

Quentin Skinner: From Historian of Ideas to Political Scientist

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This article is an assessment of Quentin Skinner's contribution to the study of political change and to the contemporary debate in political philosophy. We argue that the significance of Skinner's work to a large extent has been neglected by political scientists, as they have tended to regard him solely as a historian of ideas rather than as a political scientist. However, Skinner's approach not only offers valuable methodological lessons but a historically grounded framework that accounts for the relationship between human agency and the structural language-context, that make actions meaningful. This allows for a conception of historical change that is neither narrowly structuralist nor exclusively focused on the individual agent. In his most recent historical works, Skinner has entered the main debate of contemporary political philosophy, i.e. the debate between liberals and communitarians. Here, his analysis of the classical republican tradition of political thought, attempts a revitalization of the debate beyond the stereotypes of liberalism and Aristotelianism. This work points towards the possibility of developing a radical reconception of modern liberal democracy.

Quentin Skinner's scholarly renown is due mainly to his outstanding works in the history of ideas – *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought* (two vols., 1978) and *Machiavelli* (1981) – as well as his contributions to the theory and method of textual analysis, collected in *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and His Critics* (1988). As a rule, the reception of Skinner's work has stressed his importance to the history of political ideas at the expense of his relevance to social and political science in general. As can be seen from the reviews by Liedman (1981) and Åsard (1987), the Swedish reception constitutes no exception. A great deal of the criticism directed against Skinner has been either unwilling or unable to realize his importance to the community of political scientists. The purpose of this article is to contribute to a re-evaluation of Skinner's work and to show that it is of relevance to a far wider audience than that of the historians of ideas. There are a number of critical analyses of Skinner which we feel are one-sided and blind to the potentials inherent in his work. Hence, rather than produce yet another critical article on Skinner we attempt to read him in a constructive manner and to spell out some of the wider implications of his work. Our article is divided into two parts. The first part deals with

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Skinner's importance for social theory and especially for the study of political change. Here we present a re-reading of Skinner's methodological contributions. In a second section we focus on his contribution to the main contemporary discussion in political philosophy, primarily between liberals and communitarians.

On Historical-Political Change

In the last few decades political theory has taken a "linguistic turn". Although there have been many inroads to this turn, in this article we take it to mean that all intersubjective knowledge and experience is mediated by language and that social phenomena are ultimately invented rather than discovered. Social and political science should then concern itself less with the objects "in themselves" and more with the language that makes and upholds them. This is not to deny that objects exist without language, but it means that for us, as human beings, objects are created in and mediated through language (Laclau & Mouffe 1990, 108; Rorty 1991, 4-7). The "linguistic turn" has led to the realization that an understanding of political and social life cannot be diverted from an understanding of what makes the world meaningful and intelligible to the human agents that inhabit it. Such an insight is reached through an understanding of what constitutes the agents' identity, what makes them act in the way they do, and how they understand their own actions.

It is this realization that has led some social scientists to emphasize *discourses* as a new object of study. The concept of discourse points to a social setting characterized by an element of reflexivity, i.e. the concepts and ideas proposed by the agents involved in the discourse draw upon notions in society but may also deeply affect and feed into day-to-day interaction in society. Discourse analysis and theory thus also point to a way to conceptualize the traditional agency-structure problem. It is within this wider context of the linguistic turn and the concern with structure and agency that our reading of Skinner is located.

Within the Skinnerian, or Cambridge, school of discourse analysis, the analyst studies speech acts as the interaction between the individual statements of the speaker and the structural properties inherent in language. The word "language" refers not just to language in the sense of ethnic language: "When we speak of 'languages', therefore, we mean for the most part sub-languages: idioms, rhetoric, ways of talking about politics, distinguishable language games of which each may have its own vocabulary, rules, preconditions and implications, tone and style" (Pocock 1987, 21).¹ A language in this sense thus helps to structure thought and speech in

thematically delimited domains. However, such linguistic structures do not preclude or prohibit other ways of thinking or speaking about a topic as there are always, in any given society, more than one language potentially available to speakers.²

A crucial purpose of Skinner's work has been to elucidate the relationship between political theory – i.e. the reflection on political life – and political practice. According to Skinner, political life sets the main problems for the political theorist. These problems are formulated within the existing intellectual *language-context*. This context consists of our inherited culture and traditions of political reflection prevalent within a given society. However, it also includes contemporary contributions to the discourse on politics and society. The agent, or writer or speaker, can only act from within the frameworks of the vocabularies – or ideologies – set by such a specific language-context. The language-context is at once constraining and enabling, as it makes it possible to act, think and talk in certain ways. The relation between ideology and practice can be illustrated by the problem confronting an agent within a given context, when s/he both wants his or her actions legitimated, perhaps even appreciated, and ensures that s/he gets what s/he wants. In such a situation the problem facing the agent is not only an “instrumental problem of tailoring his normative language in order to fit his projects. It must in part be the problem of tailoring his projects in order to fit the available normative language” (Skinner 1978, I, xii–xiii). However, it is always possible for speakers to transform the language they use. This view on the relation between human action and the constraints of language is well summarized by Keith Michael Baker (1990, 6):

Human agents find their being within language; they are, to that extent, constrained by it. Yet they are constantly working with it and on it, playing at its margins, exploiting its possibilities, and extending the play of its potential meanings, as they pursue their purposes and projects. Although this play of discursive possibility may not be infinite, in any given linguistic context, it is always open to individual and collective actors.

It is because of this that the analysis of the available vocabulary, within a given language-context, is so important for explaining how political action depends on the development of political thought. The language-context provides the norms for political thinking. On this rests Skinner's claim for the primacy of the study of the history of ideologies, or vocabularies, rather than the study of specific texts or classical writers: “The historian primarily studies . . . ‘languages’ of discourse, and only secondarily the relationship between individual contributions to such languages and the range of discourses as a whole” (Skinner 1988f, 276–277). It follows therefore that the study of texts separated from the language surrounding them is meaningless. Texts acquire their importance from the intellectual context.³

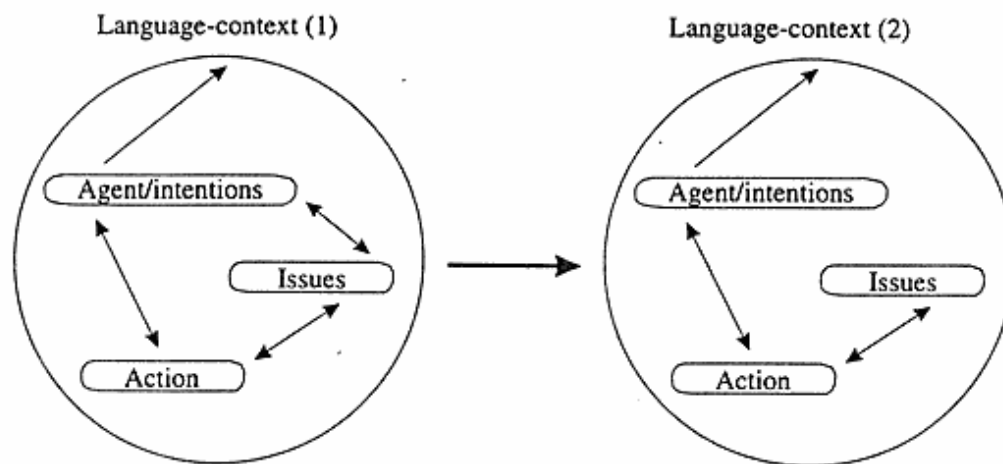


Fig. 1. The Relation Agent-Language-Context in Skinner's Work.

Skinner's ideas on historical-political change and the relation between agent and structure is illustrated in Figure 1. Agents only influence the linguistic frameworks of later historical epochs indirectly, i.e. by changing their contemporary language-context. Because of this, Skinner argues, "there simply are no perennial problems in philosophy: There are only individual answers to individual questions, and as many different questions as there are questioners." Furthermore, "[a]ny statement . . . is inescapably the embodiment of a particular intention, on a particular occasion, addressed to the solution of a particular problem, and thus specific to its situation in a way that it can only be naive to try to transcend" (1988a, 65).⁴

Hence, there are no pure ideological traditions that can be discerned through the study of a chain of *particular agents*, such as, for instance, the notion of political freedom in the works of Hobbes – Locke – Mill – Friedman, but only through the study of a series of consecutive *language-contexts*. The language-context develops and changes and it can be traced in history. The context is characterized by a certain continuity in the presence of concepts and modes of argumentation. Yet even though these can be traced, the meaning of the words will vary throughout the ages, and will not necessarily refer to the same things, problems and questions as they refer to today. Thus, there are no histories of concepts as such, but only histories of the uses of concepts in various discourses (1988f, 283).

In our reading of Skinner's theory of social change there are apparent similarities to Michel Foucault's writings (1972, 1973 and 1980). Both Skinner and Foucault are concerned with language as a structural determinant of human action and with the analysis of discourses. However, unlike Foucault's work, Skinner's theory and method open up a possibility to go beyond the mere study of "the regularity of discursive practice"

(Foucault 1972, 145) and identify potential instigators of change in practices. Thereby, the analyst can hypothesize and examine how changes have been brought about, not just point to obvious breaks in discursive practices. Whereas Foucault is still caught in a structuralist tradition, to Skinner the intentions of the agent, i.e. the writer, in the production of texts acquire great significance. The interpretation of texts therefore to a large extent concerns the agents relation to his or her language-context.

If historical-political changes and developments can be traced only through an understanding of the language-context, the main concern of the analyst is to understand a text's *meaning*. By grasping a text's meaning we can understand how it relates to the language-context and how it influences processes of social change.

As has been noted, to Skinner language is not only normative and constraining but also a resource all agents make use of in talking and writing. Specifically, the text has its own illocutionary force but the writer also has an intention to perform an illocutionary act, in the act of writing. The illocutionary force of a text is then a resource of language and the force of a statement is determined by its meaning in the language-context. The illocutionary force of a speech-act involves a capacity that the agent may intentionally use in his or her communication with her or his surroundings. If a researcher understands a text's meaning s/he can also understand the relation between theory and practice, since the writer within the language-context, can accept or reject, question, speak ironically of, or challenge predominant suppositions and conventions and to some extent reshape or transform the meaning of language (Skinner 1988b, 72–73, 1988d, 111–118, 1988f, 259–273). Ideally, the analyst should proceed to engage in two types of inquiry, namely (i) contextual studies of normative vocabularies and political ideologies so as to outline and ascertain the structural properties of a language-context, (ii) studies of agents and institutions where specific political thoughts and actions are analysed.

It is thus important to distinguish a text's meaning and an author's meaning or intentions in writing a text. In order to fully understand a text it is important to grasp both these aspects of meaning. Just as every text contains a writer's intention, it also contains a meaning beyond the writer's intention, which is given by the language-context.⁵ The impact of historical texts on our culture can be analysed without care being taken to understand the writer's intentions. However, if we also want to understand social change, we will have to examine the role of the agents in their contemporary context and analyse what they were doing in writing.⁶ In a reply to his critics, Skinner puts it like this:

This means that, if we wish to do justice to those moments when a convention is challenged or a commonplace effectively subverted, we cannot simply dispense with the category of the author. A point that takes on added significance when we reflect that, to the extent that

our social world is constituted by our concepts, any successful alteration in the use of a concept will at the same time constitute a change in our social world. The pen . . . can be a mighty sword (1988f, 276).

The agent moves within the language-context, which at the same time constitutes a resource and a constraint. Therefore the discourse rather than the author must constitute the focus of the analysis.

According to Skinner, the intentions of the agent are not hidden in the mind that authored the work. Rather they belong to the public sphere and are intersubjective. Serious ideas and statements are arguments uttered in communicative action and hence possible to read in a specific context. “[A]ny act of communication always constitutes the taking up of some determinate position in relation to some pre-existing conversation or argument. It follows that, if we wish to understand what has been said, we shall have to be able to identify what exact position has been taken up” (1988f, 275).⁷

Skinner’s theory and methodology make it possible for us to see how we are captured in our own specific language-context and to understand that our concepts do not constitute self-evident interpretations of reality. Other, rival conceptions have succumbed throughout history. Historical research thereby becomes relevant to political scientists, because we:

. . . can hope to attain a certain kind of objectivity in appraising rival systems of thought. We can hope to attain a greater degree of understanding, and thereby larger tolerance, for various elements of cultural diversity. . . . [W]e can hope to acquire a perspective from which to view our own form of life in a more self-critical way, enlarging our present horizons instead of fortifying local prejudices. . . . We may also find . . . that some of what we currently believe about, say, our moral or political arrangements is actually false. . . . Reflecting on such alternative possibilities, we provide ourselves with one of the best means of preventing our current moral and political theories from degenerating into uncritically accepted ideologies (1988f, 286–287).

This quotation emphasizes Skinner’s importance as a critical theorist. It is with this importance, as well as with Skinner’s contributions to the main discussion within contemporary political philosophy, that the second part of this article will be concerned.

Contributions To Normative Political Philosophy

In the last decade the debate raging between liberals and communitarians has been central to political philosophical discourse. To a large extent this has been a North American debate in terms of the key participants, the intellectual context and the vocabularies.⁸ However, Skinner has developed a genuine and original contribution to the debate, by exploring a republican conception of liberty. It is of interest to note that when providing his contribution, Skinner underpins his own position by means of analyses

drawn from the realm of the history of ideas. Before reviewing Skinner's polemic with liberals and communitarians, we will first attempt to reconstruct his argument that the history of ideas can be of use in this project. This is a line of argument that Skinner develops in his essay "The idea of negative liberty: philosophical and historical perspectives" (1984, 198–204).

According to Skinner, the predominant consensus and the established view on the proper study of political concepts claim that the purpose of the study is to achieve an understanding of how *we* use a certain concept. Analysts should start out from the use of the concept in "ordinary language", thereby gaining an understanding of what we normally mean by the use of a term, and then analyze the various usages of certain words in order to establish, in Feinberg's words, "what we had better mean if we are to communicate effectively, avoid paradox and achieve general coherence" (quoted in Skinner 1984, 199). The question, then, is what *we* can say or mean without being incoherent. This implies that any attempt to provide a radically different reading of an important political concept, for instance "liberty", by definition will meet with failure, as it will be incomprehensible from the vantage point of our framework or use. As Skinner notes with reference to the concept of liberty, "it is obvious that *we* cannot hope to connect the idea of liberty with the obligation to perform virtuous acts of public service except at the unthinkable cost of giving up, or making nonsense of, our intuitions about individual rights" (1984, 199).

Those who persist in trying to reformulate our understanding of the political universe will be met with either of two types of response. Either it will be claimed that he or she is in reality talking about something completely different than the contested concept, or else she or he will simply be dismissed as being confused. In order to avoid such a reception Skinner turns to history. If it can be demonstrated that a concept not only *can* be used coherently in an unfamiliar way but that it in fact *has* been so used, this will be a more convincing claim in support of the utility of an alternative meaning and use. Skinner's purpose, then, is to show that a radically different way of perceiving and organizing our political and social world has actually *worked* in the past. Naturally, Skinner is aware that our world is not a 16th-century Italian city-state or a 17th-century commonwealth. Nevertheless, his belief is that historical writers may still have something significant to tell us, even if these lessons can be brought to use only at the level of theory.⁹

What Skinner offers is a reconstruction of traditions, or in Pocock's terms (1985, 1987) languages or idioms, that have succumbed in historical battles of ideas. He draws attention to what has been forgotten and hidden in the shadows of history in order to provide us with a point of reference or alternative position. Skinner's philosophy of history is in this sense analogous to Foucault's and Walter Benjamin's. It is an attempt to write

the history of the vanquished, of that which is always in danger of being swallowed up by the triumphal procession of the mainstream: "Each of those that up to this day have been victorious partake in the triumphal procession that the present rulers stage before those that lie in the dust. As has always been the custom, the spoils are carried in the procession. They call it the cultural heritage" (Benjamin 1969, 180). Skinner wants the historian of ideas to provide us with the means with which to look beyond the confines of our contemporary understanding of the principles that organize our social and political life, forcing us to reconsider, recast, or abandon some of our accepted beliefs (1984, 202).

Skinner's own specific contribution to this provision of wider vistas deals with the concept of "liberty" and it is situated within the contemporary debate within political philosophy, between on the one hand the liberals and on the other the communitarians. A crucial issue in this strife is the question of the proper relationship between the private individual and public authority, and it is precisely this specific question that Skinner addresses.

The origins of the liberal side of this debate can be found in the works of Hobbes and Locke, and its most distinguished present-day advocate is John Rawls. The liberal argument is well known and need only be recapitulated in its essentials: individuals are held to be atomistic and autonomous and society and state are, although necessary, a constant threat to the freedom of the individual. Freedom or liberty, according to the liberals is a *negative* concept: it defines the possibility of choosing one's own personal ends in life with the minimum of restrictions. The basic way to ensure this freedom is for us to establish a bundle of rights, that will function as "trumps", having a primacy over any calls of social duty. The liberal view of the relationship between the private individual on the one hand and the public good and the State on the other has been nicely captured by Isaiah Berlin, in his claim that each person's essential aim is to establish "a maximum degree of non-interference compatible with the minimum demands of social life" (quoted in Skinner 1986, 248). Consequently, the liberal state should keep its demands upon the citizens to an agreed minimum.

The main alternative to the negative conception of liberty may be termed Aristotelian and ultimately originates on the one hand in Greek moral thought and on the other in scholastic political philosophy. It advances two basic claims: first, that individuals are moral beings with certain specific and universal human "purposes" in life and, secondly, that individuals are by nature political and social and hence that our purposes as humans must essentially be social in character. It follows from these claims that we can only be free "if we actually engage in just those activities which are most conducive to *eudaemonia* or 'human flourishing', and may therefore be said

to embody our deepest human purposes” (Skinner 1986, 233). Individuals are only free, then, to the extent that they *realize* their most distinctive human purposes and hence this conception of freedom is labelled *positive*. As these purposes are political and social they can only be realized in a society and a polity. In the last instance they are also the same for all humans, and the proper relationship between state and individual is best expressed by the word “duty”. Individuals are free to the extent that they are virtuous and perform the duties inherent in their existence as social beings.

Despite their differences, the proponents of the positive and the negative conception of liberty share some presuppositions. Both think that the alternative to the liberal notion of liberty requires an objective notion of “human flourishing” and they both define their opposition in terms of ancient versus modern values.

A notion of liberty that is not based on individual rights and minimum demands of social life, but on active participation in social and political life, requires that we can establish that essential individual goals do not flow from each particular individual as a result of autonomous choices, but from the shared quality of being human. Thus, says Skinner, even Charles Taylor¹⁰ and Isaiah Berlin are able to agree on the fact “that it is only if we can give a content to the idea of objective human flourishing that we can hope to make sense of any theory purporting to connect the concept of individual liberty with virtuous acts of public service” (1984, 197).

The liberal negative conception of liberty was already defined by Hobbes as the specifically *modern* conception of liberty. In *Leviathan* Hobbes wrote that “[t]he liberty whereof there is so frequent and honourable mention in the histories and philosophy of the ancient Greeks and Romans . . . is not the liberty of particular men, but the liberty of the Commonwealth” (quoted in Skinner 1992, 220). This view is shared not only by present-day advocates of a negative conception of liberty but also by most contemporary critics of this liberal conception. Alasdair MacIntyre, for instance, claims that today “the crucial moral opposition is between liberal individualism in some version or other and the Aristotelian tradition in some version or other. The differences between the two run very deep. They extend beyond ethics and morality to the understanding of human action, so that rival conceptions of the social sciences, of their limits and their possibilities, are intimately bound up with the antagonistic confrontation of these two alternative ways of viewing the human world” (1985, 259). In doing so liberals and communitarians together draw up their line of conflict as one between the ancients and the moderns. It is for those of us who are not ready to go back on the accomplishments of modernity but who are still sceptical of liberalism that Skinner offers a theoretical alternative. He offers a way out of the false dichotomy between modern and ancient by

providing a concept of liberty that while negative is connected to a vision of politics that is based on common meanings and purposes. Thus he allows a possibility for us to be modern without being liberals or, at least, without being libertarians. The way he does this is by “focusing on a strongly contrasting way of thinking about the relations between liberty and the common good, one that not only predates modern liberalism but has largely been obliterated by its triumph” (1992, 215–216). This is the tradition of classical republican thought.

The tradition of classical republican thought goes back to Roman moral philosophy and writers like Livy, Sallust and Cicero. Its early modern proponents were above all Machiavelli and 17th-century English republicans such as James Harrington and John Milton.¹¹ Republican writers claim that, in Hobbes’s terms, the liberty of the Commonwealth and the liberty of particular men cannot be separated. A free State, according to republicans, is a State where the will of the citizens determines the ends pursued by the community as a whole. Freedom can be circumscribed either by external powers or by the scheming of the rich and powerful, whose desire to rule and dominate threatens the will of the community. This risk is constant and in either case the threat posed to the citizens is to be treated as mere means to their masters’ ends. Thereby the citizens will lose their freedom to pursue their own ends. From the enslavement of the community follows the enslavement of the individual. The freedom of the State is, hence, a prerequisite for the freedom of the individual.

Because of the constant threat to liberty, the question of how free life can be secured was of great importance to Machiavelli and other classical republicans. The answer was that each citizen should devote himself (to these writers the citizen was always male) to the common purpose of securing liberty. This should be done in two distinct ways. First, the citizen should defend his community against external threats, and secondly, he should be vigilant in order to prevent the government of the community from falling into the hands of ambitious individuals or self-interested groups. What was demanded of the individual was not only that he should let the common end of securing the liberty of the community come before his private interests, but also that he should be *actively engaged* towards securing a common political end.

The republican notion of liberty differs in this way from the positive conception outlined above. Classical republicans never argued that the end of human life was the realization of universal human purposes in public life. On the contrary, they claimed that most people want only to be left to lead a life as free individuals, to pursue their own individual ends without, as Machiavelli stated in the *Discourses*, “anxieties about the free enjoyment of their property, without any doubts about the honour of their womenfolk and children, without any fears for themselves” (quoted in

Skinner 1986, 205). The gist of the republican argument is that this is not possible unless we put our common end before our private ends, “we can only hope to enjoy a maximum of individual liberty if we do not place that value above the pursuit of the common good. . . . The sole route to individual liberty is by way of public service” (Skinner 1992, 221). Although the republican theory of liberty is a theory of *negative* liberty in the sense that it still defines the possibility for each individual to pursue her or his own ends in life with the least possible restriction, it is very different from the liberal notion of negative liberty. For the liberals, the achievement of maximum personal liberty depends on the avoidance of participation in public life. For the classical republicans, on the other hand, active participation in the pursuit of the common good is indeed necessary for the achievement of personal liberty.

Concluding Remarks

This article has attempted to point to Quentin Skinner’s relevance to the practitioners of political science. We are of course aware that many scholars are yet to be persuaded of this importance. However, this article shows, albeit only schematically, that we can learn from Skinner both as a methodologist and as a critical theorist. Skinner’s work realizes the possibility to join together a normative, a theoretical and an empirical approach. He also indicates that theoretical awareness does not exclude empirical thoroughness. Methodologically, Skinner’s contribution can be summarized as an attempt to reformulate the study of the genesis and change of political practices and institutions.

An evaluation of Skinner’s use as a critical theorist requires us to broaden our horizons beyond the confines of this article. Our age is characterized by the roll-back of viable alternatives to liberalism. To the extent that liberalism, through the naturalization of meaning, threatens to become totalizing, Skinner’s historicism provides a valuable antidote. First, he shows us how to study the victory of liberalism as the result of active intervention by human agents rather than as a result of the march of history. Secondly, he reminds us of what was lost in liberalism’s victory. Lastly, he shows that the attempt by proponents of liberalism to acquire a monopoly on the modern conceptualization of the relationship between the private individual and the state can be counteracted. In this way Skinner offers us the tools for a radical self-reflection. Surely this must be of relevance – to all of us.

NOTES

1. In this article we treat Pocock and Skinner as the exponents of the same approach.

- Our belief that Pocock and Skinner are involved in the same project has been verified by the authors themselves, see for instance Skinner (1987) and Pocock (1985 and 1987).
2. Skinner and Pocock are particularly concerned with two political languages of early modernity, the language of virtue and the language of jurisprudence (Pocock 1987, 37–50 and Skinner 1978).
 3. The definition of the context studied thereby acquires great importance to Skinner-style analysts. This of course raises many questions concerning the limits of the context, the role of the analyst in the construction of the context and the possibility of several parallel contexts in a given society.
 4. This, however, should not be taken to imply that Skinner denies that “western traditions of philosophy have contained long continuities, and that these have been reflected in the stable employment of a number of key concepts and modes of argument” (1987, 283).
 5. Despite great differences, it is interesting to note a certain similarity between Skinner and the Russian linguist Mikhail Bakhtin (1991) on this particular point. To Bakhtin the writer, i.e. the agent, is a captive of his contemporary language-context. Future language-contexts will liberate her and will give the work a wider and deeper meaning earlier hidden in language. According to Bakhtin the language of a *specific work* is not limited. Instead, the language-context constrains the receiver and the interpreter. The work in itself survives as it is not made up of dead elements, but of forms already full of meaning. Each epoch contains several possibilities of meaning that will remain unappreciated, undiscovered, unknown and unused. However, unlike Skinner Bakhtin means that meaning can exist in a potential and hidden form and be revealed when a future language-context is conducive. Bakhtin believes that an understanding of the cultural context is necessary but not sufficient. Such an understanding can only copy a once existing reality but never create anything new. He claims that “it is of an immense importance to the interpretation that the interpreter is an outsider – in time, space and culture – in relation to what he searches to creatively understand.” To the alien culture we pose new questions that it has not posed to itself, in it we search for answers to our questions and it answers us by revealing new aspects of itself, new depths of meaning.
 6. The basic problem of a Skinner-style analysis of historical-political change and development is the emphasis on the written word. In a historical perspective, such an analysis will be an elite-analysis where the dominant form of communication, i.e. oral communication, will be left out. And what is the illocutionary force of silence? (Minogue 1988, 182–183). Another problem arises in *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought* where Skinner deals with the growth of the European conception of the state and modern political thought. Political thought here floats from the Italian city-states of the Renaissance north to central Europe and the British Isles so that, almost in Hegelian fashion, in every moment political thought also has a locality. But can the development of the European identity really be reduced from a multitude of experiences to the homogeneous development of *one* language-context? What impact, for instance, have the Islandic sagas had on Nordic political thought? (See, for instance, MacIntyre’s discussion, 121–130).
 7. In the analysis of a given language-context, the analyst must be conscious of the constraints put on the interpretation by his or her own language-context. Skinner also seems to presuppose a lucid communication within any context. The content of a text is always understood even if it is not accepted. Using a Habermasian terminology, we can say that Skinner presupposes that every language-context is characterized by unconstrained communication.
 8. The starting-point of this debate was Rawls’s *A Theory of Justice* (1971). The other main contributions are Nozick’s, *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (1974), Sandel’s *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (1982), MacIntyre’s *After Virtue* (1981), Dworkin’s *Taking Rights Seriously* (1977), Kymlicka’s *Liberalism, Community and Culture* (1989), Walzer’s *Spheres of Justice* (1983) and Taylor’s *Sources of the Self* (1989).
 9. It could well seem that this is a complete *volte-face* by Skinner. As we noted in the introduction, it is common to see Skinner as someone who argues that the study of

the history of ideas carries primarily an intrinsic value, whereas he now seems to argue that history has a practical political relevance of great potential. Åsard, for instance, concludes that “we cannot simply, like Skinner, dismiss these writers [in history] out of hand just because they wrote in a time very different from our own. Neither can we, like Skinner, *a priori* assume that their ideas are entirely without contemporary relevance. This has to be investigated and critically examined before we doom their work to eternal dissolution” (1987, 111). And Femia claims that “Skinner . . . assumes that the ideas of our ancestors are, for all intents and purposes, extinct. Each generation, he seems to be saying, must begin over again all the work done since the childhood of humanity. But political ideas cannot be created *ex nihilo*: we are crucially dependent on our philosophical tradition. Innovation in political thought rarely, if ever, consists of unprecedented originality. . . . If Skinner believes that we can ‘do our thinking for ourselves’, then he entertains an implausible view of political conceptualization” (1988, 174). However, Skinner himself suggests to us in a footnote (1984, 193 note 2) that the idea of a break in his thinking might not be correct and that the motivation for his most recent work was in fact present in his very first works. In his article “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas”, Skinner ends by discussing the value of the study of history of ideas, claiming that “[a] knowledge of the history of . . . ideas can . . . serve to show the extent to which those features of our own arrangements, which we may be disposed to accept as traditional or even ‘timeless’ truths may in fact be the merest contingencies of our peculiar history and social structure. (. . .) Furthermore, it is commonplace . . . that our own society places unrecognized constraints upon our imaginations. It deserves, then, to become a commonplace that the historical study of the ideas of other societies should be undertaken as the indispensable and the irreplaceable means of placing limits on those constraints” (1969, 67).

10. Despite their differences, there are many similarities between Taylor’s and Skinner’s ideas of the critical potential of history. Thus, Taylor argues that recourse to the past is necessary for the refutation of the “modern naturalist views which suppress their own underlying visions of the good. Tracing their development from earlier religious or metaphysical views through the partial repudiation of these is not only important in order to define more clearly what kind of transformation gave rise to them. We also have to recur to these earlier views in order to get some model of the kind of sense of the good which was still openly avowed then, but is suppressed from awareness now” (1989, 104).
11. The development of the republican tradition has been traced by J. G. A. Pocock in *The Machiavellian Moment* (1975).

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