

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-61503-7 - Rethinking the Foundations of Modern Political Thought

Edited by Annabel Brett and James Tully

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Rethinking the Foundations of Modern Political Thought

Quentin Skinner's classic study of *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought* was published by Cambridge in 1978. This was the first of a series of outstanding publications that have changed forever the way the history of political thought is taught and practised. *Rethinking the Foundations of Modern Political Thought* looks afresh at the impact of the original work, asks why it still matters and considers a number of significant agendas that it still inspires. A distinguished international team of contributors has been assembled, including many of the leading intellectual historians writing today, and the result is an unusually powerful and cohesive contribution to the history of ideas, of interest to large numbers of students of early modern history and political thought. In conclusion, Quentin Skinner replies to each chapter and presents his own thoughts on the latest trends and the future direction of the history of political thought.

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Annabel Brett and James Tully with
Holly Hamilton-Bleakley



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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

Cambridge University Press

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521615037

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First published 2006

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

ISBN-13 978-0-521-84979-1 hardback

ISBN-10 0-521-84979-9 hardback

ISBN-13 978-0-521-61503-7 paperback

ISBN-10 0-521-61503-8 paperback

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Preface

James Tully and Annabel Brett

The present volume has its beginnings in a conference of the same title held at Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, in 2003 – the twenty-fifth anniversary of the publication of *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*. We would like to start by thanking everyone involved in making that event a success. To Holly Hamilton-Bleakley we owe both the original idea for the conference and an enormous amount of the work involved in organising it. Aysha Pollnitz and Jacqueline Rose helped us out with exemplary efficiency and cheerfulness. But our greatest thanks are, of course, due to our speakers, whose uniformly excellent papers and comments made for such a memorable and stimulating intellectual occasion. We can only regret that for reasons of space we were not able to include all their contributions in this volume, and we would like to express our gratitude in particular to David Colclough, Tim Hochstrasser, Kari Palonen and Joan Pau Rubies for their part in the proceedings. We would like to express our special gratitude to John Salmon, whom we remember for his generous help with the project and outstanding contribution to the history of European thought.

There are several reasons why, twenty-five years on, Quentin Skinner's *Foundations* presented an apt subject for the kind of rethinking we wanted to encourage. It was in many ways an act of rethinking itself. One of Skinner's stated aims in the preface to that volume was simply to write 'a more up-to-date survey' of the transition from medieval to early-modern political thought, taking into account the new research and approaches which had evolved since what he viewed as the last such attempt, Pierre Mesnard's *L'essor de la philosophie politique au XVIe siècle* of 1936. The episodes, figures and categories he deployed bear the distinctive mark of a prior tradition of analysis, going back to the work of his Cambridge predecessor John Neville Figgis at the beginning of the twentieth century. But his ambitions for the two volumes did not rest solely with integrating new research into an inherited analytical framework. As his Preface goes on to make plain, he wanted to rethink this material in such a way as to demonstrate two major new ideas of his own: one, that the story of this transition is the story of the genesis of the modern concept of the state; two, that to write this story means writing not, in the first instance, about the 'great texts'

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of the Western canon, but about the normative vocabularies or ideologies that constituted the political discourse of the time. Only within these vocabularies, Skinner famously postulated, do the great texts find their intentionality and their sense; only in this context can continuity, change and transition be located.

In this sense, Skinner's book looked both backward, towards a by-then classic tradition of writing, and forward, towards a new vision of what the history of political thought could look like. The success of his Janus-faced *Foundations* is as remarkable as it is well known. Skinner effectively reconfigured the field of late-medieval and early-modern political thought, and a subsequent generation of scholars has gone to work within its outlines, inspired by his map and his method. Nonetheless, as they have done so, they have inevitably pushed at some of the boundaries he set out, questioning, refining or expanding both the substantive analyses and their methodological premises. Indeed, Skinner himself has to some extent done the very same thing. In the spirit of the original, the aim of the conference and of this volume was both to look back at these developments and assess their significance, and at the same time, more importantly, to look forward to where these new developments point us now at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

The Foundations of Modern Political Thought was not a book about method in itself, but it was one that self-consciously aimed to exemplify a method. Accordingly, the first two chapters of this book devote themselves, by way of introduction, to that theme. Mark Goldie situates *Foundations* within the intellectual context of Cambridge in the 1970s, while Holly Hamilton-Bleakley views the work from the perspective of Skinner's methodological dialogue with Collingwood, Wittgenstein and Austin. The following four chapters centre largely on volume I of *Foundations* and are concerned with two themes to which Skinner has continued to devote a great deal of attention: Renaissance civic humanism and liberty. John Pocock goes back to the book's founding moment to characterise its original dialectical intentions and critically to assess some of the directions Skinner's work on these themes has taken since. Marco Geuna begins by examining the reconstruction, in *Foundations*, of an Italian pre-humanist rhetorical culture, and goes on to consider its implications for Skinner's later work on Machiavelli and on the 'neo-Roman' idea of liberty in *Liberty before Liberalism*. Warren Boutcher looks at the period through a different lens, questioning the possibility, within Renaissance print culture, of recovering the intentions of authors and hence the moment of historical agency on which Skinner's method ultimately turns. Finally, Cathy Curtis takes an author who looms large in Skinner's story of Renaissance political thought, Thomas More, re-examining the nature of his republicanism and questioning the explanatory power of 'neo-Roman' terminology in relation to his work.

The next three chapters take up the major themes of the second volume of *Foundations*, Skinner's original and powerful reinterpretations of scholastic

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political thought in the Counter-Reformation and Calvinist resistance theories. Harro Höpfl questions the historical propriety of some of Skinner's categories and, to some extent, the whole notion of a 'scholastic political thought' as such. Annabel Brett considers the place of the scholastics within the story of an emerging concept of the state, asking how far it changes our picture of both to include their reflection on non-European peoples. Martin van Gelderen resituates Skinner's work on resistance theories with a new examination of the contrast between Calvinist and Lutheran discourse, extending the analysis to seventeenth-century Protestant theories of resistance up to Locke, as Skinner himself had intimated in *Foundations*.

Pursuing this same direction, chs. 10–12 deal with Thomas Hobbes and the modern concept of the state, around which *Foundations* was ultimately orientated. Richard Tuck and Kinch Hoekstra debate the question of whether or not Hobbes is a democratic theorist, a question which, as they show, involves considering at a very deep level his understanding of the nature and function of the state. By contrast, David Armitage looks beyond the territorial state to question Hobbes's place in the theory of international relations and its history. Finally, Quentin Skinner offers his own reflections both on *Foundations* itself and on the chapters, replying to some of their strongest claims, clarifying some of his own, and offering new and characteristically enlightening thoughts on these controversial and important topics.

In the process of editing this volume we have incurred further debts which it is a pleasure to acknowledge here. We would like to thank Richard Fisher of Cambridge University Press for his continuing encouragement and support. We would also like to thank Conor Donaldson, Mike Simpson and our copy-editor Hilary Scannell for coping admirably and patiently with the minutiae of the editing process. We are also grateful to the Pierre Trudeau Foundation of Canada and to Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, for their support. But we must end with our warmest appreciation and gratitude to Quentin Skinner for everything he has done in connection with this project, and for his continuing intellectual and personal inspiration to us and to so many others of his students and colleagues.