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Quentin Skinner, The Foundations of Modern Political Thought

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Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*

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The Oxford Handbook of Classics in Contemporary Political Theory

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Abstract and Keywords

In *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, Quentin Skinner has three aims: creating a sort of reference book for hundreds of primary texts in multiple languages, illuminating a more general historical theme using late medieval and early modern political texts, and giving us a history of political thought with a genuinely historical character. Skinner allows us to see political theorists creatively wrestling with difficult political problems of their day, and attempting to solve them through their writing. Skinner's critics, however, cannot shake the sense that placing these texts in historical contexts robs them of some of their profundity and value as works of political theory. This chapter examines some of Skinner's treatments of particular authors, notes some difficulties with the book's methods, and situates the debate around *Foundations* within the emergence of a self-conscious Cambridge School.

Keywords: history of political thought, Cambridge School, Quentin Skinner, late medieval political thought, early modern political thought

In the 1960s, Quentin Skinner began publishing a series of more or less methodological papers on historical explanation and interpretation.¹ At the same time, he was also publishing more or less substantive accounts, mostly of Hobbes. No doubt these two kinds of publications were mutually reinforcing. Skinner made clear from the beginning his conviction that what passed for the history of political theory was some mix of science fiction and patent confusion.

How so? I came of age, as I suppose many still do, thinking that "history of political theory" indicated a list of canonical authors, gaily skipping over centuries and continents: Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, Machiavelli, and so on. (That Augustine-to-Aquinas skip is especially dazzling: over 800 years!) Sure, people have quibbled about various contenders for the list: what about Thucydides, or Marsilius of Padua, or Diderot?

Followers of Leo Strauss were by no means the only people to assume, or argue explicitly, that canonical writers escaped the parochial concerns of their own day to address “timeless” or “abstract” or “fundamental” questions about political life. So it was easy to imagine dialogues or rebuttals, to ask for instance in what ways John Stuart Mill’s defense of democracy defeated Plato’s attack on it; or just what Aristotle, Aquinas, and Marx did and didn’t share in their worries about money and interest. So too I came of age, as I suppose many still do, thinking that one just picked up these books and read them: carefully, of course. But it is not polemical to notice, for instance, that you could be a Hobbes scholar in good standing and not know, let alone care, that *Leviathan* was published two years after the Rump Parliament put King Charles I on trial—and found him guilty and hanged him—for violating England’s “fundamental constitutions,” attempting to make himself an “unlimited and tyrannical” ruler, and fomenting “unnatural, cruel and bloody wars; and therein guilty of all the treasons, murders, rapines, burnings, spoils, desolations, damages and mischiefs”: so much for responsibility for the civil wars of the 1640s (Rushworth 1721, 7:1418–1419). Political theorists who’d dabbled in philosophy of science could try to shrug such matters off by invoking the distinction between the context of discovery and the context of justification. Hobbes, in this view, might have stumbled on his view by thinking about the political problems of his day. But so too he could have stumbled on them while daydreaming about Aristotle, or just plain dreaming, or reading chalk graffiti in Malmesbury. None of that has anything to do with assessing the cogency of his views.

In his relatively slim two volumes, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought* (henceforth *Foundations*), Skinner attempted something very different. “I have three main aims in this book,” he began. “The first is simply to offer an outline account of the principal texts of late medieval and early modern political thought.” The bibliographies to the two volumes contain hundreds of primary texts in multiple languages, as well as an imposing array of secondary sources. In this way Skinner’s work serves as a kind of reference book. Need a capsule account of François Hotman, or the Monarchomachs, or Christopher St. Germain’s *Doctor and Student*? Flip the pages, cruise his account, and you’re ready to go.

“My second aim,” continued Skinner, “has been to use the texts of late medieval and early modern political theory in order to illuminate a more general historical theme. I hope to indicate something of the process by which the modern concept of the State came to be formed.” This ambitious explanatory task obviously requires much more than stringing together plot summaries of hitherto neglected texts in the history of political theory.

“My third,” he concluded, “is to exemplify a particular way of approaching the study and interpretation of historical texts,” an approach that “might begin to give us a history of political theory with a genuinely historical character” (1:ix–xi). Skinner’s prose style is elegant, usually understated—this is writing that gives not an inch to the decidedly unattractive convention in political theory that excuses or even applauds weirdly ponderous or portentous or plain pretentious prose—but there was no mistaking these fighting words. Skinner indeed had opponents, who registered fierce if querulous

opposition to the very idea of historical method.² But his verb *begin* intimates indeed a more sweepingly radical skepticism than Skinner has ever held about previous scholarship, some of which he has always been generous about. No surprise that some leading political theorists promptly embraced Skinner's work—and indeed called for more intensive historical context.³ Skinner's was a bold challenge to business as usual, but he had sympathizers, even allies, too.

Then again, for many or most political theorists, the vistas revealed by Skinner's account were arrestingly new. There were political theorists wrestling with how Italy's cities could cling to self-government against noxious invaders, trying to figure out just what their liberty consisted in and just what it causally depended on. Was faction a problem? Was wealth? What *kind* of problem? As republican self-government gave way not just to invaders but to princely government, theorists wrestled with new challenges. Doing so, they drew on and repurposed all kinds of older resources: Roman law, Stoicism, the Bible, classical rhetoric, and more. Sometimes they did so with *brio* and ironic wit. (A favorite example of mine: Marsilius opens the *Defensor Pacis* with a glowing tribute to Aristotle, nonchalantly conceding that there was just "one singular and very obscure cause," "a certain perverted opinion," the philosopher didn't know (Marsilius of Padua 2001, 4-5). Only much later in the book does the reader learn what that was: the rise of the Roman Catholic Church and its claims to allegiance and supremacy, which for Marsilius changes everything. They had to respond to political ruptures and war as the Reformation destroyed fantasies of the unity of Christendom. They had to figure out what might properly limit authority, what the jurisdictional boundaries of church and "state" were, when the people might have a duty to resist—or when they might simply have a right to resist.

Skinner's account allows us to see how traditions of political theory don't simply constrain; they also open up new possibilities. (Someone with no political language at all wouldn't be in a position to be especially observant or creative. He'd be mute, paralyzed, uncomprehending.) It allows us to see political theorists, minor and canonical alike, as creatively wrestling with difficult political problems, not as idle daydreamers musing on the good or anything like that. It's also daunting: it suggests that academic work in political theory might require a lot more than snuggling up with your favorite canonical text or author. Though Skinner has always been insistently anti-imperialist about the sort of work he does; he has always agreed that there might be other illuminating projects.

Context and Meaning

Any account that might qualify as “genuinely historical,” Skinner argues, would have to take up this question in understanding works of political theory, whether minor or canonical: what was the author doing in writing (and publishing) it? The earlier methodological papers make clear Skinner’s debts to J. L. Austin’s account of performative utterances and R. G. Collingwood’s musings on historical explanation. *Foundations* has a vintage pragmatist claim that I can only cheer for: “I take it that political life itself sets the main problems for the political theorist, causing a certain range of issues to appear problematic, and a corresponding range of questions to become the leading subjects of debate” (1:xi). Reading a text, however closely, with no knowledge of its context couldn’t, then, give us any insight into what problems the author was trying to solve. To see history as throwing up problems that need solutions is not simply to smudge, but actually to obliterate, the facile distinction between context of discovery and context of justification. It’s also to corrode the facile thought that historians of theory do “descriptive” work, contemporary theorists “normative” work: for thinking of historical theories as putative solutions is already to evaluate them.

What counts as context? *Foundations* is catholic, even totalizing, and so daunting: Skinner promises a focus on “the more general social and intellectual matrix out of which” canonical works arise (1:x). This was a significant change from the central thrust of the earlier methodological papers, which focused on language. Keith Thomas congratulated Skinner on his sketch of the Counter-Reformation and religious wars in France: “Professor Skinner’s reconstruction of these external political pressures is detailed and careful, while his account of the interplay between political event and political theory is subtle in the extreme”⁴ (Thomas 1979). I doubt it: anyway it’s hard to see how two slim volumes covering hundreds of primary texts could also offer detailed accounts of “the more general social and intellectual matrix” over multiple centuries and countries. In fact Skinner’s nods to social and political context are brief, even cursory, and though it sounds uncharitable another reviewer, Cary Nederman, was closer to the mark in complaining about “Skinner’s weak and bookish concepts of history and ideology” (1981).⁵ More charitably, one might say the gestures toward social and political context work better as reminders for readers such as Thomas, who already know a lot of relevant history themselves.

Not so Skinner’s attention to traditions of discourse. These serve as his preferred frame for situating texts, even or especially canonical texts. When he considers Machiavelli’s *Prince* or More’s *Utopia*, he begins by reviewing what they share with the traditions they’re working in—or with. That, he suggests, gives us a “benchmark” (1:255) against which to appraise their originality. He tends to canvass propositions distilled from the inherited traditions and see whether the canonical figures do or don’t subscribe to each. This approach misses what a more literary or rhetorical approach, thinking of the texts’ strategies and ironic subversion, might reveal. So for instance Skinner argues that

Machiavelli's commitment to *virtù* is strongly continuous with that of the humanists. He evidences Machiavelli's "contempt for Agathocles" (1:119; see too 1:137–138). But I think Machiavelli is keenly aware that his reader inherits a formal definition of virtue, roughly dispositions that produce good ends, and a substantive list of what the virtues are; and I think Machiavelli wants to exploit the thought that conventional vices might meet the formal definition of virtue, so he knows he needs to wrestle the reader away from his preconceptions. His account of Agathocles is more barbed than Skinner suggests: in short order, Machiavelli tells us his awfulness is virtue, it can't be virtue, it makes him the equal of the most excellent, and we can't celebrate him as excellent. Instead of seeing logical confusion, we should see a deliberate attempt to shake the reader out of his complacencies. And the mischievous presentation of Agathocles is just softening up the reader for the decisive blow produced by Machiavelli's account of Hannibal, which moves effortlessly from invoking "his inhuman cruelty which, together with his infinite virtues [*sua inumana crudeltà, la quale, insieme con infinite sua virtù*]" to referring to that same cruelty and "his other virtues [*la altre sua virtù*]," forcibly implying that Hannibal's cruelty was itself a virtue (Musa 1964, 140).⁶ Nothing in Skinner's method precludes a more literary approach to canonical—or for that matter more pedestrian—texts.

Regardless, Skinner's command of intellectual context saves him from bogus claims about originality. No wonder he repeatedly chides other scholars for making wrongheaded claims: Hans Baron's claims about the originality of *quattrocento* civic humanists are "perhaps somewhat questionable" (1:43); Alan Gewirth's contrast between Marsilius and the civil lawyers is "somewhat overdrawn" in missing Bartolus (1:62); Hans Baron is "again somewhat misleading" (1:79) and "speaks somewhat misleadingly" (1:82, and see 1:102); Julian Franklin is "somewhat misleading" in casting Bude as a "pioneer of legal humanism" (1:205); C. B. Macpherson is "somewhat misleading" in casting constitutionalism as a seventeenth-century development (2:347). "Somewhat" here is arch British understatement for something like "wholly and outrageously." One wonders whether Skinner meant to mark a contrast in neglecting his ritual "somewhat" and complaining that "there seems to be a vitiating confusion" in Michael Walzer's portrait of the radical innovations of Calvinism (2:323; see too 1:77, where poor Baron gets excoriated for being "misleading" once again, this time without a *somewhat*).

Regardless, the worry about who said it first summons up an enervating picture of history as epidemiology: who'd they catch it from? and who'd they transmit it to? The project of writing a history of how the concept of the modern state emerged is surely more promising than that. It's not quite a building without architects: at every step of the way there are writers with intentions, writers grappling with political problems. But the end of the story is unintended, even unforeseen, by any of the players along the way. No one sat down and wondered, "how can I help develop a modern concept of the state?" Instead, a long series of disparate actors grappling with disparate problems introduced a series of conceptual innovations that finally yielded a concept no one had in mind. In this way the creation of the modern concept of the state is an irreducibly social process, with collaborators who don't even know they're collaborating. Skinner earlier had blasted claims about "anticipation" in history as nonsensical teleology; one reviewer scolded him

for replacing such talk with the vocabulary of “hints” and evolution (Boucher 1980). Point taken: but it’s better to take such language as unfortunate exposition, not as embodying some perverse line of argument that can’t be sustained on the merits.

Plenty of readers couldn’t—can’t—shake the sense that placing canonical texts in historical contexts robs them of their profundity, their dignity, their value as works of political theory. If you’re in this mood yourself, you (too) easily reach for such adjectives as *enduring* or *timeless* value. This is in part why for instance Nathan Tarcov complained that “Skinner’s interpretation of Machiavelli is superficial, confused, and poorly documented”: “Skinner is less interested in Machiavelli’s contradicting the Bible, Plato, or us, than in his contradicting Pontano or Patrizi” (Tarcov 1982, 707–708). Even as friendly a reviewer as John Dunn agreed that when it came to the likes of Machiavelli and More, figures “reflecting deeply on what human beings should truly value or do,” it would be hard to maintain that political life not only spun off problems but also determined the outline of solutions (Dunn 1979). More generally Skinner can be lampooned as the person who wants to tell you, indignantly, that if you think you learned something from an old book, he can prove you read it anachronistically, so you misread it, so you really didn’t understand what its author was up to at all.

But that’s lampoon-Skinner, not real Skinner. It’s deeply mistaken to imagine that we face a blunt alternative: either a historically informed reading or a theoretically interesting one. Or, put differently, that we can either put canonical works in some historical context and strip them of any interest they have for us, or we can read them acontextually and learn from them. Make your concerns as putatively timeless or fundamental or abstract as you like, and it might still be that placing canonical works in context is a way to deepen their interest for us. It might even be that that is the only way. I say *might* because I don’t imagine there are any guarantees here. But a strikingly odd feature of the debate that has bubbled along about Skinner’s work, and historical approaches more generally, is how much in the clutches of that unsupported blunt alternative it is. If I’m right about that, it’s facile to help yourself to the view that precisely insofar as your interest in canonical texts is theoretical, you needn’t trouble yourself with learning any historical context.

Still there are puzzles about Skinner’s use of context. Let me juxtapose two passages. First is a qualified endorsement for Kristeller’s suggestion that we see Renaissance humanists not as bursting out of nowhere, but as teachers of rhetoric whose work was strongly continuous with the Middle Ages. Here’s the qualification:

It is arguable, however, that one effect of this approach has been to give rise to an oversimplified explanation of *quattrocento* moral and political thought. It has become fashionable in the first place to lay a somewhat [?!] exaggerated emphasis on purely ‘internal’ explanations of the rise of humanism.... It seems misleadingly one-sided, however, to suppose that an ‘internal’ history of humanism can hope to

serve as a sufficient explanation of its development, and thus that the sort of 'external' explanations favoured by Baron can be altogether ruled out. (1:102–103)

It matters, Skinner urges, that these humanist writers are in a world where Florence's liberties are threatened by the Visconti of Milan. The scare quotes around *internal* and *external* must indicate some unstated hesitation about the conceptual baggage traveling with that distinction, but it's clear enough here.

Second is a puzzle arising from the rapid international triumph of Luther's Protestantism, puzzling not least because earlier staunch critics of the church launched popular movements which fizzled (think Lollards and Hussites, and if you think, "hey I'm a theorist, I don't care," well, think again):

The next question must clearly be to ask why Luther's message, and in particular its social and political implications, should have proved so powerfully attractive in so many different countries. There are doubtless many perspectives from which this question can be viewed, each of which may serve to suggest its own set of answers. To the historian of political ideas, however, the most important consideration must undoubtedly be the fact that Luther's political doctrines, and the theological premises on which they were based, were closely affiliated with—and partly derived from—a number of deeply-rooted traditions of late medieval thought. (2:21)

I don't see any way to fit these two passages together. I'd scrap the second. It might turn out contingently that the most illuminating context for explaining Luther's success is its continuity with intellectual traditions. (Though I rather doubt it.) But I can't imagine why a historian of political ideas *must* see it that way. Political ideas can be the *explanandum* without being the *explanans*. The same historian of political ideas, after all, is willing to insist that we must see the humanists as in part rallying to the defense of Florentine liberties. That's a challenge in the actual political world, not a matter of any intellectual tradition at all. If "political life itself sets the main problems for the political theorist," which again I think is an exceedingly good idea, then there's no reason whatever for a historian of political ideas to blindfold himself from the possibility that Luther's view took off precisely because people seized on it as a solution to their political problems.

Translation and Criteria

I want now to press harder on Skinner's second aim: sketching how the modern concept of the state was formed. Two connected problems make it difficult to grasp, let alone appraise, what he's done here. First is Skinner's decision to present his materials almost completely in English. This is delightfully unfussy, but sometimes, I'm afraid, one needs to fuss over just what words in foreign languages mean—more pointedly, what they meant when they were written. Second is a surprising silence about the criteria for some of the

key concepts in the argument. No reader of Skinner's methodological papers could imagine that Skinner is somehow (somewhat?) uncomfortable with analytically precise arguments. But *Foundations* needs lots more of that sort of thing, in ways I'll try to explain.

First, translation. Skinner's primary sources are in English (but not today's English, of course), French, German, Italian, and Latin. (Most of his secondary sources are in English, but he draws on French, German, and Italian scholarship too.) Five languages over a few centuries: this raises pressing questions about how contemporaries understood their key terms. Latin was a *lingua franca* among the learned, though it's still possible that, say, the Latin used in fifteenth-century France (or, more finicky yet, 1480 Paris) was different in ways that might matter from, say, the Latin used in sixteenth-century Germany. But it's crucial to get in focus what words are allegedly standing for what concepts, and how the concepts are differently inflected across time and space. Skinner is fully aware of this issue: in launching the first volume, he remarks, "Where key terms present special problems of translation, the rule I adopt is to follow as closely as possible the translations used at the time," and reviews some key terms that "need to be understood in their early-modern rather than in their current and somewhat different senses" (1:xxii-xxiii). My worry is that this overarching assurance isn't enough.

Occasionally in the main text too, Skinner offers tantalizing hints of these issues, although, like his bids toward broader historical context, they may work better as reminders for the handful of people who share his daunting command of multiple languages:

The true Church becomes nothing more than an invisible *congregatio fidelium*, a congregation of the faithful gathered together in God's name. This Luther saw as a sublimely simple concept, completely encapsulated in his claim that the Greek word *ecclesia*, which is habitually used in the New Testament to denote the primitive Church, should be translated simply as *Gemeinde* or congregation... (2:10-11)

You might not want to pause at the translation of *congregatio fidelium* into "congregation of the faithful," but there are after all false cognates. Leave *ecclesia* aside, because I have no reason to doubt it's been standardly translated as "church": a critical Bible scholar might have reason to reopen that, but Skinner doesn't. But those of us without (sixteenth-century!) German have to take his word that *Gemeinde* is just "congregation" too. Notice that even if "congregation" works well enough for both *congregatio* and *Gemeinde*, it would matter whether there are any subtle shadings of difference between the two. It would open up the possibility that Luther is tweaking something—or that his cognizant readers will sensibly suspect that he is. Similarly, at one point Skinner balks at a translation of a passage from Machiavelli's *Prince*, because he thinks it illicitly summons up an end-justifies-the-means picture not really in the Italian. "Since Machiavelli's exact

phraseology is important to my argument at this point,” he notes, “I am translating from, and referring to, the Italian edition of *The Prince*” (2:354, n 1).

There’s probably nothing much to worry about as Skinner presents the central thrust of Jean Bodin’s *Six Books of the Commonwealth*—*Les Six livres de la République*—without even nodding toward the French. Yes, it’s possible that Bodin’s 1576 invocation of *souveraineté* doesn’t quite answer to our own *sovereignty*. Skinner gives us—again in English—Bodin’s formal definition: “the most high, absolute and perpetual power over the citizens and subjects in a commonwealth” (2:287). As his bibliography shows, Skinner here is using a 1962 reprint edition of Richard Knolles’s 1606 translation of Bodin (1962) though he has modernized the spelling. He must think it fine for his purposes: after all, he does not here offer the kind of correction or modification he does with Machiavelli’s *Prince*. The 1606 translation would be perfect if his central interest were the reception of Bodin in early modern England, though even there one would want to know roughly how many Englishmen read Bodin in French. But that’s not in fact Skinner’s central interest here. His account of Bodin appears in a chapter entitled, “The Context of the Huguenot Revolution.”

Bodin’s original French runs, “La souveraineté est la puissance absolue et perpétuelle d’une République. ...” (Bodin 1583, 122) “Most high” is perhaps a plausible way to mark the distinction between *pouvoir* and *puissance*. (My French is bad, my early modern French worse, so I honestly don’t know.) There is nothing in the original French to justify “over the citizens and subjects”—but there is in the “very free” Latin translation of the work that Bodin himself offered in 1586, and Knolles drew on both (Bodin 1992, xxxvi). There’s another potential pitfall here in appraising the reception of Bodin’s work: which readers had it in French, which in Latin? Finally, one might fuss about whether “commonwealth” and *République* are finally the same. (If you’re not willing to worry about false cognates, and so not inclined even to hesitate at what might shift when we render *souveraineté* as “sovereignty,” then you surely ought to be wondering why *République* shouldn’t be translated as “republic.”) More tantalizingly, Bodin immediately follows his definition by rattling off what he takes to be the same notion in Latin, Greek, Italian, and Hebrew. It is not a boring or recondite or antiquarian matter of philology to dig into these different words and excavate what conceptual overlaps—and differences—they summon up. And one would have thought it grist to Skinner’s mill to wonder what Bodin is doing in the act of simultaneously breaking a kind of (somewhat?) new ground in thinking about sovereignty and in easily suggesting that the same notion has been kicking around various other languages, even ancient languages.

Still, as I say—not facetiously—at the end of the day there is probably nothing much to worry about in Skinner’s treatment of Bodin. I’m less confident about his presentation of Mario Salomonio’s 1514 work, “the series of dialogues entitled *The Sovereignty of the Roman Patriciate*” (1:131). Here the bibliography suggests that Skinner is translating himself, from the original *Patritii Romani de Principatu*. His discussion of the book sticks with some of the original Latin: *Imperium, Lex Regia, maior universis, maior singulis, inferior universe populo, legibus solutus*. But nothing in the text even alludes to what

might be thought tricky about translating *Principatu*—nor what would be tricky about glossing Rome’s patricians as “the people,” as Skinner does consistently here. Whatever my sadly severe limits with French, they’re dwarfed by my complete blankness about Latin, so I shan’t venture a view. But it is an ominous sign that when Bodin gives the Latin for *souveraineté*, it’s *maiestas*, not *principatu*. Even if our own “sovereignty” is a perfectly serviceable translation of *souveraineté*, *maiestas*, and *principatu*, those three foreign words could still have intriguing differences worth teasing out. And it is by no means trivial to figure out what conceptual resonances Latin has when it’s used here by an early sixteenth-century Italian writer. But when Skinner doesn’t probe these issues, doesn’t offer any explicit defense of his translation choices, he makes it too easy for the reader to think that Salomonio is already a Lockean in embracing popular sovereignty and a ruler entrusted with limited tasks and accountable to the people for them. He might well be! But I don’t think Skinner has justified that picture. Too much of the relevant work is sadly offstage.

Second, criteria. In his preface, Skinner tells us that “I have ... tried to write a history centred less on the classic texts and more on the history of ideologies,” that “historians of political theory” should “think of themselves essentially as students of ideologies,” that “if the history of political theory were to be written essentially as a history of ideologies, one outcome might be a clearer understanding of the links between political theory and practice” (1:xi-xiii). The concept of ideology is notoriously thorny, so the reader naturally expects some more or less explicit account of just what this orientation entails. Skinner doesn’t provide one. His repeated bid to focus on ideology is embedded in a discussion that also invokes *mentalités*, itself not given any explicit gloss either. I suspect Skinner does not intend *ideology* to summon up anything about false consciousness and he explicitly disavows any interest in superstructure. I think all he means by ideology is popular views; I think the theory/ideology contrast means only “views entertained by great thinkers” as against “ordinary views of the day.”⁷ But I’m not sure. In particular I’m not sure whether for *views* I should be substituting *discourses* or *vocabularies* or something like that. An author willing to instruct us three times in a row to devote ourselves to ideologies ought to tell us, loud and clear and crisply, what sense of *ideologies* he has in mind.

More striking for a book that promises an account of how the modern concept of the state was formed, it’s hard to identify what Skinner thinks the criteria for that concept are. There are hints along the way: for instance, a passing reference to “the development of a modern, naturalistic, and secular view of political life” (1:50). This language suggests that the modern idea of the state is secular. (That does not quite entail that the things in the world we identify as modern states are themselves secular. Developments since the publication of *Foundations*—in the West, too—have made it even harder to take that picture seriously. That modern societies or modern states are secular seems like a wistful idealization of Scandinavia or, worse, a faculty lounge fantasy.)

But the reader really has to wait for the conclusion to the second volume for Skinner to begin to put together the puzzle pieces. Skinner suggests “that a “precondition” “for the acquisition of the modern concept of the State” “is clearly that the sphere of politics should be envisaged as a distinct branch of moral philosophy, a branch concerned with the art of government” (2:349). Some of his account sounds clearly in Weber: “the supreme authority within each independent *regnum* should be recognised as having no rivals within its own territories as a law-making power and an object of allegiance” (2:351). And some of it sharpens the idea of secular authority by summoning up the separation of church and state: “the acceptance of the modern idea of the State presupposes that political society is held to exist solely for political purposes. The endorsement of this secularised viewpoint remained impossible as long as it was assumed that all temporal rulers had a duty to uphold godly as well as peaceable government” (2:352). But there’s an unhappily tight circle lurking in the presentation: it’s finally unclear, of all things, just what Skinner means by *politics*. Political society exists for political purposes, and the sphere of politics is concerned with the art of government: one would like more. This sort of thing is in part why Michael Oakeshott, while saluting *Foundations* as “an exercise in historical understanding as exact as may be,” expressed grave reservations about Skinner’s argument about the emergence of the modern concept of the state (1980).

None of my reservations here depend on any worries about historical work in political theory. On the contrary, they should go to suggest further reasons that such work can be conceptually savvy and theoretically illuminating.

Postscript: The “Cambridge School”

In a distressingly gloppy formulation, many now lump together all kinds of historical work under the rubric “the Cambridge school”: this glosses over what might be significant differences—how Skinner’s work has changed over time, how it differs from John Dunn’s, how both differ from that of J. G. A. Pocock, who might live and work across the Atlantic but who often gets lumped into the same “school,” how all of these might differ from other historically inflected work in political theory.

Whatever one makes of that lumping, and the reader can already guess what I do, *Foundations* is a paradigm of a kind of work that now has an institutionally significant instantiation, what must count as signal impact on the field. That’s the Ideas in Context series at Cambridge University Press. As I write, there are some two hundred volumes in the series, now described this way:

The books in this series discuss the emergence of intellectual traditions and related new disciplines. The procedures, aims and vocabularies that were generated will be set in the context of the alternatives available within the contemporary frameworks of ideas and institutions. Through detailed studies of

the evolution of such traditions, and their modification by different audiences, it is hoped that a new picture will form of the development of ideas in their concrete contexts. By this means, artificial distinctions between the history of philosophy, of the various sciences, of society and politics, and of literature may be seen to dissolve.⁸

Indeed, that agenda is not limited to the history of political theory: but many or most of the titles in the series are in fact that. There's some of the same totalizing impulse here summoned up by Skinner's "general and social intellectual matrix," but of course the individual titles in the series are varied, not just in their topics and quality, but in the sorts of tasks they set themselves and what they take the relevant contexts to be. That's all to the good: it would be perverse for any series editor to try to impose a high degree of uniformity.

One might have hoped for more constructive traffic between "Cambridge school" work, however conceived, and other approaches to political theory, instead of frigid if polite balkanization. But there's no point being utopian.

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Notes:

(¹) The principal ones, with responses from critics and a helpful rebuttal in turn from Skinner, are collected in Tully, ed. (1988).

(²) See especially Minogue (1981).

Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*

(³) *Political Theory* commissioned not one but two reviews—by Judith Shklar and Julian Franklin (1979)—and both were positive. See too Ashcraft (1981) and Kelley (1979).

(⁴) I've concentrated here on the contemporary reception of *Foundations*. For some views twenty-five years later, see Brett, Tully, and Hamilton-Bleakley, eds. (2006).

(⁵) For a more dyspeptic review urging more context, see Black (1980).

(⁶) For a less fiercely compressed exposition of the point, see my *Cunning* (2006). I'm writing about *Foundations*, not Skinner's corpus more generally, but I'm happy to note that these matters are brought into somewhat sharper focus in his *Machiavelli* (2000).

(⁷) Compare the suggestions in reviews by Stephen Holmes (1979) and J. G. A. Pocock (1979).

(⁸) <http://www.cambridge.org/us/academic/subjects/politics-international-relations/history-ideas/series/ideas-context>, last visited 7 August 2014.

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