Quentin Skinner: History, Politics, Rhetoric

Kari Palonen

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It is still rare to find an historian included in such a series as that which Polity Press devotes to ‘Key Contemporary Thinkers’, and it is a strong testimony to Quentin Skinner’s considerable presence in debates among political and cultural theorists that he should be considered a natural figure for inclusion in it. Skinner is that rare phenomenon in English academic life, an historian who is also deeply and inextricably committed to philosophical and political modes of understanding as integral elements of properly constituted historical reflection. British historians all too rarely engage with philosophy, and this is greatly to the impoverishment of history, a discipline that is so obviously and vitally a necessary element in contemporary thought. Skinner has done much to make historians, especially in the field of political thought, philosophically literate.

Kari Palonen’s study of Skinner’s work makes a stronger case for the philosophical reach of his intellectual engagement than it does for its more purely political or social influence. This, one suspects, is despite rather than because of Palonen’s interpretation of Skinner’s work, which he considers as a contribution to the grand sociological ambitions of Nietzsche, Weber, and allied thinkers in what he calls ‘a perspectivist view of knowledge and scholarship’. Palonen, the author of several studies of Weber, makes much of this perspectivist dimension in Skinner’s thought, but such parallels seem episodic and often contrived rather than organic to his subject’s detailed and methodological arguments, although it is good to see British scholarship being considered in European perspective, albeit in a sometimes rather laboured manner. This is nowhere clearer than in Palonen’s frequently elaborated attempts to make Skinner a natural ally of Reinhart Koselleck, despite the many manifest distinctions between the ‘Cambridge School’ contextualism promoted by Skinner and Koselleck’s style of conceptual history (‘Begriffsgeschichte’). There is a tendency on Palonen’s part to foreshorten Skinner’s thought in order to fit it tidily into a more firmly Continental model of conceptual history than it otherwise naturally occupies. It is likewise odd that Skinner, the supreme apostle of contextualism in historical study, is not placed in context, and a great deal is lost in the process. For example, Skinner’s specifically Cambridge provenance needs to be taken much more seriously than it often is, and Palonen fails to give

it the attention it demands. The influence of Wittgenstein was practically that of a local deity in the Cambridge of the 1950s and 1960s, and it can still be felt in literary and theological studies at that university, as well as in the philosophy and history practised there. Skinner's encounter with Wittgenstein's writings — along with those of the Oxford philosophers R.G. Collingwood and J.L. Austin — is part of a 'Wittgensteinian moment' that was keenly felt across a wide spectrum of post-positivist British culture, itself now worthy of serious study. What is more, by analysing Skinner's early methodological writings as these emerged within a Cambridge History Faculty then — apart from such notable exceptions as Duncan Forbes and Peter Laslett — largely devoted to a very conservative brand of empiricism, one can correctly appreciate just how brave these interventions originally were. Several Cambridge grandees (including J.H. Plumb, to whom the young Skinner was close) were making grand statements in the 1960s about the nature of history, and Skinner's work has to be seen in relation to the earlier work of Butterfield and Carr, and the contemporaneous work of Kitson Clark and Elton (with whose historiographical *dicta* Skinner has productively engaged in recent writings).

This is to ask Palonen to act as an historian of thought, and this he refuses to do, choosing instead to read Skinner, interestingly and suggestively, as a theorist of politics who wishes to interpret political thought as a part of political activity. There is, then, much of value in Palonen's reading of Skinner, although one feels that he does not engage powerfully enough with Skinner's developing interest in rhetoric. He proves himself a sensitive reader of what is now an extensive *oeuvre*. This is, above all, an admiring study, and one would have welcomed more criticism of its subject. Is Skinner's theory of liberty, for instance, quite as convincing as Palonen suggests, and isn't his conception of a neo-Roman tradition in political thought infinitely more controversial than Palonen implies? Palonen's account also lacks the attractive lucidity that characterises Skinner's gracefully effective work.

Palonen is not an historian, and this simple fact vitiates much of his discussion of Skinner's historical writings. It is difficult, and sometimes positively foolhardy, to paraphrase historical argument, and Palonen is not an adept in that particular art. More than those of many 'key contemporary thinkers', the writings of historians are the best witness to their cultural enterprise. Rather than read Palonen's interesting but very particular abridgement of his work, would-be students of Skinner would do better to proceed immediately to read his own writings, and if they still wish to encounter criticisms and defences, then *Meaning and Context*, the collection of essays *pro* and *contra* edited by James Tully for Polity Press in 1988, remains the one indispensable source.

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