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Quentin Skinner in Context

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Abstract: As Quentin Skinner argues, political thinkers are best read in historical context. But in what context do Skinner's own interpretations of the history of political thought belong? This essay places his denunciation of grand narratives in the context of the decline of Whig interpretations of history and presents his Republicanism as a substitute source of legitimacy in the wake of the collapse of the British Empire and of the loss of social influence of Christianity. This essay also argues that Skinner's inquiries cannot be understood solely in the light of their historical context. His historical work is linked with his republican philosophy. The relation between his concept of liberty and his contextualism shows the dependence of his contextualist methodology on specific philosophical commitments.

Contextualism in Context

From Hegel onward, it has been something of a commonplace to point out that political thinkers, in order to be interpreted properly, need to be placed in their original historical context. The German historicist tradition explored this approach at the end of the nineteenth and in the first third of the twentieth century, offering many examples of its fruitfulness (and important limitations). A Cambridge historian of political thought like John Neville Figgis, writing in the early nineteen hundreds, seems to take the importance of context for granted. Why is it, then, that in the 1960s and 1970s, Quentin Skinner's aim to put political ideas "in context" seemed to be an exhilarating, provocative program for Cambridge history?

The answer is tied up with nineteenth-century Whig interpretations of history, describing contemporary England as the culmination of a happy history of freedom, thanks to the Reformation and the Glorious Revolution of 1688. The shortcomings of such Whig interpretations were denounced by Herbert Butterfield in a book published in 1931. As a historian, Butterfield condemned Whig interpretations for their bad scholarship. As a Christian who kept the Fall in mind, Butterfield had no sympathy for any ideology of progress. It was a mistake to privilege certain parts of history simply because they appear to point to the future or, more generally, to study the past with reference to the present: "[T]he truth of history is no simple matter, all packed and parcelled ready for handling on the market

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place."[1] Seldom is one academic book enough to kill a national mythology, still less the mythology of a nation which, in the 1930s, still dominated the world. Even on Butterfield's own home turf, an "essential Whiggishness" remained in the teaching of one of his successors in the Regius Chair of History in Cambridge, Geoffrey Elton.[2]

Peter Laslett's critical edition of Locke's *Two Treatises of Government* (1960) offered another Cambridge critique of the Whig interpretation. Prior to Laslett's edition, the *Two Treatises* had been viewed as a justification of the Glorious Revolution, but Laslett was able to show that the essay had been written long before it was printed, about 1681, when the Whigs with whom Locke was associated were planning something significantly more violent than the transfer of power that took place a few years later. The *Two Treatises* could not be a retrospective justification for the revolution.[3] Locke was not, after all, the founding father of modern liberty *simpliciter*, but a more complex figure who had to be put and to remain "in context"—an obvious point that was, nevertheless, supposed to carry some weight at the time. Quentin Skinner remembers how "talking to Laslett about this scholarly discovery, I was very struck by how he himself saw its wider significance. He felt that he had shown Locke's treatise to be essentially a party-political pamphlet. He took it that, by showing how it had arisen out of a specific political crisis, he had demoted it from the canon by casting doubt on its ahistorical character and significance."[4]

Laslett, like Butterfield, taught in the History Faculty in Cambridge. There, young dons, John Dunn and Quentin Skinner, were quick to take up Laslett's approach, writing contextual histories to show the limits of Whig interpretations of history. For Skinner, "the 'Whig' ideology indeed obviously amounted neither to genuine history nor to systematic political theory. It was more like propaganda in historic dress."[5] As a historian of political thought, Skinner quickly made a name for himself, arguing in an elegant prose that political thinkers had to be understood in their context (something that should have been taken for granted), and that no grand narrative was

[1]Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History* (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1931), 132.

[2]Patrick Collinson, "Elton," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 18, 351.

[3]John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, ed Peter Laslett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960), Introduction and Notes.

[4]"An Interview with Quentin Skinner," *Finnish Yearbook of Political Thought* (2002), 6: 42. Cf. James Tully, ed., *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and His Critics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), 327, n. 12; J. Pocock, "Quentin Skinner. The History of Politics and the Politics of History," *Common Knowledge* 10, no. 3 (2004): 534–39.

[5]Q. Skinner, "History and Ideology in the English Revolution," *The Historical Journal* 8, no. 2 (1965): 178.

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available (something that sounded exciting, perhaps even "post-modern," in the Cambridge of that time.)[6]

When giving an account of the roots of his own contextualism, Skinner emphasizes the influence of Collingwood's *Autobiography*, as well as the work of Peter Laslett, Duncan Forbes, and John Pocock. He is also keen to stress his frustration with what he saw as the crude intellectual history that had become fashionable in the 1950s, an intellectual history that owed little to German historicism or to Figgis. This might explain why he found contextualism attractive, but not why he found it so attractive. For him and for those around him, there was another motivation, besides good scholarship. For young dons, contextualism offered an exhilarating way to articulate the distance they felt from the England of their own parents and grandparents.

As I have said, Butterfield had not quite killed off Whig interpretations. In 1931, England was still too formidable a nation to abandon easily its national mythology. However, in the early 1960s, after a long relative economic decline, two costly World Wars, the loss of an empire, and the decline of its established church, England's national mythology had lost much of its capacity to seduce.

Empire-building satisfied the desires of English oligarchs for acquisition, offering them new resources with which to meet the demands of those who stay at home. The popular success of the empire, symbolized in Victoria's title as Empress of India, had added a powerful source of legitimacy to the moral grounding traditionally provided to the state by the established church. In the 1960s, however, the empire shrank away. Christianity had already lost some of its political and intellectual importance in the nineteenth century. In 1924, Keynes suggested that the decade of the 1860s would probably "be regarded by historians of opinion as the critical moment at which Christian dogma fell away from the serious philosophical world of England, or at any rate of Cambridge."[7] The late 1950s and early 1960s turned out to mark a different watershed. Christian dogma fell away not from "the serious philosophical world" or from the state narrowly understood, but from society at large.[8] As the social authority of the established church was withering away and as the discourse on the secularization of society was becoming fashionable in the universities, alternative sources of legitimacy had to be found. For disillusioned academics of the previous

[6]J.-F. Lyotard, *La Condition Post-Moderne* (Paris: Minuit, 1979).

[7]J. M. Keynes, *Essays in Biography*, vol. 10 of *The Collected Writings of John Maynard Keynes*, ed. E. Johnson (London: Macmillan, 1971–1982), 168.

[8]In these years, the trial of D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley* symbolized powerfully Christianity's loss of social influence. C.H. Rolph, ed., *The Trial of Lady Chatterley: Regina c. Penguin Books Ltd. The Transcript of the Trial* (London, Privately printed, 1961). See, for instance, Bryan Wilson, *Religion in Secular Society: A Sociological Comment* (London: Penguin, 1966) and Callum Brown, *Death of Christian Britain* (London: Routledge, 2000).

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generation, the Soviet Union offered an alternative empire and the Communist Party an alternative church.[9] But in 1956, Khrushchev's critique of Stalin and the occupation of Budapest discredited these substitutes for empire and church.

The decline of the British Empire and the decline of its Communist rival were crises for the grand political mythologies still dominant in the 1950s, for the Whig interpretations of history that had underpinned modern British self-understanding, and for the Marxist-Leninist philosophy of history that had attracted exasperated left-leaning intellectuals. Both interpretations of history had promised history's end in freedom and happiness. The collapse of the British Empire and the decline of the Anglican Church were a blow for the *roman national*, while the collapse of the Stalinist lie was a blow for international eschatology.

Skinner and his generation reacted in a straightforward manner to the collapse of imperial and communist political mythologies: they kept the historicism and dropped the grand narratives. Born in 1940, Skinner is a member of the generation keen to refashion the England famously described by Orwell as "a family, a rather stuffy Victorian family, with not many black sheep in it, but with all its cupboards bursting with skeletons.... It is a family in which the young are generally thwarted and most of the power is in the hands of irresponsible uncles and bedridden aunts."[10] Born of Scottish parents but educated in England, Skinner was not insensitive to the fate of the British Empire, upon which his family was dependent for its living. Sixteen at an important moment in the history of its decline, the Suez Crisis, he had "opposed the policy of the Eden government," and more generally, "had quarreled with his father on British colonial policy."[11] As for Christianity, he became such a keen reader of Russell's *History of Western Philosophy* that "for a long time, I knew many passages from it almost by heart": "I shall never forget the electrifying effect it had upon me."[12] Skinner seems to have remained faithful to Russell's brand of atheism. "Speaking as a modern unbeliever," he writes without apparent regret, "a lot of what theists claim about their faith strikes me as unintelligible." Many eminent Cambridge historians of the previous generation (Owen Chadwick, Ullmann, Knowles, Butterfield, Kitson Clark among others) were practicing Christians. With a certainty characteristic of the zealous atheist although

[9]Moses Finley, for example, emigrated to Britain after coming under attack for his left-wing opinions in the committee run by Joseph McCarthy. Finley was appointed lecturer in classics at Cambridge in 1955.

[10]George Orwell, *England Your England and Other Essays* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1953), 210.

[11]Kari Palonen, *Quentin Skinner: History, Politics, Rhetoric* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003), 11.

[12]"An Interview with Quentin Skinner," *Finnish Yearbook of Political Thought*: 36.

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unusual in a historian of early modern Europe, Skinner expands that "to say all this is not merely to say that theism must certainly be false; it is also to say that it must be grossly irrational to believe otherwise. To say, however, that a belief is grossly irrational is to say that anyone who continues to affirm it must be suffering from some serious form of psychological blockage or self-deceit."[13]

If neither the church nor the empire would do, to what could a young man turning twenty in 1960 devote himself? Stalinism was no longer an option, nor (for anyone historically minded) was a Marxism reduced to a self-righteous theory of historical interpretation. The Labour Party was not attractive either: it had become complacently satisfied with the welfare-state it had long sought, and the class struggle was being transformed by the absorption of most of the working class into a vast middle class.[14] Most young people aspired to something more, wanting to overcome the narrowness of bourgeois private life, to create a new type of social bond. Hence, the call of the new left, which flourished around that time: "Out of Apathy!"[15] Neither the Whig exaltation of the private nor the Soviet critique of the private seemed to offer an honorable way forward: Skinner's generation had to find another solution. Focusing on context ensured a more accurate scholarship, while attempting to stay clear of any political mythology, old or new. But a contextual focus could also seem to make the history of political thought irrelevant to the present.

John Dunn's account of Locke's political thought emphasized its very limited relevance to the contemporary world. Locke's ideas were insufficiently democratic (conceding only a very limited role to actual popular consent) and much too religious for a secular modern age.[16] Dunn's indictment of Locke corresponded to this vision of a new world. The England of the 1960s, it was hoped, would be a much more democratic society, and one in which the social influence of the church had become limited. Dunn's book on Locke suggests that there is little to be learned from him. Similarly, Skinner's paradoxically entitled *Foundations of Modern Political Thought* (1978) suggests that there are no foundations to modern political thought. Implying that one's subject is ultimately of no relevance to one's own time and politics is somewhat dispiriting. Trying to resist that conclusion, John Dunn wrote an article dedicated to "What Is Living and What Is Dead in

[13]Q. Skinner, "Who Are "We"? Ambiguities of the Modern Self," *Inquiry* 34, no. 2 (1991): 148. Cf. Maurice Cowling, *Religion and Public Doctrine in Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 3: 619–21.

[14]Ralf Dahrendorf, *Class and Class Conflict in Industrial Society* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1959).

[15]E. P. Thompson, ed., *Out of Apathy* (London: Stevens and Sons, 1960).

[16]John Dunn, *The Political Thought of John Locke: An Historical Account of the Argument of the Two Treatises of Government* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), reviewed by Q. Skinner in *American Historical Review* 75 (1969): 489–90.

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the Political Theory of John Locke?"[17] Skinner also seems to have felt the need to make his work and the thinkers he was studying relevant to his students and contemporaries.

In his *Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, Skinner recognizes his intellectual debts to John Dunn and to Alasdair MacIntyre.[18] Dunn's and MacIntyre's intellectual journeys contrast with Skinner's. With characteristic skepticism, Dunn continued to criticize contemporary political mythologies, revealing the weakness of existing defenses of liberal democracy and demolishing them with perhaps an ounce of despair.[19] In a characteristic combat against his own skeptical tendencies, MacIntyre has turned from his earlier Trotskyism to become a Roman Catholic and a Thomist, giving a new impulse to virtue ethics. Under the influence of Pocock's *Machiavellian Moment* (1975), and in reaction to Margaret Thatcher's revival of the Whig idea of negative freedom, Skinner became a republican.

Where does Skinner leave an England that has lost its empire but not yet found a new role? The British state has long owed its moral authority to its association with the Anglican Church. And democracy developed in the British Isles in significant part thanks to the empire it had found for the advantage of its oligarchs and the vanity of its people. What could serve as contemporary surrogates for church and empire in the British context? Skinner's work has the great merit of raising the question, but it goes further. It does not acknowledge passively the end of the empire and Anglican Church's loss of influence: it welcomes both and suggests that one should go much further in the destruction of what has made the United Kingdom great. Skinner wants to invite us to be more politically responsible, to become more committed citizens, with a more powerful sense of civic duty. In a world where he can see neither an empire nor a place for the church, he is calling for civic virtue. He is hoping that his work will challenge our political imagination and reinvigorate his blasé students.

If his students do focus on the context as much as he advises, they will lose the grand perspective that Skinner owes to his own teachers.[20] Alternatively, if his students accept his own grand narrative, what will this involve?

[17]J. Dunn, "What Is Living and What Is Dead in the Political Theory of John Locke?" in J. Dunn, *Interpreting Political Responsibility: Essays 1981–1989* (Cambridge: Polity Press), 9–25. The title alludes to B. Croce's *What Is Living and What Is Dead in the Philosophy of Hegel* (1907).

[18]Q. Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 1: x (n. 2).

[19]J. Dunn, *Western Political Theory in the Face of the Future* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

[20]Judith Shklar, "*The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, by Quentin Skinner," *Political Theory* 7, no. 4 (1979): 549–52. John Dunn, "The Cage of Politics," *The Listener* 15 (March 1979): 389–90. Kenneth Minogue, "Method in Intellectual History: Quentin Skinner's *Foundations*" [1981] in Tully, ed., *Meaning and Context*, 176–93.

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Republicanism in Context

Still suffering from the effects of totalitarianism, modern Europeans often associate the nation-state with Nazism and, in reaction, often defend a radical individualism. Many contemporary political theorists offer sophisticated versions of personal autonomy, but rather unsophisticated theories of citizenship. Most would struggle to explain, for instance, the patriotism displayed by citizen of the United States and of Great Britain in the name of independence and freedom. These great democracies showed that their citizens could act as citizens worthy of the name and that liberalism cannot be reduced to the cult of the private, to the indefinite accumulation of wealth at the expense of the public sphere. Accordingly, some political thinkers have contended that the proper response to totalitarianism is republican participation. Far from associating Nazism with the nation-state, Hannah Arendt explains in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* that Nazism was a consequence not of the triumph of political participation but of its decay. Far from offering individualism as an answer to totalitarianism, she associates it with the very destruction of social and political bonds that led to totalitarianism. Today, influential scholars like Pocock (indebted to Arendt), Skinner, and Gordon Wood condemn the shallowness of the individualism and cosmopolitanism dominating political thought in many universities.[21] They criticize a narrow liberalism with too strong a focus on the private sphere.

For a country like the United Kingdom, tired of its former desire to transcend geographic and spiritual boundaries, a renewed civic humanism could be seen as an attractive solution. Republicanism seemed to fit the demands of a secular and democratic society. It offered equality as an alternative to the hierarchies of the empire, and the earthly city as an alternative to the city of God. Since the hierarchical structures of imperial Britain were being dismantled, and since religion would no longer do, citizenship had to take over. With the end of the Empire came equality and democracy. But what kind of democracy? An oligarchic liberal democracy built around private property and the remains of the establishment? Or a more radically participatory democracy? For republicans, an opportunity awaited the young and the bold: building a much more demanding political regime, a democracy founded on more than a minimal agreement.

Skinner's history of political thought offers an alternative to Whig interpretations of history, substituting a republican focus on democracy for a Whig focus on commerce and liberalism, and a history of the decline of freedom for a history of its triumph. Opposed to the Whig interpretation of history, Skinner is also opposed to the Whig theory of freedom as absence of

[21]Gordon Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1969). John Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton U.P., 1975).

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constraint. We "must take our duties seriously, and instead of trying to evade anything more than 'the minimum demands of social life' we must seek to discharge our public obligations as wholeheartedly as possible."[22] His call for civic virtue aims to nurture social and political bonds among the English people in a post-colonial and post-Christian context. Since his English contemporaries were not attracted by republicanism, and since there has been little republicanism in England in recent centuries, Skinner had to look back to the seventeenth century. And since the "English republicans" were less keen on popular participation than on representative government, he turned instead to the Italian republics of the Middle Ages where he found the model he has been keen to extol.[23]

In his historic work, Skinner oscillates between a commitment to republicanism and the safe haven of modern relativism. Wearing his contextualist hat, he is very careful to explain: "I am not really interested in taking sides . . . I have very seldom, as a historian, asked myself whether the beliefs I study are true." But a few lines later, putting on his republican hat, he is happy to conclude with an indictment: "Hobbes is, if you like, the culprit in the destruction of the idea which was so central to the Renaissance moral philosophy, that the contrast concept for freedom is slavery."[24] There is, after all, a "culprit." In the three volume collection of his past articles (*Visions of Politics*, 1, 2, and 3, 2002), Skinner leaves us with alternatives developed five years before in *Liberty before Liberalism*, alternatives which summarize his "vision of politics": an appealing, republican Machiavelli or a dreadfully (fascinatingly) anti-republican Hobbes.[25]

But Machiavelli and Hobbes are not the stark opposites Skinner would have them be. It would be foolish to conflate the position of the sixteenth-century Florentine Machiavelli with that of the seventeenth-century English Hobbes. Their styles could not contrast more; the historical contexts in which they write differ; the political options they offer diverge. In many respects, Machiavelli is clearly republican and Hobbes clearly anti-republican. Machiavelli brings political glory to the fore; Hobbes does his best to expunge it. However, historians of political thought have long recognized that there were strongly Machiavellian features in Hobbes's thought, or, to put it more anachronistically, strongly Hobbesian features in Machiavelli. "It was

[22]Q. Skinner, "The Republican Ideal of Political Liberty," in G. Bock, Q. Skinner, and M. Viroli, *Machiavelli and Republicanism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 308.

[23]Q. Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, and *Liberty before Liberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). See also Q. Skinner and Martin van Gelderen, *Republicanism: A Shared European Heritage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

[24]"An Interview with Quentin Skinner," *Cogito* 11, no. 2 (1997): 76.

[25]Volume 1 is concerned with methodology, Volume 2 with Machiavelli and republicanism, and Volume 3 with Hobbes's world.

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Hobbes who first turned the Prince into everyman and explored the Machiavellianism of everyday life."[26] Both thinkers give rulers unconstrained leeway to act for the good of the people; both emphasize the need for the ruler to be cruel when necessary. Machiavelli's Prince, like Hobbes's Leviathan, could be described as an "absolutist" ruler. Both thinkers are often seen as the quintessential realists for their approach to the international world. The effort to reconcile Hobbes and Machiavelli has been a crucial concern for philosophers from Montesquieu onward. Skinner acknowledges that "the question of how to reconcile these divergent perspectives remains a central problem in contemporary political thought."[27] Far from contributing to this reconciliation, however, he does his best to make it impossible.

On the all important question of the relation between *The Prince* and the *Discorsi*, Skinner is evasive. Still present in his small but balanced *Machiavelli* (1981), the towering figure of the Prince tends to disappear from his Machiavellian republicanism. The *Prince* disappears when Skinner starts developing more explicitly his own republican alternative. Is it because the Prince seems so difficult to reconcile with our own image of what a participatory democracy is supposed to look like? Is it because this Prince is so obviously manipulative, so keen to decide things for himself independently of the people?

Skinner's opposition between Hobbes and republicans also leads him to leave aside the fact that Hobbes himself was, if not also an atheist, at least a theist for whom religion should be subordinated to politics: a significant common point with Machiavelli, which should deserve ample comment. Writing on the English Civil War, Skinner draws a radical opposition between Hobbes and republicans whom Skinner describes as disciples of Machiavelli. This understates how important Christian faith was for most republicans: the Civil War was, above all, a Puritan Revolution.[28] As opposed to the atheist Machiavelli, Skinner's so-called Machiavellians were more often than not Calvinists. How faithful to Machiavelli can a Calvinist be? Skinner neither asks nor answers this question.

[26]Michael Walzer, "On the Role of Symbolism in Political Thought," *Political Science Quarterly* 82, no. 2 (1967): 203. Richard Tuck: "The 'Modern' School of Natural Law [Grotius, Hobbes, Pufendorf] arose not out of a critique or repudiation of the Renaissance, but out of a profound sympathy with some of the fundamental themes of Renaissance political and moral thought" (*The Rights of War and Peace* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999], 5). Cf. Pierre Manent, *An Intellectual History of Liberalism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton U.P., 1994), 10–38.

[27]Q. Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), xi.

[28]S. R. Gardiner, *The First Two Stuarts and the Puritan Revolution* (London: Longman, Green and Co, 1876); C.H. Firth, *Cromwell's Army* (London: Methuen, 1902); Michael Walzer, *The Revolution of the Saints* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965); John Morrill, *The Nature of the English Revolution* (London: Longman, 1993).

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Skinner also contrasts Hobbes's fundamental distrust of political participation with what he calls the neo-Roman republican idea of liberty. This leads him to neglect the most important focus shared by Hobbes and Machiavelli: a commitment to the idea of political representation. The republicans sided with parliament; Hobbes was undoubtedly the first great theorist of political representation. Skinner has written extensively on these matters, which makes it all the more striking that he underplays the extent to which Hobbes and the republicans can be seen as cofounders of representative government.

Why does Skinner want to place his opposition between these two thinkers at the center of his vision of politics? Skinner, a gifted rhetorician who can be very clear when he wants to be, does not give a clear answer to this question. The crucial issues for him seem to involve the role and the historicity of the state.[29] In what is perhaps his most personal piece of writing, Skinner strikingly describes the birth of the state as the "earliest major counter-revolutionary movement in modern European history."[30] Does siding with Machiavelli against Hobbes mean that one should have no time for the state? Skinner extols republican participation not with but against the state and representative democracy. In this sense, his republicanism echoes the political aestheticism of the student movement of the 1960s.

Skinner emphatically is not a political anarchist. But he seems to be attracted to a romantic anarchism. His interpretation of Machiavelli marginalizes Machiavelli's fascination with evil.[31] Reading Skinner's works, it is difficult to sense that "there is evidently something peculiarly disturbing about what Machiavelli said or implied[,] something that has caused profound and lasting uneasiness"[32] or to recall the well-documented, sixteenth-century interpretation of Machiavelli as devilish. "Old Nick" disappears. (It is only after Niccolo Machiavelli that the devil is so called.)[33] Why Machiavelli has been seen for so long as the founder of the reason of state is difficult to understand (even if the expression itself does not occur in Machiavelli).[34] Machiavelli describes how much better it is for citizens to defend themselves and not to depend on others, but he is also keen to show that most citizens prefer not to do their duty—hence the need for an exacting prince. Skinner

[29]Q. Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, vol. 2, 349–58.

[30]Q. Skinner, "The State of Princes to the Person of the State," *Visions of Politics*, vol. 2, 405. Cf. Michael Oakeshott, "Review of *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*," *The Historical Journal* 23, no. 3 (1980): 451–53.

[31]For instance, Q. Skinner on Borgia, *Machiavelli*, 16–18, 33–34.

[32]Isaiah Berlin, "The Originality of Machiavelli" [1972], in *The Proper Study of Mankind* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1997), 270.

[33]Q. Skinner, "Old Nick," *The Spectator* 8 (January 1965): 46–47.c

[34]In contrast with Meinecke, for instance. See his *Machiavellianism: The Doctrine of Raison d'Etat and Its Place in Modern History* [1924], translated from the German by D. Scott, 1957.

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laments the absence of political participation, the weakness of our sense of civic duty. He thinks that "we live in reactionary times."[35] Yet in his œuvre there is little place for the human's recalcitrant side. Skinner calls for a renewed sense of citizenship, but without any account of why citizens remain reluctant to perform their civic duty. This is striking since it is the starting point of both Machiavelli and Hobbes, the very reason why both insist that states need powerful and imperious leaders. Both Machiavelli and Hobbes remind us again and again of our fundamental selfishness, but this basic selfishness is the common denominator Skinner tends to ignore. Could it be that like most anarchists, he would rather emphasize our natural goodness to explain why we might be willing to do our duty in the absence of the state?

What will be the effect of Skinner's teaching? If it is too one-sided, if it does not have any place for the state, Skinner's invitation to political responsibility might undermine itself. Whig interpretations of history had many shortcomings. But they had one advantage: they put privacy to the fore, and privacy lies at the heart of the freedom of the moderns, liberal freedom. Whig interpretations of history bolstered the British elite in its haughty arrogance, but at least they seem to have been good for its self-education, nurturing an establishment keen to defend freedom under the rule of law. In spite of his denunciation of the Whig interpretation of history, Butterfield himself came close to defending it, claiming (during World War II) that "'wrong' history was one of our assets. The Whig interpretation came at exactly the crucial moment, and, whatever it may have done to our history, it had a wonderful effect on English politics."[36]

Skinner is rightly sensitive to the fact that if there is an executive distinct from the people, the people are no longer themselves the executive as in ancient or medieval republics. But his reluctance to focus on the emancipatory power of the state is remarkable. He does not seem to be prepared to recognize that, thanks to the state's own political responsibility, we can afford to have a private life and to care not too much about politics. If we were to get rid of the state, as presupposed by liberalism, the state would have to be replaced with the social pressure and moral conservatism typical of ancient republics.

Oddly enough, Skinner, the disciple of the deeply antiutopian Machiavelli, ends up praising utopianism. The disciple of the pragmatic and aggressively political Machiavelli turns out to be romantic and apolitical, without concern for "the world itself."[37] Skinner turns our attention to medieval republics, to a

[35]"An Interview with Quentin Skinner," *Finnish Yearbook of Political Thought*: 59.

[36]H. Butterfield, *The Englishman and His History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1944), 7.

[37]Q. Skinner, "Political Theory after the Enlightenment Project," in Joan W. Scott and Debra Keates, *Schools of Thought* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton U.P., 2001), 15.

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nostalgic ideal of the type of public participation that the state has made redundant—another version of this "world we have lost."[38]

Skinner's critique of the state is typical of the New Left's nostalgia for a renewed community and of its profound frustration with the private/public divide. Skinner's call for a neo-Roman Machiavellian citizenship echoes this frustration, aggravated in the 1980s by the success of Margaret Thatcher's top-down politics.[39] The romanticism of the New Left, explicit in some of its spokesmen, like E. P. Thompson and Raymond Williams, has taken new shape in Skinner's republicanism.[40]

Politically, republicanism is a more sensible alternative to imperialism than a superficial cosmopolitanism. But the very idea of representation makes Skinner uncomfortable. He makes fun of "our *soi disant* representatives."[41] He seems to believe that "representative democracy" is an oxymoron.[42] Skinner's republicanism does not call for the kind of patriotism that would correspond to our nation-states. He could have focused on the republican elements present in English political life (emphasised by Montesquieu in his description of England as a republic hiding behind the form of a monarchy), but he does not. His Machiavelli is not the father of Italian nationalism, the thinker celebrated by Italian nationalists. His Machiavelli has lost the traits of which Mussolini was fond: the passion for a unified Italy and the nostalgia for Rome's antique greatness.[43]

The appeal of Machiavelli for Skinner centers on Machiavelli's championing of pagan Roman republicanism against the Christian primacy of the heavenly city and against the Victorian idea of the British Empire. Skinner wishes to isolate a republican theory of liberty in Machiavelli, but Machiavelli, as Skinner recognizes, advocated recklessness and expansionism: for rulers and for peoples.[44] Skinner is quite right to see Machiavelli as anti-Christian, but he disregards the price to be paid for this anti-Christian move: Machiavelli's is an intensely warlike political thought, built on an unabashed expansionism, which takes Rome as the example to imitate. Can Machiavelli's imperialism and recklessness be separated from his republican theory of freedom, as Skinner would have it? Machiavelli is perhaps more a theorist

[38]P. Laslett, *The World We Have Lost* (London: Methuen, 1965).

[39]John Dunn, *The Cunning of Unreason* (London: Harper Collins, 2000), 141–79.

[40]E.P. Thompson, *William Morris, Romantic to Revolutionary* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1955). Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society (1780–1950)* (New York: Columbia U.P., 1958).

[41]Q. Skinner, "The Republican Ideal of Political Liberty," 309.

[42]Those of C. P. Snow's novels that reflect the intrigues of Christ's College (of which Skinner has been a fellow since 1962) offer a good introduction to the odd form of direct democracy still practiced at Cambridge.

[43]Machiavelli, *The Prince*, translated by G. Bull, with a prelude by Mussolini (London: Folio Society, 1970).

[44]Q. Skinner, *Machiavelli* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 73–77.

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of imperialism than a theorist of republicanism. But Skinner tends to avoid this issue: his Machiavelli has to explain England's loss of empire in what is meant to be a post-Christian era. For Skinner and many of his generation, neither church nor empire was an object fit for their moral and political imagination. A shift had taken place, possibilities had disappeared, and ways of dreaming and living had gone. A vacuum needed to be filled.

Contextualism Decontextualized

Skinner defends a radical and methodological contextualism, suggesting that little transcends historical context. He tends to reduce the history of political philosophy to the history of political life. As a historian of political thought, he is more interested in what a text is doing than in what it is saying. He treats philosophical arguments solely as actions in disguise. Action, history, and movement are everything. There is no order, no continuity, no nature that philosophers could analyze and contemplate. Everything is transient.

Yet, as a republican, Skinner is keen to assert that there is a continuity that makes Machiavelli relevant for our time. As he puts it in a quiet footnote to his inaugural lecture, dedicated to the concept of republican freedom, *Liberty before Liberalism*:

> There is unquestionably a deeper level of continuity underlying the dispute I have been examining over the understanding of individual liberty.... The point of considering this example has not been to plead for the adoption of an alien value from a world we have lost; it has been to uncover a lost reading of a value common to us and to that vanished world."[45]

No political argument transcends its context, save Skinner's own uncovering of an idea of liberty, which does transcend its context. Republicanism and contextualism sit ill together, but they have become the two trademarks of Skinnerism, the two reactions to the predicament of the 1960s: neither church nor empire for England; neither Whig nor Marxist interpretation of history.

If a thinker is the product of a context that pulls him in two different directions, will his own thought be pulled in these two directions? Skinner has attempted to defend relativism in matters of history and the enduring value of a concept of liberty. He criticizes the idea of perennial problems yet ends up writing about such a problem. Skinner has not attempted to reconcile the two sides of his work, the contextualism and the grand narrative. In that sense, he is more a historian than a philosopher and might be right in describing himself as "not myself a first order political theorist but merely

[45]Q. Skinner, *Liberty before Liberalism*, 117–18, n. 29. Cf. "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas" [1969], in J. Tully, ed., *Meaning and Context*, 66.

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(at least mainly) a historian of the subject."[46] But when one's subject is the history of political philosophy, one must make philosophical judgments—and Skinner does. His methodology, like all methodologies, is not a philosophically or morally neutral doctrine, but the reflection of a particular philosophical position.

It is useful to put Quentin Skinner in context to show how illuminating the context can be (as Skinner himself argues) and how it can put in perspective some of the tensions in his own thought. Much more important, it is useful to put his thought in context to show that the historian of political thought cannot prescind from making his own judgments within political philosophy. There is nothing controversial about putting thought in context (or Quentin Skinner in context). What is controversial is to reduce thought to its context, to contend that thought remains always, deep down, fundamentally dependent on various human (all too human) interests, and that philosophy can be reduced to politics.[47] Skinner argues that he is not offering a transcendental alternative to liberalism. He is only displaying archaeological findings and thereby alerting us to possibilities that may have been too hastily buried in the past. But I wonder whether this a fair description of what Skinner is actually doing. Skinner claims that his contextualism is unfettered by any political philosophy and that his own contextualist practice can be abstracted from his own philosophy. The context he recognizes as relevant is the linguistic and rhetorical one, not the philosophical one. Skinner's position reflects less the linguistic context he has been associated with (although the language available in the early 1960s was the language of language[48]), or the political context of the 1960s, but a genuinely philosophical position. Skinner's version of history cannot be separated from his own philosophical commitments: his theory of liberty, to which I shall now move.

As the Church of England was losing its influence in England, the idea that moral principles should be understood in relation to the Anglican tradition seemed to be undermined. A neo-Kantian concept of autonomous reason was seen as more appropriate, more in tune with a new liberalism and individualism winning the day. But for republicans like Skinner, this concept of autonomous reason was unsatisfactory: morals should be related neither to tradition nor to autonomous reason, but to civic life. In the context of the

[46]Q. Skinner, "Political Theory after the Enlightenment Project," 15. See, for example, David Gauthier, "Reason and Rhetoric in the philosophy of Hobbes, by Q. Skinner" *The Journal of Philosophy*, 94, no. 2 (1997): 94–97.

[47]"My admiration for [... Skinner's] writings is due, *inter alia*, to my belief that he writes as a rational actor who rationally desires to find the truth. Would he wish to deny it?" Martin Hollis, *Reason in Action. Essays in the Philosophy of Social Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 258. Cf. Charles Taylor, "The Hermeneutics of Conflict," in Tully, ed., *Meaning and Context*, 218–28.

[48]E. Gellner, *Words and Things: A Critical Account of Linguistic Philosophy and a Study in Ideology* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1959).

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1960s and of their legacy, there were, broadly speaking, three possible reactions to the decline of Christian churches: a liberal one, a communitarian one, and a republican one. Communitarians recover a lost sense of tradition—more often than not, they react against the secularization thesis and emphasize how valuable it can be to belong to a religious community.[49] Liberals aim to take advantage of and even contribute to the decline of Christian traditions, in order to nurture an individual freedom based on the autonomy of practical reason. Republicans equate moral with civic virtue, attempting to avoid both liberalism and communitarianism while agreeing with the communitarian critique of liberalism and with the liberal critique of communitarianism. For them, communitarians are right about the limits of liberal individualism, and liberals are right to seek liberation from Christian tradition.

Many contemporary liberals understand freedom as an absence of constraint and remain faithful to Isaiah Berlin's defense of negative freedom.[50] But they modify it slightly. Berlin was thinking politically, and, in the context of the Cold War, saw negative freedom as a conceptual safeguard against totalitarianism. Contemporary liberals are thinking in the aftermath of the 1960s. They tend to defend negative liberty because of their allegiance either to moral skepticism and a secular context or to a neo-Kantian idea of the autonomy of reason. In contrast, both communitarians and republicans criticize the primacy of negative liberty. Communitarians argue that negative liberty can only make sense in relation to a concept of positive liberty, in the light of traditions of the good life, which help to determine a sense of purpose for both individuals and community. They also help in determining the kind of constraints required by a theory that defines freedom as an absence of constraints. Republicans like Skinner try to defend a third concept of liberty, which is neither the liberal negative one nor the communitarian positive one. This third concept is instead a right and a duty to participate in the life of the political community, yet it is also a freedom from dependence on the will of others.[51] Both republicans and communitarians are indebted to the New Left's reaction against the primacy of the individual sphere. As its name suggests, the New Left wanted something new: it wanted not blood and tears, but meaningful social bonds, a sense of community, an alternative to what it understood to be the conformism and the apathy of the Old Left. Republicanism and communitarianism answer similar questions and difficulties. Both intellectual schools are best understood

[49]As an intellectual phenomenon, communitarianism seems more American than British. But I would point out that the concerns of MacIntyre and Taylor, for instance, go back to the British first New Left (1956–1962). See journals like *The New Reasoner* for MacIntyre and *Universities and Left Review* for Taylor.

[50]Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty" [1958], in *The Proper Study of Mankind*, 191–242.

[51]Q. Skinner, "A Third Concept of Liberty," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 117 (2002): 237–68.

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in the context of aspirations in the 1960s to create a more satisfactory community, one extending beyond the narrow privacy of negative liberty.

Skinner's republican critique of the primacy of negative liberty emerges from the same context as the communitarian critique of negative liberty. A shared aspiration to combat individualism unites him with Alasdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor, who were closely involved with the New Left. Unlike Skinner, however, both MacIntyre and Taylor are believing Christians. What account should be given of the good life? According to Skinner, "this is a question that our theologians as well as our philosophers have been debating for centuries, and its does not seem at all likely that they will manage in the near future to reach a final agreement. . . . The history is all there is."[52] Skinner's rhetoric and linguistic contextualism define the background of his general analysis of the human predicament: we do not know much about human beings, there is not much to be know about human beings, human nature is an unknown x; "the history is all there is." With his republicanism, Skinner offers an answer to this diagnosis. It is through political commitments, through the city, through civic virtue and participation, that we will find an identity, a sense of purpose. Republicans focus on civic duty, because civic duty can be relied upon even in a post-Christian context. In a context where people are no longer prepared to belong to the same church, they can at least agree that they form a single people.

Skinner wants neither Hobbes's negative freedom nor a concept of positive freedom which might bring him back to Christian and English traditions. According to Skinner, "instead of trying to evade anything more than 'the minimum demands of social life' we must seek to discharge our public obligations as wholeheartedly as possible." But what are these public obligations, if neither the dictates of an autonomous reason nor traditional obligations? Skinner began by reducing political ideas to the details of their context, but he came to espouse a romantic republicanism. Since his histories give weight neither to reason nor faith, one is left with the strong impression that for Skinner all human action is ultimately a question of will. Skinner's civic communitarianism resembles Sartre's peculiar brand of political existentialism: do act, do participate, commit yourself. *Il faut s'engager*.

The account of Skinner's intellectual background offered here has to remain a hypothesis—a hypothesis made plausible by the intelligibility and the relevance that it gives to Skinner's own positions. The evidence provided for my overall argument is limited, but it is bound to be. The young Skinner was neither a public figure nor a garrulous writer. In the absence of archival documents, published letters, or memoirs, it is difficult to be more precise. Few young men and women in the 1960s were asking themselves explicitly: "Now that church and empire are gone, what shall we do?" If anything, very few were thinking about it at all, and there is no reason to think that Skinner

[52]Q. Skinner, "A Third Concept of Liberty": 265.

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ever explicitly considered the issue in these terms.[53] The movements associated with the student revolution and the New Left took the end of the empire and the decline of Christianity for granted. For many, a studied superficiality reflected a refusal to articulate as problems the fundamental political and religious shifts that had recently taken place. Sociologists and theologians have written on the secularization thesis, but most contemporary political philosophers have not. Historians have written excellent accounts of the end of the British Empire, but, surprisingly, no political thinker has yet tried to assess in depth its consequences for the United Kingdom.

[53]Presented with the argument in this article, Q. Skinner found it "plausible." (Conversation with the author, Cambridge, July 2005).

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