When intellectual historians talk about the meaning of a text, is it important to distinguish between the intended meaning of the author and the meaning that is received by his contemporaries? How do you use historical and textual sources to obtain insights on both? Usually, how much of your work is biographical—that is, to explore the intellectual development of the author in order to grasp what he had in mind as he wrote a text—and how much of it is political and social history—that is, to study the community, society, and regime in which the author wrote his work in order to gain insight on what the author's audience was trying to get from the text?

QS: The study of what you call the received meanings of texts obviously constitutes a branch of intellectual history in itself. But I have always tried to avoid writing such histories of alleged influences. When you read a given text, you may often be inclined to infer the influence of some earlier texts. But in the absence of independent documentary evidence, it will always be impossible to distinguish such alleged influences from random resemblances, or resemblances arising from a wider intellectual background. Such so-called reception studies have become more fashionable of late, but I continue to be somewhat skeptical about their historical worth.

Let me turn to your question about whether it is important to distinguish the meaning of a text from the intended meaning of its author. I have been taken by a number of my critics to equate the two. But it seems to me that we need to disentangle a confusion here. On the one hand, if by the meaning of a text you have in mind the meaning of the words and sentences contained in it, then I don't make any equation with the intended meaning at all. I think there will always be what Paul Ricœur nicely called surplus meaning in texts.¹⁷ There will always be an intended meaning, but in complex texts there will always be far more, if only because our words often have multiple or contested meanings, so that often we cannot hope to infer authorial intent from usage. But on the other hand, if by the meaning of a text you have in mind how the text was meant to be taken, that is, what its author may have meant by it, then I do indeed make an equation between meaning and intentionality. This is because I take it that, when we ask what a writer may have meant by a given utterance, this is equivalent to asking about

the intentions that went into the act of uttering it.

To put the same point another way, I think that recent theories of interpretation—including Derrida's work and that of other deconstructionist critics—have been too much preoccupied with warning us not to look for intended meanings. I largely agree, as I've intimated, with Derrida's skeptical observations about the possibility of recovering intentions in the face of polysemy and ambiguity. But it's a mistake to infer from this that the study of intentionality must either be an irrelevance or a lost cause. I say this because, in addition to the purported meanings of texts, we also need to ask what any given writer may have been *doing* in issuing a given utterance, and hence what they may have meant by it. But here we are dealing not with meanings but with linguistic actions. And, as in the case of any other type of action, we identify the specific nature of any speech-act by way of recovering the intentions embodied in it.

It is true, however, that the ascription of intentions to speech-acts is always a matter of inference. J. L. Austin makes the relevant distinction very effectively in *How to do things with words*.¹⁸ If you place any speech-act within the context of linguistic and social conventions that makes sense of it, then you will have succeeded in recovering the *force* of the utterance. You will be able to show, for example, that a particular utterance had the force of a warning, say, rather than an order or a greeting or a prediction and so on. But it is another and further thing to claim that the person who spoke with the force of a warning was performing the intended act of warning someone.

My response to this objection is that it will often be legitimate to insist on the inference. We can sometimes hope to show that, when someone spoke with a certain force, this was because they intended what they said to carry that specific force. This is what I tried to argue, for example, in my book *Hobbes and Republican Liberty*.¹⁹ I showed that Hobbes's insistence on physical constraint as the antonym of freedom had the force of criticizing and repudiating the well-established claim that the antonym of freedom is dependence on the will of others. I inferred that Hobbes's underlying intention was to undermine and set aside the widely-held account. Some critics complained that we can never hope to get into the mind of a dead writer (or even a living one) in this fashion, if only because such intentions are purely mental events. But I am claiming that they are not purely mental events. They are entirely in the public arena, and are susceptible of being recovered simply by intertextual comparisons and the inferences that can be drawn from them.

You also ask about biography and social history. As I have al-

17 Paul Ricœur (1913–2005), French philosopher. *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (1976)

18 Austin, J.L. *How to Do Things with Words*, Harvard University Press (Cambridge: 1962), the William James Lectures Series (Book 1), P. 72, 75, 135, 146, 150

19 Skinner, *Hobbes and Republican Liberty*. Cambridge: 2008.

ready declared, my basic operating assumption is that in the history of social, moral and political theory it is society that sets the questions, causing a certain and continually changing range of issues to appear problematic, and hence in need of philosophical attention. About the value of biography, I must confess I am something of a skeptic, especially because it sometimes seems that the huge popularity of biography in our time is chiefly a testament to the entrancing power of gossip. I am not sure that we really know how to write biographies. It is a genre that carries us away from the realm of intentions and into the much murkier depths of motivation and character. Here the problem is that we do not have agreed theories about the springs of action. As a result, biographies inevitably contain a lot of speculation, and are frequently condemned to operate merely on the surface of things. I should add, however, that there is one way in which biography seems to me a crucial tool for intellectual historians to wield. We need to discover as much as we can about the education received by the writers we are trying to understand. In the case of professional thinkers, it is surely obvious that a detailed awareness of their range of reading will be one of the best means of acquainting ourselves with the contents and limits of their mental world.

CJH: Hence in several of your works on Hobbes, you have constantly referred to the books available to Hobbes in the Hardwick Library.²⁰

QS: Yes. That's right.

CJH: This is a question on politics: you say in *Hobbes and Republican Liberty* that Hobbes denounced the *soi-disant* freedom-seeking mindset as a type of aristocratic *ressentiment*—the elites wished to attain honors from the commonwealth that the sovereign was not to hand out.²¹ Do you think that is characteristic of modern republican democracy? Is one of the sources of discontent with authoritarian regimes the fact that they do not let us fully realize our political ambitions?²²

QS: I think it was certainly shrewd of Hobbes to observe that

20 See, for example, *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes* (Cambridge: 1996) and *Hobbes and Republican Liberty* (Cambridge: 2008)

21 Skinner, *Hobbes and Republican Liberty*. P. 81. 'a sense of their want of that power, and that honour and testimony thereof, which they think is due unto them', Hobbes 1969a, 27. 3, p. 169

22 Skinner, Quentin. *Foundation of Modern Political Thought* Vol. I. Preface xi-xii. "...And it is evident that, as long as historians of political theory continue to think of their main task as to interpreting a canon of classic texts, it will remain difficult to establish any closer links between political theory and political life. But if they were instead to think of themselves essentially as students of ideologies, it might become possible to illustrate one crucial way in which the explanation of political behavior depends upon the study of political ideas and principles, and cannot meaningfully be conducted without reference to them.

some of the dislike of absolutism in early seventeenth-century England stemmed from a sense on the part of the aristocracy that their standing was being debased, that they were being debarred from the exercise of traditional privileges. But I don't feel that an inability to realize my political ambitions would figure at all largely on my own list of reasons for thinking that it would be terrible to live under a powerfully authoritarian regime. I must admit, however, that this may simply because I have never had any political ambitions at all. I have chosen a way of life that gives me a lot of autonomy, but even so I find it hard to live according to my principles as much as I should. To adopt politics as a way of life, in which you are continually asked to compromise your principles and treat politics as the art of the possible, would to me be unimaginable.

CJH: To continue the conversation on contemporary forms of political life: since what scholars refer to as the fall of "medieval universalism" in the West—that is, the understanding of the cosmos as constructed in a fixed way according to the teachings of Christianity—has there emerged in the "foundation of modern political thought" a modern universalism in the context of globalism? Are today's politics moving towards relativist ends or a *comopolis*?

QS: I am no prophet, and I like Hobbes's remark that the best prophets are merely the best guessers. But if I am allowed a guess, then it would be that the prospects for a modern form of universalism are set to recede rather than advance. It is true that neo-liberal economists have for a long time been urging globalization on us, and that this has helped to give rise to neo-liberal forms of the state that have actively encouraged this ideological project. But it now looks as if these developments may be arrested and even reversed by populist protests that are already visible on a large scale. Politicians who oppose the free movement of capital and labor are gaining mass support in the European Union as well as the United States from people who feel betrayed and marginalized by the neo-liberal state. The current trend seems to be towards a narrow nationalism rather than anything like a burgeoning *cosmpolis*.

CJH: Your works have challenged us to see in greater light the different trends and traditions at work in early modern political thought, such as the neo-Roman and Hobbesian views of liberty, or the humanist and scientific approaches to knowledge, etc. At a macroscopic level, do you identify a general tradition of the West emerging out of the Renaissance and the Reformation, and is it still in place? What could be referred to as the western legacy, if there is one?

QS: I agree that a particular self-image has developed in the west since the era of the Renaissance. We have been encouraged to accept a self-congratulatory narrative about the end of religious warfare, the growth of toleration, the pushing back of obscurantism by Enlightenment rationalism, the vast increases in wealth and welfare made possible by the scientific revolution and the triumph of capitalism, and so on. But surely very little

of this narrative now remains in place. We have been forced to acknowledge that all these benefits came with enormous costs, that the past century was perhaps the most barbarous in the history of mankind, and that the human race is currently threatening its capacity even to sustain its own continued existence.

CJH: What constitutes the *other* for the west? Is there a non-western tradition, and how would an intellectual historian be able to compare them?

QS: Of course, there are many non-western traditions, but they do not necessarily constitute self-conscious alternatives to western values, as opposed to merely offering different outlooks on life. As for how intellectual historians might compare such traditions, I hope it won't be a consequence of the current globalization of intellectual history that we start asking questions of this kind. We can of course hope with profit to compare specific features of strongly contrasting ways of life. But to mount comparisons between entire traditions of thinking, to say nothing of entire civilizations, would surely be beyond the powers of even the most learned historian, and I don't see how it could responsibly be done.

CJH: Is that your point of view on Professor Toynbee's *A Study of History*?

QS: If I correctly remember, Arnold Toynbee revealed to the world that there have been nineteen civilizations, to which he added the offensive claim that Scandinavia is the site of an 'abortive' civilization, and that in the Ottoman and some other cases the march of civilization was 'arrested'. One absurdity lies in Toynbee's governing assumption that the term 'civilization' refers unambiguously to a distinctive form of life, so that lists of civilizations can be uncontentiously compiled. But the main absurdity is that he then proceeded to argue that his nineteen cases provide him with sufficient information to generate inductive and hence predictive generalizations about what causes civilizations to rise and fall. The whole project is statistically as well as conceptually illiterate.

CJH: Let us then discuss another distinct method of doing history. You have on many occasions referred to the influence of Marxism on history as a discipline.²³ Today we still talk about the Marxist branch of historicism, and refer to the Marxist method as a historical one. Since the decline of the Soviet Bloc at the end of the twentieth century, there has been a contemporaneous decline in Marxism's influence on

23 See, for example, Skinner, Quentin. "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas". *History and Theory*, Vol. 8 (1969); interviews such as: 'Making history: the discipline in perspective' Interview with Quentin Skinner: http://www.history.ac.uk/makinghistory/resources/interviews/Skinner_Quentin.html; "Quentin Skinner on Encountering the Past": http://www.jyu.fi/yhtfil/redescriptions/Yearbook%202002/Skinner_Interview_2002.pdf

the humanities and social sciences. How do you characterize that change, and what is your opinion on Marxist historians' approach to the understanding of history?

QS: I should begin by explaining why it was that, in my early years as a scholar, I devoted so much time to thinking about Marxist approaches to history. The reason was that such approaches were strongly in the ascendant at the time, especially in the work of Fernand Braudel and the *Annales* school in France, and in such prominent Anglophone historians as Christopher Hill, Eric Hobsbawm, C. B. Macpherson, E. P. Thompson and others.²⁴ They tended to assume that the leading motors of historical change will always be fundamentally economic in character. When they had anything to say about political theory, they tended to argue that the principles by which political actors commonly claim to be motivated are usually rationalizations of their socio-economic interests and general condition of life. This way of thinking clearly underpins C.B. Macpherson's book, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism*, which was published just as I was beginning research in 1962.²⁵ It was said to follow that social and political principles can have no independent explanatory role in accounting for the processes of social change. The study of intellectual history thus came to seem of marginal significance. I remember that, when I arrived at the Institute for Advanced Study in 1974 (where I stayed for four years) I discovered that intellectual history was regularly dismissed by Princeton historians like Lawrence Stone in precisely these terms.²⁶

I came to feel that this approach embodies a misunderstanding of the complex role played by social and political argument in relation to social change. One obvious weakness arises from the unargued assumption that people's professed principles are generally little more than rationalizations of their interests. This contention appears in some cases to be obviously false. Some people undoubtedly act out of normative principles that may be strongly at variance with their interests. But the main problem is that, even if we accept that professed principles are mere rationalizations, what the Marxist approach fails to recognize is that they nevertheless help to construct, and not merely to reflect, the lineaments of our social and economic world. We can see how this comes about as soon as we reflect on the crucial consideration that normally we can only hope to succeed in doing what we can manage to legitimize. As a result, we are generally committed to acting only in such ways as are compatible with the claim that we are motivated by our pro-

24 Fernand Braudel (1902-1985), French historian and a leader of the *Annales* School; Christopher Hill (1912-2003) English Marxist historian; Eric Hobsbawm (1917-2012), English historian; Crawford Brough Macpherson (1911-1987), Canadian political theorist; Edward Palmer Thompson (1924-1993), British historian, writer, and campaigner.

25 Macpherson, C.B. *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism*. Oxford: 1962.

26 Lawrence Stone (1919-1999), English historian

fessed principles. But this in turn means that such principles will always have to be invoked when it comes to explaining our behavior. This is because our conduct will always in part be limited and directed by the need to legitimize what we are doing. The explanation of what we are doing will therefore need to make reference to the principles in the light of which we seek to legitimize our behavior. This was one of the claims I was most of all concerned to underline in my book, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*.²⁷

As I say, for me what is crucial about this argument is that it yields the conclusion that social and political ideas are not merely the products but one of the producers of social reality. But this is not necessarily because they serve as the motives of our social behavior. Rather it is because the need to legitimate our behavior requires that our actions must remain compatible with the claim that they are motivated by some already recognized normative principle, even in those instances (or rather, especially in those instances) where this is not the case. The need for legitimation, in short, is one of the constraints that helps to shape our social world. This is how it comes about that social and political ideas are among the constructors of reality, and this is what Marxist theories of ideology seem to me to miss.

CJH: Thank you, Professor. At the closing of our interview, what would you offer as advice to undergraduate students, aspiring historians, and students of the social sciences and humanities interested in intellectual history? What should we pay attention to in our reading and research?

QS: I am most grateful for the question. I'm only a student of certain questions in moral and political philosophy, so maybe it will be best if I limit myself to addressing people like yourself who are interested in these specific issues. I think I only have two pieces of advice. One stems from my answer to your opening question. As I said, I think we should study the thinkers of the past so far as possible in their own terms. But I should now like to add that our motivation for studying them should, I think, come from here and now. This is the point I was trying to bring out when I spoke earlier about my book, *Liberty before liberalism*. If we turn back to the pre-modern era, we find that freedom was understood not as a predicate of actions, but rather as the name of a status, that of an independent person by contrast with the dependence characteristic of slaves. Once we have succeeded in reconstructing this earlier and unfamiliar story, I then want us to ask: what do we think of this alternative view? Might it be more useful to reconsider it rather than continuing to set it aside?

My other piece of advice would be that, in selecting topics for research, you should never allow yourself to be too much in-

fluenced by what is going on in the discipline. Never select a subject simply because it is currently fashionable. One reason is that historiographical fashions change all the time, and sometimes with bewildering suddenness. Far better to stick with what you care about. But the most important reason is that the early years of academic life are often lonely and difficult, and it is easy to become discouraged. If you are not committed at an existential level to what you are doing, it is all too likely that you will lack sufficient determination to continue in discouraging times. The best way to endure and flourish is to concentrate on what matters most to you, not what currently captivates the profession. If your research is of sufficient interest, the profession will soon be captivated.

²⁷ Skinner, Quentin. *Foundations of Modern Political Thought*. Vol. 1, 2. Cambridge: 1978.



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