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978-0-521-58105-9 - Visions of Politics: Volume 1: Regarding Method

Quentin Skinner

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VISIONS OF POLITICS

The first of three volumes of essays by Quentin Skinner, one of the world's leading intellectual historians. This collection includes some of his most important philosophical and methodological statements written over the past four decades, each carefully revised for publication in this form. In a series of seminal essays Professor Skinner sets forth the intellectual principles that inform his work. Writing as a practising historian, he considers the theoretical difficulties inherent in the pursuit of knowledge and interpretation, and elucidates the methodology which finds its expression in his two succeeding volumes. All of Professor Skinner's work is characterised by philosophical power, limpid clarity and elegance of exposition. These essays, many of which are now recognised classics, provide a fascinating and convenient digest of the development of his thought.

QUENTIN SKINNER is Regius Professor of Modern History in the University of Cambridge and a Fellow of Christ's College. He has been the recipient of several honorary degrees, and is a Fellow of numerous academic bodies including the British Academy, the American Academy and the Academia Europea. His work has been translated into nineteen languages, and his many publications include *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought* (two volumes, Cambridge, 1978), *Machiavelli* (Oxford, 1981), *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes* (Cambridge, 1996) and *Liberty before Liberalism* (Cambridge, 1998).

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Volume 1: Regarding Method

QUENTIN SKINNER

*Regius Professor of Modern History
University of Cambridge*



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General preface

Several of the chapters in these volumes are appearing in print for the first time. But most of them have been published before (although generally in a very different form) either as articles in journals or as contributions to collective works. Revising them for re-publication, I have attempted to tread two slightly divergent paths at the same time. On the one hand, I have mostly allowed my original contentions and conclusions to stand without significant change. Where I no longer entirely endorse what I originally wrote, I usually indicate my dissent by adding an explanatory footnote rather than by altering the text. I have assumed that, if these essays are worth re-issuing, this can only be because they continue to be discussed in the scholarly literature. But if that is so, then one ought not to start moving the targets.

On the other hand, I have not hesitated to improve the presentation of my arguments wherever possible. I have corrected numerous mistranscriptions and factual mistakes. I have overhauled as well as standardised my system of references. I have inserted additional illustrations to strengthen and extend a number of specific points. I have updated my discussions of the secondary literature, removing allusions to yesterday's controversies and relating my conclusions to the latest research. I have tried to make use of the most up-to-date editions, with the result that in many cases I have changed the editions I previously used. I have replied to critics wherever this has seemed appropriate, sometimes qualifying and sometimes elaborating my earlier judgments. Finally, I have tinkered very extensively with my prose, particularly in the earliest essays republished here. I have toned down the noisy polemics I used to enjoy; simplified the long sentences, long paragraphs and stylistic curlicues I used to affect; taken greater pains to make use of gender-neutral language wherever possible; and above all tried to eliminate overlaps between chapters and repetitions within them.

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I need to explain the basis on which I have selected the essays for inclusion in these volumes. I have chosen and grouped them – and in many cases supplied them with new titles – with two main goals in mind. One has been to give each volume its own thematic unity; the other has been to integrate the volumes in such a way as to form a larger whole.

The chapters in volume 1, *Regarding Method*, are all offered as contributions to the articulation and defence of one particular view about the reading and interpretation of historical texts. I argue that, if we are to write the history of ideas in a properly historical style, we need to situate the texts we study within such intellectual contexts and frameworks of discourse as enable us to recognise what their authors were *doing* in writing them. To speak more fashionably, I emphasise the performativity of texts and the need to treat them intertextually. My aspiration is not of course to perform the impossible task of getting inside the heads of long-dead thinkers; it is simply to use the ordinary techniques of historical enquiry to grasp their concepts, to follow their distinctions, to recover their beliefs and, so far as possible, to see things their way.

The other volumes are both concerned with leading themes in early-modern European political thought. In volume 2, *Renaissance Virtues*, I focus on the fortunes of republicanism as a theory of freedom and government. I follow the re-emergence and development from the thirteenth to the sixteenth century of a theory according to which the fostering of a virtuous and educated citizenry provides the key to upholding the liberty of states and individuals alike. My concluding volume, *Hobbes and Civil Science*, examines the evolution and character of Thomas Hobbes's political thought, concentrating in particular on his theory of the state. I consider his views about the power of sovereigns, about the duties and liberties of subjects and about the grounds and limits of political obedience. I attempt in turn to relate these issues to Hobbes's changing views about the nature of civil science and its place in his more general scheme of the sciences.

While stressing the unity of each volume, I am anxious at the same time to underline the interrelations between them. I have attempted in the first place to bring out a general connection between volumes 2 and 3. As we turn from Renaissance theories of civic virtue to Hobbes's civil science, we turn at the same time from the ideal of republican self-government to its greatest philosophical adversary. Although I am mainly concerned in volume 3 with the development of Hobbes's thought, much of what he has to say about freedom and political obligation can also be read as a

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critical commentary on the vision of politics outlined in volume 2. The linkage in which I am chiefly interested, however, is the one I seek to trace between the philosophical argument of volume 1 and the historical materials presented in volumes 2 and 3. To put the point as simply as possible, I see the relationship as one of theory and practice. In volume 1 I preach the virtues of a particular approach; in the rest of the book I try to practise what I preach.

As I intimate in my general title, *Visions of Politics*, my overarching historical interest lies in comparing two contrasting views we have inherited in the modern West about the nature of our common life. One speaks of sovereignty as a property of the people, the other sees it as the possession of the state. One gives centrality to the figure of the virtuous citizen, the other to the sovereign as representative of the state. One assigns priority to the duties of citizens, the other to their rights. It hardly needs stressing that the question of how to reconcile these divergent perspectives remains a central problem in contemporary political thought. My highest hope is that, by excavating the history of these rival theories, I may be able to contribute something of more than purely historical interest to these current debates.

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I remain deeply obliged to the large number of colleagues who supplied me with detailed comments on the original versions of the chapters in these volumes, and I am very glad of the chance to renew my thanks to them here. This is also the moment to single out a number of friends who have given me especially unstinting support and encouragement in my work over the years. I list them with the deepest gratitude: John Dunn, Clifford Geertz, Raymond Geuss, Fred Inglis, Susan James, John Pocock, John Thompson, Jim Tully. My debt to them can only be described – in the words of Roget’s indispensable *Thesaurus* – as immense, enormous, vast, stonking and mega.

I also owe my warmest thanks to those friends who have helped to give the individual volumes in this book their present shape. For advice about the argument in volume 1 I am particularly grateful to Jonathan Lear, Kari Palonen, Richard Rorty and the late Martin Hollis. For numerous discussions about the themes of volume 2 I am similarly indebted to Philip Pettit and Maurizio Viroli. As will be evident from my argument there, I also learned a great deal from chairing the European Science Foundation workshop ‘Republicanism: A Shared European Heritage’. Special thanks to Martin van Gelderen and Iain Hampsher-Monk for many instructive and enjoyable conversations, and for helping to make our meetings such a success.¹ For advice about volume 3 I owe an overwhelming debt to Kinch Hoekstra, Noel Malcolm and Karl Schuhmann, all of whom have shown a heartwarming readiness to place at my disposal their astounding knowledge of early-modern philosophy. A number of my recent PhD students have likewise helped me by commenting on individual chapters or on my project as a whole. My thanks to David Armitage, Geoffrey Baldwin, Annabel Brett, Hannah Dawson, Angus

¹ The papers read and discussed at our meetings have now been published in two volumes: Martin van Gelderen and Quentin Skinner (eds.), *Republicanism: A Shared European Heritage* (Cambridge University Press, 2002).

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Gowland, Eric Nelson, Jürgen Overhoff, Jonathan Parkin and Richard Serjeantson.

As well as receiving so much assistance from individual scholars, I owe at least as great an obligation to the institutions that have sustained me throughout the long period in which I have been working on the materials presented here. The Faculty of History in the University of Cambridge has provided me with an ideal working environment throughout my academic career, and I have benefited immeasurably from my association with Christ's College and Gonville and Caius College. I never cease to learn from my colleagues and from the many brilliant students who pass through the Faculty, and I owe a particular debt to the University for its exceptionally generous policy about sabbatical leave. This is the first piece of work I have completed while holding my current post as a Leverhulme Major Research Fellow. I hope that other publications will follow, but in the meantime I already owe the Leverhulme Trust my warmest thanks for its support.

I need to reserve a special word of appreciation for the owners and custodians of the paintings and manuscripts I have examined. I am indebted to the Marquis of Lansdowne for permission to consult the Petty Papers at Bowood, and to the Duke of Devonshire and the Trustees of the Chatsworth settlement for allowing me to make extensive use of the Hardwick and Hobbes manuscripts at Chatsworth. I am similarly grateful for the courtesy and expertise I have encountered in the manuscript reading rooms of the Bibliothèque Nationale, the British Library, the Cambridge University Library, the Bodleian Library and the Library of St John's College Oxford. I am likewise grateful for the friendly helpfulness of the custodians of the Cappella degli Scrovegni in Padua and the Palazzo Pubblico in Siena.

For permission to reproduce photographs my thanks are due to Alinari (Florence), the Warburg Institute (University of London) and Dost Kitavebi (Ankara). For permission to make use of material that originally appeared in their pages I am grateful to the following journals and publishers: Blackwells and Co., The British Academy, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, *Essays in Criticism*, Europa Publications, *The Finnish Yearbook of Political Thought*, *The Historical Journal*, *History and Theory*, *History of Political Thought*, *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, *The Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, Macmillan and Co., *New Literary History*, *Politics, Prose Studies*, The Royal Historical Society, Stanford University Press and The University of Pennsylvania Press.

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I have benefited from an extraordinary amount of patient and resourceful assistance in the final stages of preparing these volumes for the press. Richard Thompson amended the quotations in several articles in which I had originally modernised the spelling of early-modern texts. Alice Bell devoted an entire summer to checking transcriptions and references with wonderful meticulousness. Anne Dunbar-Nobes undertook the enormous labour of assembling the bibliographies, rewriting them in author-date style, reformatting all the footnotes and checking them against the bibliographies to ensure an exact match.

While these volumes have been going through the Press I have received a great deal more in the way of technical help. Anne Dunbar-Nobes agreed to serve as copyeditor of the book, and saw it into production with superb professionalism as well as much good cheer. Philip Riley, who has for many years acted as proofreader of my work, generously agreed to perform that task yet again, and duly brought to bear his matchless skills, patience and imperturbability.

I cannot speak with sufficient admiration of my friends at Cambridge University Press. One of my greatest pieces of professional good fortune has been that, throughout my academic career, Jeremy Mynott has watched over the publication of my books with infallible editorial judgement. Richard Fisher has likewise been a pillar of support over the years, and has edited the present work with characteristic enthusiasm, imagination and unfaltering efficiency. My heartfelt thanks to them both, and to their very able assistants, for so much goodwill and expertise.

I cannot end without acknowledging that, if it were not for Susan James and our children Olivia and Marcus, I could not hope to manage at all.

The reprinting of these volumes has provided me with a welcome opportunity to weed out some small inaccuracies. I am very grateful to Richard Westerman for helping me to recheck the text.

Conventions

Abbreviations. The following abbreviations are used in the footnotes:

BL: British Library

BN: Bibliothèque Nationale

DNB: Dictionary of National Biography

OED: Oxford English Dictionary

Bibliographies. These are simply checklists of the primary sources I have actually quoted and the secondary authorities on which I have relied. They make no pretence of being systematic guides to the ever-burgeoning literature on the themes I discuss. In the bibliographies of printed primary sources I list anonymous works by title. Where a work was published anonymously but its author's name is known, I place the name in square brackets. In the case of anonymous works where the attribution remains in doubt, I add a bracketed question-mark after the conjectured name. The bibliographies of secondary sources give all references to journal numbers in arabic form.

Classical names and titles. I refer to ancient Greek and Roman writers in their most familiar single-name form, both in the text and in the bibliographies. Greek titles have been transliterated, but all other titles are given in their original language.

Dates. Although I follow my sources in dating by the Christian era (CE and BCE), I have had to make some decisions about the different systems of dating prevalent in the early-modern period. The Julian Calendar ('Old Style') remained in use in Britain, whereas the Gregorian ('New Style') – ten days ahead of the Julian – was employed in continental Europe from 1582. When quoting from sources written or published on the Continent I use the Gregorian style, but when quoting from

British sources I prefer the Julian. For example, I give Hobbes's date of birth as 5 April rather than 15 April 1588, even though the latter date is technically correct from our point of view, given that the Gregorian calendar was adopted in Britain in the eighteenth century. A further peculiarity of early-modern British dating is that the year was generally taken to start on 25 March. I have preferred to follow the continental practice of treating the year as beginning on 1 January. For example, I treat Hobbes's translation of Thucydides – entered in the Stationers' register with a date of 18 March 1628 – as entered in 1629.

Gender. Sometimes it is clear that, when the writers I am discussing say 'he', they do *not* mean 'he or she', and in such cases I have of course followed their usage rather than tampered with their sense. But in general I have tried to maintain gender-neutral language as far as possible. To this end, I have taken full advantage of the fact that, in the British version of the English language, it is permissible for pronouns and possessives after *each, every, anyone*, etc. to take a plural and hence a gender-neutral form (as in 'to each their need, from each their power').

References. Although I basically follow the author-date system, I have made two modifications to it. One has been rendered necessary by the fact that I quote from a number of primary sources (for example, collections of Parliamentary debates) that are unattributable to any one author. As with anonymous works, I refer to these texts by their titles rather than the names of their modern editors and list them in the bibliographies of primary sources. My other modification is that, in passages where I continuously quote from one particular work, I give references so far as possible in the body of the text rather than in footnotes. Except when citing from classical sources, I generally give references in arabic numerals to chapters from individual texts and to parts of multi-volume works.

Transcriptions. My rule has been to preserve original spelling, capitalisation, italicisation and punctuation so far as possible. However, I normalise the long 's', remove diphthongs, expand contractions, correct obvious typographical errors and change 'u' to 'v' and 'i' to 'j' in accordance with modern orthography. When quoting in Latin I use 'v' as well as 'u', change 'j' to 'i', expand contractions and omit diacritical marks. Sometimes I change a lower-case initial letter to an upper, or vice versa, when fitting quotations around my own prose.

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Translations. When quoting from classical sources, and from early-modern sources in languages other than English, all translations are my own except where specifically noted. I make extensive use of the editions published in the Loeb Classical Library, all of which contain facing-page versions in English. But because these renderings are often very free I have preferred to make my own translations even in these instances. I must stress, however, that I remain grateful for the availability of these editions, and have generally been guided by them in making my own translations, even to the extent of adopting turns of phrase.