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978-0-521-29337-2 - The Foundations of Modern Political Thought: Volume One: The Renaissance

Quentin Skinner

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**The foundations of
modern political thought**

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QUENTIN SKINNER

PROFESSOR OF POLITICAL SCIENCE
UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE



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Preface

I have three main aims in this book. The first is simply to offer an outline account of the principal texts of late medieval and early modern political thought. I discuss in turn the chief political writings of Dante, Marsiglio of Padua, Machiavelli, Guicciardini, Erasmus and More, Luther, Calvin and their disciples, Vitoria and Suárez, and the French constitutionalist theorists, including Beza, Hotman, Mornay and especially Bodin. No such survey of the transition from medieval to modern political theory has I think been attempted since the publication of Professor Pierre Mesnard's *L'essor de la philosophie politique au XVI^e siècle*. Professor Mesnard's study is of course a classic one, and I cannot hope to emulate either his range or the depth of his scholarship. However, it is more than forty years since his book first appeared, and a number of major advances in the subject have been made since that time. Many new editions have been produced, often embodying important scholarly discoveries. And a large secondary literature has grown up, adding a great deal of new information, as well as challenging many received opinions about the leading texts. For these reasons it has seemed worthwhile to try to furnish a more up-to-date survey of the same period, taking account as far as possible of the more significant findings of recent research.

My second aim 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. To mention this wider ambition is at the same time to explain the chronological boundaries of this book. I begin in the late thirteenth century, and carry the story down to the end of the sixteenth, because it was during this period, I shall seek to show, that the main elements of a recognisably modern concept of the State were gradually acquired.¹ The decisive shift was made from

¹ As I seek to make clear in my Conclusion, this is not to say that precisely *our* concept of the State was acquired. The theorists I discuss remained confused about the relationship between the people, the ruler and the State. And of course they lacked the post-Enlightenment conception of the relationship between the nation and the State.

the idea of the ruler ‘maintaining his state’ – where this simply meant upholding his own position – to the idea that there is a separate legal and constitutional order, that of the State, which the ruler has a duty to maintain. One effect of this transformation was that the power of the State, not that of the ruler, came to be envisaged as the basis of government. And this in turn enabled the State to be conceptualised in distinctively modern terms – as the sole source of law and legitimate force within its own territory, and as the sole appropriate object of its citizens’ allegiances.¹

After considering the historical developments which prompted this conceptual change, I turn briefly in the Conclusion from history to historical semantics – from the concept of the State to the word ‘State’. The clearest sign that a society has entered into the self-conscious possession of a new concept is, I take it, that a new vocabulary comes to be generated, in terms of which the concept is then articulated and discussed. So I treat it as a decisive confirmation of my central thesis that, by the end of the sixteenth century, at least in England and France, we find the words ‘State’ and ‘l’État’ beginning to be used for the first time in their modern sense.

My third concern is to exemplify a particular way of approaching the study and interpretation of historical texts. I have already discussed this approach in a series of articles published over the past twelve years, and it hardly seems appropriate to rehearse their arguments here.² I hope in any case that, if my method has any merits, these will emerge as I try to practise my own precepts in the body of this book. However, it may be worth indicating very briefly what is at issue by comparing my approach with the more traditional method of studying the history of political ideas – the method employed, for example, by Professor Mesnard. He treats the subject essentially as a history of the so-called ‘classic texts’, producing successive chapters on the chief works of Machiavelli, Erasmus, More, Luther, Calvin and the other major figures. By contrast, I have tried not to concentrate so exclusively on the leading theorists, and have focused instead on the more general social and intellectual matrix out of which their works arose. I begin by discussing what I judge to be the most

¹ For this famous definition see Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich, 3 vols (New York, 1968), vol. 1, p. 56.

² For any reader who may be interested, I have listed the titles of these essays in the bibliography at the end of this volume. I should like to add that, in arriving at my views about the nature of interpretation, I have been much influenced by a number of writers whose works I have also mentioned in the bibliography. I should especially like to record my debt to the theories of R. G. Collingwood, my admiration for the work done by Alasdair MacIntyre on the philosophy of action as well as on the history of moral concepts, and my more specific obligations to the methodological writings of Martin Hollis, J. G. A. Pocock and especially John Dunn.

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relevant characteristics of the societies in and for which they originally wrote. 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. This is not to say, however, that I treat these ideological superstructures as a straightforward outcome of their social base. I regard it as no less essential to consider the intellectual context in which the major texts were conceived – the context of earlier writings and inherited assumptions about political society, and of more ephemeral contemporary contributions to social and political thought. For it is evident that the nature and limits of the normative vocabulary available at any given time will also help to determine the ways in which particular questions come to be singled out and discussed. I have thus tried to write a history centred less on the classic texts and more on the history of ideologies, my aim being to construct a general framework within which the writings of the more prominent theorists can then be situated.

It may well be asked why I adopt this somewhat elaborate approach, and I should like to end these preliminary remarks by sketching an answer. One dissatisfaction I feel with the traditional ‘textualist’ method is that, although its exponents have generally claimed to be writing the history of political theory, they have rarely supplied us with genuine histories. It has rightly become a commonplace of recent historiography that, if we wish to understand earlier societies, we need to recover their different *mentalités* in as broadly sympathetic a fashion as possible. But it is hard to see how we can hope to arrive at this kind of historical understanding if we continue, as students of political ideas, to focus our main attention on those who discussed the problems of political life at a level of abstraction and intelligence unmatched by any of their contemporaries. If on the other hand we attempt to surround these classic texts with their appropriate ideological context, we may be able to build up a more realistic picture of how political thinking in all its various forms was in fact conducted in earlier periods. One merit I should thus like to claim for the approach I have described is that, if it were practised with success, it might begin to give us a history of political theory with a genuinely historical character.

The adoption of this approach might also help us to illuminate some of the connections between political theory and practice. It is often observed that political historians tend to assign a somewhat marginal role to political ideas and principles in seeking to explain political behaviour. And it is evident that, as long as historians of political theory continue to think of their main task as that of interpreting a canon of classic texts, it

will remain difficult to establish any closer links between political theories and political life. But if they were instead to think of themselves essentially as students of ideologies, it might become possible to illustrate one crucial way in which the explanation of political behaviour depends upon the study of political ideas and principles, and cannot meaningfully be conducted without reference to them.

Some sense of the nature of these interactions will I hope emerge in the course of this book. But the point I have in mind can readily be expressed in more general terms if we consider the position of a political actor who is anxious to engage in a particular course of action which he is also anxious, in Weberian phrase, to exhibit as legitimate. Such an agent may be said to have a strong motive for seeking to ensure that his behaviour can plausibly be described in terms of a vocabulary already normative within his society, a vocabulary which is capable of legitimating at the same time as describing what he has done. Now it may appear – and many political historians have assumed – that the nature of the connection this suggests between ideology and political action is a purely instrumental one.¹ The agent has a project he wishes to legitimate; he accordingly professes just those principles which best serve to describe what he is doing in morally acceptable terms; and since the selection of these principles relates to his behaviour in a wholly *ex post facto* way, it hardly seems that the capacity to explain his behaviour need depend in any way on referring to whatever principles he may happen to have professed. It is arguable, however, that this is to misunderstand the role of the normative vocabulary which any society employs for the description and appraisal of its political life. Consider, for example, the position of an agent who wishes to say of an action he has performed that it was honourable. To offer this description is certainly to commend as well as to describe what has been done. And as Machiavelli shows, the range of actions which can plausibly be brought under this heading may turn out – with the exercise of a little ingenuity – to be unexpectedly wide. But the term obviously cannot be applied with propriety to describe *any* Machiavellian course of action, but only those which can be claimed with some show of plausibility to meet the pre-existing criteria for the application of the term. It follows that anyone who is anxious to have his behaviour recognised as that of a man of honour will find himself restricted to the performance of only a certain range of actions. Thus the problem facing an agent who wishes to legitimate what he is doing at the same time as gaining what he wants cannot simply be the instrumental problem of tailoring his normative language in order to fit

¹ For an attempt to document in detail one case in which this has clearly been assumed, see Skinner, 1974a.

his projects. It must in part be the problem of tailoring his projects in order to fit the available normative language.

It will now be evident why I wish to maintain 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. For it now appears that, in recovering the terms of the normative vocabulary available to any given agent for the description of his political behaviour, we are at the same time indicating one of the constraints upon his behaviour itself. This suggests that, in order to explain why such an agent acts as he does, we are bound to make some reference to this vocabulary, since it evidently figures as one of the determinants of his action. This in turn suggests that, if we were to focus our histories on the study of these vocabularies, we might be able to illustrate the exact ways in which the explanation of political behaviour depends upon the study of political thought.

My main reason, however, for suggesting that we should focus on the study of ideologies is that this would enable us to return to the classic texts themselves with a clearer prospect of understanding them. To study the context of any major work of political philosophy is not merely to gain additional information about its aetiology; it is also to equip ourselves, I shall argue, with a way of gaining a greater insight into its author's meaning than we can ever hope to achieve simply from reading the text itself 'over and over again' as the exponents of the 'textualist' approach have characteristically proposed.¹

What exactly does this approach enable us to grasp about the classic texts that we cannot grasp simply by reading them? The answer, in general terms, is I think that it enables us to characterise what their authors were *doing* in writing them. We can begin to see not merely what arguments they were presenting, but also what questions they were addressing and trying to answer, and how far they were accepting and endorsing, or questioning and repudiating, or perhaps even polemically ignoring, the prevailing assumptions and conventions of political debate. We cannot expect to attain this level of understanding if we only study the texts themselves. In order to see them as answers to specific questions, we need to know something about the society in which they were written. And in order to recognise the exact direction and force of their arguments, we need to have some appreciation of the general political vocabulary of the age. Yet we clearly need to gain access to this level of understanding if we are to interpret the classic texts convincingly. For to understand what questions a writer is addressing, and what he is doing with the concepts

¹ For this injunction see J. P. Plamenatz, *Man and Society*, 2 vols (London, 1963), vol 1, p. x.

available to him, is equivalently to understand some of his basic intentions in writing, and is thus to elicit what exactly he may have meant by what he said – or failed to say. When we attempt in this way to locate a text within its appropriate context, we are not merely providing historical ‘background’ for our interpretation; we are already engaged in the act of interpretation itself.

As a very brief indication of what I have in mind, consider the possible significance of the fact that John Locke in his *Two Treatises of Government* makes no appeal to the alleged prescriptive force of the ancient English constitution. An examination of the prevailing ways of thinking about the concept of political obligation at the time reveals that this could only have been seen by his contemporaries as a remarkable lacuna. This discovery may well lead us to ask what Locke may have been doing at this point in his argument. We are bound to reply that he was rejecting and ignoring one of the most widely accepted and prestigious forms of political reasoning available to him. This may in turn lead us to ask whether he may not have had the intention to convey to his original readers that he saw the claims of prescription as unworthy of his attention, and thus that he was, so to speak, stating his attitude to the theory in the form of his silence. The example is of course over-schematised, but it serves well enough to hint at the two major claims I have in mind: we can scarcely be said to have understood Locke’s meaning until we have considered his intentions at this point; but we can scarcely hope to attain this understanding unless we are prepared to focus not simply on his text, but also on the more general context within which it was written.

The reader may wonder whether I have any new findings to report as a result of applying this methodology. I should like to mention two general points. In volume I I have sought to emphasise the remarkable extent to which the vocabulary of Renaissance moral and political thought was derived from Roman stoic sources. A great deal of work has been done – for example by Garin – on the Platonic origins of Renaissance political philosophy. And recently a strong emphasis has been placed – notably by Baron and Pocock – on the contribution of Aristotelian doctrines to the formation of ‘civic’ humanism. But I do not think it has been fully appreciated how pervasively the political theorists of Renaissance Italy, and of early modern Europe in general, were also influenced by stoic values and beliefs. Nor do I think it has been fully recognised how far an understanding of this fact tends, amongst other things, to alter our picture of Machiavelli’s relationship with his predecessors, and in consequence our sense of his aims and intentions as a political theorist. In volume II I have tried in a similar way to uncover the sources of the vocabulary

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characteristic of Reformation political thought. I have sought in particular to emphasise the almost paradoxical extent to which the Lutherans as well as the radical Calvinists relied on a scheme of concepts derived from the study of Roman law and scholastic moral philosophy. A considerable literature has been devoted in recent years to discussing the formation of 'the Calvinist theory of revolution'. But I argue that, strictly speaking, no such entity exists. While there is no doubt that the revolutionaries of early modern Europe were in general professed Calvinists, it has not I think been sufficiently recognised that the theories they developed were almost entirely couched in the legal and moral language of their Catholic adversaries.

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Acknowledgements

My greatest debt is owed to those friends who have read and commented on the whole manuscript of this book, in some cases reading it in several successive drafts. I am deeply grateful to them all: to John Burrow, Stefan Collini, John Dunn, Susan James, John Pocock and John Thompson. They have offered me constant support and advice, as well as providing me with a large number of helpful suggestions, almost all of which I have tried to incorporate into my final draft. I should like to add two special words of thanks. One is to John Burrow, who originally supervised my work in political theory when I was an undergraduate at Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, and has continued to guide me in the subject (and in much else) ever since. The other is to John Dunn, to whom I owe most of all. I have discussed my work with him at every stage, never ceasing to learn from his insights and the amazing breadth of his reading, and benefiting immeasurably from his unfailing kindness and encouragement as well as from his many detailed criticisms.

I am scarcely less indebted to those who have commented on particular sections of my work. Jimmy Burns has read practically the whole of my script, helping me in particular with the intricacies of late scholastic thought as well as checking my translations with meticulous scholarship. John Elliott has read the chapters on the counter-reformation and prompted me to revise them extensively in the light of his criticisms. Julian Franklin has read the chapters on the Calvinist revolution, putting his massive knowledge of early modern constitutionalism at my disposal in a series of exceptionally helpful letters and conversations. Peter Gay has read the second volume, and has spent a great deal of time and effort in an attempt to make me think and write more clearly. Felix Gilbert has read virtually the whole of the first volume, bringing to bear his unsurpassed understanding of Renaissance political thought, and thereby saving me from many errors of judgment and fact. Martin Hollis has read the second volume, correcting my Latin, making numerous suggestions, and above all helping me to articulate the methodological assumptions on

which I have tried to base my work. And in the final months of revision I have received a great deal of help from Donald Kelley, who has not only read the whole of my script and enabled me to avoid a number of mistakes, but has also supplied me with much bibliographical detail as well as valuable general advice.

I have also incurred a number of more general obligations in the course of writing this book, and these too I record with deep gratitude. I owe a great deal to Peter Laslett for his generous help and advice in the early stages of my research. And I owe a very large debt to Jack Plumb for his continual encouragement and many kindnesses. It was he who originally suggested, in his capacity as an adviser to Penguin Books, that I should be commissioned to write a synoptic survey of early modern political thought. It was only after I had worked for some time on the projected book – which was to have covered the whole period from the early sixteenth to the early nineteenth century – that I found the undertaking to be far beyond my powers. I am grateful to Penguin Books for having agreed at that point to release me from the obligation I had formed. My thanks are also due to many past pupils at Cambridge University, with whom I have discussed my work in lectures and seminars. I must especially mention Richard Tuck, originally a pupil and now a colleague at Cambridge. I always learn from our conversations, and I am sure that many of them must have left their mark on this book. I should also like to acknowledge the expert assistance as well as the many kindnesses I have received from Mrs Peggy Clarke and the secretarial staff attached to the School of Social Science at the Institute for Advanced Study, who have typed my manuscript with great skill and speed, and from Clare Scarlett, who has checked quotations, references and bibliographies. Finally, I should like to offer my thanks to the staff of the British Library, the Firestone Library at Princeton, and especially the University Library at Cambridge. Much of my research has been done in the rare-book rooms of these collections, where I have always been received with unflinching patience and courtesy.

I am also much indebted to the various institutions which have supported and encouraged me in my work. Christ's College, Cambridge has given me material help as well as its fellowship. The Faculty of History and the University of Cambridge have shown me exceptional generosity, especially in allowing me three years' leave of absence from my lectureship in 1976, thus giving me the leisure to complete several pieces of work, of which this book is one. Finally, I owe a special debt to the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton. I first went there as a visitor in 1974, and I am deeply grateful to Clifford Geertz, Albert Hirschman and Carl

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Kaysen for having proposed that I be invited to return in 1976 for a three-year stay. During these visits I have not only been able to write virtually the whole of the final draft of these volumes; I have also been privileged to discover that, as a setting for scholarly work, the Institute is beyond praise.

As these volumes go to press, I am very pleased to learn that there is still time to express my thanks to Jeremy Mynott of the Cambridge University Press, who has shown unfailing patience, efficiency and tact.

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Notes on the text

(1) *References.* I have tried as far as possible to dispense with the use of footnotes. However, I am of course anxious that the sources of all the quotations and other information I have given should be readily identifiable. The solution I have adopted is as follows. When citing from an original source I mention the author and identify the work immediately before quoting from it. I then give the page-reference in brackets at the end of the quotation. When taking information from a modern work of scholarship, I place the name of the author, the date of the work and the appropriate page-reference in brackets immediately after citing from it. Full details of all the editions I am using can be found in the bibliographies. It must be admitted that the use of these devices places certain constraints on my prose, and doubtless destroys any lingering pretensions to elegance. But the only alternative, in a book containing so many quotations, would be to disfigure the pages with an intolerable clutter of footnotes.

(2) *Editions.* In the case of original sources I generally use what I judge to be the most readily available edition. However, where a modern critical edition has been produced, embodying new scholarly findings, I always use this in preference to other and perhaps more readily accessible versions of the text. When quoting from Shakespeare's plays, my line-references are to the Oxford edition, edited by W. J. Craig and first published in 1905.

(3) *Translations.* I have generally made use of existing translations, except where they seem defective in significant respects. Where I cite from a source originally written in a language other than English, and where no translation exists, all translations are my own. I have also rendered all titles into English. The reader who wishes to recover the original titles of foreign works I have translated will find them included in the bibliographies of primary sources.

(4) *Bibliographies*. The bibliographies at the end of each volume are simply check-lists of primary sources I have actually discussed in the text, and of secondary works I have cited for specific pieces of information. They make no pretence of being full introductions to the very large literature on early-modern political thought. I have also added very brief bibliographies at the end of each group of Chapters. These contain what I take to be the most important works a student might begin by consulting if he or she wished to gain more information about one or other of the major writers discussed.

(5) *Names*. I have followed the conventional (though not very consistent) practice of anglicising the names of rulers and towns, while leaving the names of authors in their original form. Thus I speak of Francis I (not François ^{1^{er}}) but I speak of Jean (not John) Calvin. A special problem arises with those medieval and Renaissance writers who liked to classicise their names. These I have generally turned back into their vernacular forms. Thus I speak of Marsiglio (not Marsilius) of Padua, and of John Mair (not Major). In some cases, however, the classical versions have become so well-known that to do this would be absurd, and in these cases I have opted for familiarity rather than consistency. For example, I speak of Philipp Melanchthon (not Philipp Schwartzerd) and of Justus Lipsius (not Joost Lips).

(6) *Modernisation*. I have modernised wherever possible. All dates are expressed in the new style, with the year beginning on January 1st. Spelling and punctuation have been modernised in all citations from original sources. Archaic formulations (such as ‘doth’ for ‘does’) have been given in their modern equivalents, and all titles have been modernised – so that, for example, I speak of *The Book Named the Governor*, not *The Boke Named the Gouvernour*. I have followed these procedures even when citing from modern scholarly editions in which the original spelling and punctuation have been preserved. I recognise that this last decision may be felt to offend against the best scholarly etiquette, but the alternative seems to impose a gratuitous quaintness on the writers with whom I am concerned, with the consequent danger that their arguments may not be taken as seriously as they deserve.

(7) *Terminology*. 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. This means, however, that in several important cases the English

terms I employ need to be understood in their early-modern rather than in their current and somewhat different senses. There are three main examples of this:

(i) *Princeps* and *Magistratus*. Following early-modern practice, I normally render these terms respectively as ‘prince’ and ‘magistrate’. In early modern Europe, however, these translations still carried the (much wider) connotations of the original Latin, connotations which have since been lost. The term ‘prince’ was frequently used to refer to kings and emperors as well as princes. And ‘magistrate’ was standardly used to describe a much wider class of legal officials than the word currently denotes. In order to preserve consistency, I have generally employed both these terms – even when not translating – in their older and wider sense.

(ii) *Respublica*. Sometimes this term was used simply to mean ‘Republic’. Where the context makes it clear that this is the intended meaning, this is naturally the translation I adopt. But sometimes it was used to refer to kingdoms and principalities as well. Some modern scholars in consequence translate it – even in editions of fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century texts – as ‘State’. But this is misleadingly anachronistic, since no political writer before the middle of the sixteenth century used the word ‘State’ in anything closely resembling our modern sense. I have accordingly preferred in all such cases to follow the early-modern practice of translating *Respublica* as ‘commonwealth’. This may appear slightly mandarin, but it seems the only way to maintain consistency, as well as to signal the crucial fact that, in the period with which I am largely concerned, the term *Respublica* still carried with it a number of normative overtones (mainly suggestive of the common good) which have subsequently withered away in the increasingly individualist atmosphere in which our political arrangements have come to be discussed.

(iii) *Studia humanitatis*. Some modern scholars, translating this Ciceronian concept as ‘the humanities’ (and its cognates as ‘humanism’, ‘the humanists’, etc.) have gone on to use these terms with unfortunate vagueness. As a result, several authorities have recently proposed that, in order to avoid further confusion, the word ‘humanism’ ought to be excised from any future accounts of early-modern thought. (Professor Hay, for example, has tried to banish the word altogether from his survey of the Italian Renaissance.) (See Hay, 1961, p. 8.) Again, however, it seems to me – and here I simply follow the lead of Professor Kristeller’s seminal essays – that the answer lies not in evading the use of the term, but in confining its employment to its original Renaissance meaning, using it simply to refer to the students and protagonists of a particular group of

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NOTES ON THE TEXT

disciplines centred around the study of grammar, rhetoric, history and moral philosophy. Understood in this way, the term is I think valuable as well as perspicuous, and I have accordingly felt able to use it freely, though always, I hope, in this older and more restricted sense.