

In and Out of Context

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Quentin Skinner. *Hobbes and Republican Liberty*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. 245pp, HB \$70.00 ISBN 9780521886765; PB \$22.99, ISBN 9780521714167.

Quentin Skinner indisputably numbers amongst the past half-century's most important historians of political thought. His investigations of the inextricable bond between political discourse and political behavior helped restore intellectual history as a critical component of the study of politics. Perhaps the clearest sign of his impact is the ubiquity of his formerly controversial foundational premises. Most historians now assume that a sincere, if vexed, relationship exists between political thought and action, often without reflecting on the exertions of Skinner and J.G.A. Pocock to counter Lewis Namier's and G.R. Elton's revisionist insistence that political thought merely amounted to retrospective justification for political business.

Skinner's contributions extend far beyond this assault on revisionism, and his work engages with that of Berlin, Strauss, Oakeshott and other luminaries of modern political philosophy. His innovation within both the historical and political philosophical traditions lies in his emphasis on notions of discourse and context as critical to the formation of political ideas, as displayed in his stunning 1978 analysis of the origins of the modern state, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*. Skinner drew on Collingwood and the later Wittgenstein to define context as the totality of political utterances available to motivate historical actors, while discourses were constituted by statements sharing ideological continuity. He brought antiquarianism to philosophy and politics to erudition. Not all historians of political philosophy embraced his recalibration of their methods. Many were loath to exam-

ine forgotten pamphlets as well as acknowledged classics, the context in which ideas were shaped as well as their formal characteristics, and the past on its own terms as well as its relationship to the present. Nor were all early modern historians convinced by his effort to integrate their canon—Kristeller, Baron, Garin, Pocock, to name a few—into a teleological narrative of the emergence of the modern state.

This methodology has become far less controversial as Skinner's students and inheritors have populated academia. His students have earned considerable influence in the disciplines of history, philosophy and political science for their application of his vision to figures from Marsiglio of Padua to John Locke. Cambridge remains the site of new and vibrant Skinnerite scholarship, with important outposts in Boston, Helsinki, Sydney and beyond. Meanwhile, *Foundations* has been the subject of two collections of essays and a cottage industry of scholarly examination.

Skinner's insistence that scholarship be useful perhaps best accounts for his continuing impact. When one surveys his work—and that of his students *cum* colleagues—the charge of bloodless antiquarianism sometimes levied against him appears wholly unconvincing. His work has focused adamantly on questions of vital contemporary significance. While *Foundations* traced the development of modern notions of state and sovereignty from late medieval Italy to the French Wars of Religion, his more recent works have elaborated the late seventeenth-century eclipse of republican conceptions of freedom by a modern understanding of liberty. The republican species—which Skinner has grudgingly ceased to call “Neo-Roman”—derived from a particular reading of Roman authorities, and it defined freedom as a condition in which men exercised their will in a free state unimpeded by any arbitrary power. Modern liberty is, to Skinner, far more troubling, for it is defined by humanity's freedom to abrogate certain rights to receive, in return, the covenanted promise of protection from one's state. This state is the absolute and legitimate seat of all sovereignty in any government, whether despotic or democratic. And though the state might impede individual action, its obstruction cannot be considered arbitrary because of this covenant. The decision to submit to the state's authority always constitutes the covenant's renewal in an act of free will.

Thomas Hobbes is the central figure in this narrative, and *Hobbes and Republican Liberty* builds on Skinner's 1996 intellectual biography *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes*, as well as his 1998 essay *Liberty Before Liberalism* to offer focused readings of the alteration in Hobbes' definitions of liberty from his service as secretary to the Cavendishes to his 1651 *Leviathan*. Meticulous interrogation, Skinner argues, enables recognition of two features of Hobbes' career denied or underappreciated by existing scholarship: Hobbes' definition of liberty did not remain static throughout his career, and these shifts were driven by Hobbes' desire to respond to the outpouring of works propounding the republican theory of liberty. Such works, Hobbes believed, divided England before the Civil War, hardened Parliamentary resistance, and supplied the grounds for Charles I's decapitation in 1649. Skinner traces subtle alterations in Hobbes' theories of freedom, liberty, impediment, and will with admirable verve and technical rigor, while succinctly encapsulating the opposing polemical literature. A vibrant Hobbes emerges, one whose untangling or circumvention of philosophical knots derived from his unfailing compulsion to ignore, overcome, or appropriate criticism. Still locked in combat with those who wish to empty the history of philosophy of the diachronic and biographical, Skinner injects Hobbes' work with a dynamism that renders the crusty old philosopher human, with ideas subject to all the deficiencies that entails.

An unsympathetic reader might suggest that there are few new ideas in this work, but they should nonetheless concede that such close readings strengthen Skinner's account of Hobbes' philosophical positions, even if grounds for dispute still remain. Skinner also compares Hobbes' positions with those of antagonists such as Algernon Sidney and John Milton more directly than he had previously. Though the book introduces few conclusions that will surprise those familiar with Skinner's work, it nonetheless paints with masterful detail the formal characteristics of his notion of modern liberty.

If the work is one of retrenchment, its methodological decisions reveal Skinner capable of arraying in different ways to fight recurring battles. Most noticeable is the influence of Herbert Butterfield, whose insistence that polemical debates be viewed as the factory of ideas here

resonates from title to last word. Much of the work hints at another Butterfieldian investigation of Hobbes—Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer’s *Leviathan and the Air-Pump* (1985); in fact, their last line is evoked in Skinner’s final word. Shapin and Schaffer conclude with a paradoxical “Hobbes was right” to argue that Hobbes was defeated in debate for reasons more sociological than evidentiary—that is, because the dispute was adjudicated according to the human grounds that Hobbes argued were determinative of truth, rather than judged on logical merit. Skinner’s conclusion is, however, devoid of irony: “We can hardly fail to acknowledge that [Hobbes] won the battle. But it is still worth asking if he won the argument” (216).

Such a conclusion might suggest that Skinner should be understood as a paragon of humanistic scholarship, for this would resolve the apparent contradiction that he prizes study of the past on its own terms and for the profit it bestows upon the present. But that would overlook Skinner’s explicitly political stance. In fact, he does not value contextual analysis for its own sake, as a transferable skill applicable to any social, political, and intellectual problems and capable of countenancing merits in all ideas. Rather, he believes that directing his method at a canonical question of political theory should yield a specific answer infused with singular truth—in this case, the superior nature of republican liberty. His contextualism is a social scientific tool, rather than a humanistic one. And the result is a teleology that reinforces or, worse, determines his perceptions of the past.

This point is significant, for if contextualist methods have lost authority in the social sciences, they continue to exert tremendous impact among historians precisely because of their ability to decipher enigmatic ideas. A generation of early modern European historians reared on Carlo Ginzburg, Natalie Zemon Davis and Robert Darnton analyze their seemingly inscrutable subjects to show that they synthesized disparate traditions and adhered to a foreign, though explicable, set of motives. Despite Skinner’s advocacy of contextualism, his polemicists never seem to possess alien motives. Rather, they all operate with unflinching rationality, never inspired by prophecy or patronage, always dogged in pursuit of convenient truths. For example, Skinner ends with Hobbes’—pragmatically accepting the legitimacy

of the Protectorate in 1651 while revising *Leviathan*. At no point does one receive the impression that Hobbes suffered from the recognition that his enemies had triumphed, nor does Hobbes appear attentive to France's absolutist regime in which he lived. Rather, in Skinner's account, the aging philosopher calmly and monastically adapted his theory of legitimate sovereignty to include the Protectorate once it assumed responsibility to protect the subjects Charles I had failed. Certainly the Protectorate fit Hobbes' definition of the state, but one wonders whether there was quite so little intellectual violence or so much solipsism as Skinner describes.

The best contextualist studies adumbrate their contexts as much as they do their interlocutors and Skinner's work does not meet this standard. The motivations of those whose bellicosity led to the Civil War are here reduced to undiluted republicanism. Very little attention is devoted to the significance of the common law, and only slightly more to the critical role of Puritanism in overturning the Stuart state. And if Pym, Milton, and Hobbes' other opponents appear less stimulated by their own contexts than collectively constitutive of Hobbes', fellow absolutists receive even less attention. Few readers will emerge from this work with a better understanding of Charles I, Archbishop Laud, or Robert Filmer.

To be fair, Skinner's apparent narrowness derives from the fungibility of the term "context." For those who follow the current historiographical orthodoxy and believe that the term refers to the complete nebula of events, institutions and ideas available to historical figures, some of Hobbes' invocations of context may seem misplaced. For example, the two chapters on *The Elements of Law* examine the status of liberty in this 1640 tract, but the political events contemporaneous with its circulation are not introduced until the subsequent chapter. Skinner here reminds us that his notion of context serves primarily as a tool of debate against the formalist history of ideas assaulted by his earliest work. It refers to a discursive field, but it excludes material events and exigencies, along with, in this case, religion and local legal traditions. It is for this reason that one never encounters the Bourbons during Hobbes' exile in France, just as one never encountered the chancery or exchequer in *Foundations*. Skinner's context is too stridently language-oriented to demand their inclusion.

Of course, such an approach does yield material that might otherwise fall into obscurity, and it would be ungenerous to overstate Skinner's narrowness. For example, he reveals Hobbes' indebtedness to early modern emblem books. Hobbes culled material for visual and rhetorical eloquence and pithy annunciations of political positions from the large number of such works available to him. Though they periodically disappear from Skinner's analysis, he uses the emblem books to populate the field of utterances available to Hobbes. In this case, the pursuit of new discursive contexts brings to the surface a deeply politicized genre central to Hobbes' conception of political discourse and crucial to his responses to republican ideas. One wishes that Skinner might have focused more closely on them; though his analysis of emblem books sometimes fits uncomfortably within his text, these moments illuminate the intellectual fertility of the expansive search for obfuscated contexts. Given the duration of Skinner's engagement with Hobbes, it is remarkable that he remains capable of finding fresh material, and it illustrates the vitality of Skinner's project. It also suggests that new contexts for Hobbes may be unearthed, perhaps in the exchanges during his younger years with the Cavendishes, perhaps in his lengthy experience in France, perhaps in studies of his readership.

But it also inspires curiosity as to why Skinner so resolutely resists including local religious discourses within the formational context of modern liberty, and the neatest explanation is simply his pronounced secularist presentism. His emphasis on discourse and context, when inflected by his own secularism, does not accommodate the special potency of religion in early modern Europe. Indeed, the limitations of Skinner's own scholarship are best illuminated by the potency of his methodology. For at the heart of his project lies the pursuit of neglected sources. His work has helped kindle a scholarly culture of erudites eager to recover new sources with which scholars reconceptualize the genesis of ideas. If his own scholarship appears less definitive for its narrow conception of context and overdetermined by his pursuit of contemporary relevance, he should credit himself. His insistence on the importance of context has nourished the revitalizing entanglement of intellectual history and the history of political thought, even as it reveals the limitations he imposes on his own work.

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