

## Intellectual History, Liberty and Republicanism: An Interview with Quentin Skinner<sup>1</sup>

*Javier Fernández Sebastián (JFS)*—If you are in agreement, we will begin this conversation with a few general methodological questions and then go on to deal with the more specific aspects of your work. I remember the huge impression my first readings of your methodological articles had on me at the beginning of the 1970s. In those years, the atmosphere reigning in Spanish universities was deeply pervaded with Marxism and many scholars used to consider ideas, or ideologies an epiphenomenon of another kind of reality or of more substantial structures (for example, the standard reference for studying seventeenth-century English political thought was the Spanish translation of Macpherson's *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism*). On the other hand, the subject matter called the History of Political Ideas was often regarded as a more philosophical and theoretical rather than historical discipline. In those seminal articles—I am referring to “Meaning and Understanding” above all—, besides severely criticizing what you called mythologies—mythology of doctrines, mythology of coherence, mythology of prolepsis—you convincingly redefined a number of basic concepts for studying this matter; among them were “context” and “intentionality.” Many discussions over the latter have taken place. However, nowadays, many years later, I have the impression that there are still those who take the notion of *context* lightly and have an incorrect understanding of it. Don't you think that one of your least understood analytical instruments is, perhaps due to its apparent transparency, your idea of “context”? Could you explain what you understand by “context” and its use in intellectual history?

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<sup>1</sup>) Quentin Skinner was interviewed by Javier Fernández Sebastián (Universidad del País Vasco, Spain) at the Centro de Estudios Políticos y Constitucionales, Madrid, on March 29, 2006. This interview has appeared in Spanish translation in *Historia y Política* 16: 237-258 (2006).

*Quentin Skinner (QS)*—May I first say how honored I feel to be asked to talk to you about my work, and how grateful I am to know that it has been of some use to you in your own intellectual development. I'm particularly glad to know that my early methodological articles struck a chord with you, for they were written in a very different intellectual climate, and I am always worried that nowadays they may look like mere antiques.

As you rightly say, they were written at a time when Marxist methodologies were extremely prominent in Anglophone academic life. I am very interested to know that this was also the case in Spain, and that Macpherson's *Possessive Individualism* was translated and well-known. Macpherson's work was of course very important, and I do not want to sound as if I am nothing but a critic of Marxism. We need to remember that Marx's writings have frequently served as a liberating as well as a challenging force. Furthermore, he bequeathed to us a vocabulary of social analysis that we all continue to use: such concepts as alienation, exploitation, and wage-slavery have lost nothing of their power or relevance in the global capitalism of the present century. It sometimes seems to me that Marxism has become discredited at precisely the time when some of its insights seem increasingly worth taking seriously.

From the perspective, however, of an intellectual historian, the economic determinism associated with Marxism always seemed to me a hostile as well as a misguided argument. You are right to say that much of my early philosophical work was directed against the accompanying assumption that intellectual life is simply "superstructural," and hence susceptible of being causally explained by reference to underlying economic forces. It is important to remember how crudely this alleged distinction between base and superstructure was deployed even by the most widely admired historians at the time when I joined the profession in the early 1960s. For example, Fernand Braudel had just published what he himself described as a "total history" of the Age of Philip II in which he contrived to say nothing whatever about the philosophy of the time, although the Spanish Universities of the later sixteenth century were among the most intellectually vibrant and influential in the whole of Europe. For me, Braudel's "totality" missed out practically everything of the greatest historical interest: the art, music, literature, and philosophy of the age.

You ask about the concept of "context" that I put forward by way of challenging this Marxist distinction between base and superstructure. As

you say, the notion looks transparent, but my use of it has certainly been widely misunderstood. I was not of course pleading for an historical method based on nothing more than an indiscriminating holism, an attempt to relate everything to everything else, as critics have sometimes complained. The kind of context I wanted intellectual historians to take as their main object of enquiry was a very specific one, and stemmed from my more general views about the character of philosophical texts, especially texts in the history of moral, social, and political philosophy.

My view has always been that one of the most fruitful ways of approaching such texts is to view them as embedded in processes of legitimization. They are often most usefully considered, that is, as attempts to support or criticize, to commend or condemn particular actions, institutions or states of affairs. I have been inclined to say, particularly in the case of even the most canonical works of moral and political theory, that they only exist because there must have been some specific problems within their society that were felt to need attention and debate. Even the “classic” texts of the canon, I have always argued, need to be approached as attempts to address and deal with such specific and local issues. The sort of explanatory context in which I have always been interested has therefore been the context of whatever moral and political problems were uppermost in public debate at the time. I have been interested, that is, in recovering a context of questions to which even the greatest texts of moral and political theory can be seen as attempted solutions and answers.

But I need to add—and here I return to my critique of Marxism—that this is not in the least to say that I treat these texts as nothing but rationalizations of the moral or political outlook of their age. On the contrary, our attempts to address the deepest moral problems thrown up by our societies always draw on a background of inherited intellectual resources. These traditions are always normative for us in various ways. What we generally do, as a matter of fact, is to turn to them and try to show how they can be brought to bear on contemporary issues. The key point to remember, I always feel, is that what it is possible to do always depends in part on what you can hope to legitimize, so that the relationship between principle and action can never be a purely instrumental one.

JFS—Still on the subject of “context,” allow me to read an excerpt from a text written by the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset at the beginning of the 1940s:

“There is no real ‘history of ideas’. All texts look (...) like a fragment of a context. But both text and context each mean and refer to a situation in view of which everything spoken arose (...). The real situation from which one speaks or writes is the general context of all expressions. Language always acts in reference to it, implies it and demands it. (...) An idea is always a man’s reaction to a certain situation and circumstance. The idea is an action that a man carries out in view of particular circumstances and with a specific aim. (...) Thus, there are no ‘eternal ideas’. Every idea is inevitably attached to the situation or circumstances in which it performs its active role and function”.<sup>2</sup>

Would you endorse these statements generally speaking? Or, on the contrary, is there anything you would like to clarify or any points you would like to add?

QS—Your quotation from Ortega y Gasset was new to me, but I find it altogether congenial, and indeed it is disconcerting to see how much he is already saying in the 1940s what I tried to say in the 1960s. It is a beautiful passage, and basically I agree with it wholeheartedly.

You ask if I have anything to add to it. Perhaps I might allow myself two observations. He states that an idea is always the reaction to some specific circumstance, and he adds that there are therefore no eternal ideas. I suppose that, strictly speaking, the alleged inference does not follow. Within the most abstract realms of thought, there might surely be some concepts to which an appeal is always made, even under the most diverse social circumstances. My other observation is that I would not myself want to say that (to quote) “the idea is an action.” I would want to say that the articulation of an idea is always an action, always involves the performance of a specific speech-act. However, basically what Ortega is saying seems to me not only right, but wonderfully expressed.

JFS—Commenting on the importance of the general political vocabulary and linguistic conventions of an epoch as an impassable intellectual limit, in the Prologue to the first volume of *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought* (1978), you wrote that “the problem faced by any agent wishing to

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<sup>2)</sup> José Ortega y Gasset, *Complete Works* (Madrid: Alianza Editorial-Revista de Occidente, 1983), Vol. VI, 377-418; see in particular pp. 388-392; the emphasis is that of the author.

legitimize what he is doing at the same time as he achieves what he proposes simply cannot be the instrumental problem of moulding his normative language so that it adapts to his *projets*. In part, it has to be the problem of moulding his *projets* so that they adapt to the normative language available.”<sup>3</sup> According to this, it can be said that language imposes certain limits on expression and, to an extent, confines us in a closed space. It seems to me, however, that in much of your work, especially in recent years, you have insisted above all on the most active aspect of language as being a resource provider available to agents, who make use of it—through different rhetorical strategies—with quite different aims. Don’t you think that this difference in emphasis—language as a weapon/language as a limitation—is one of the features that, especially since the last decade of the twentieth century, distinguishes your work from that of Pocock, with whom you are so often associated?

QS—I very much agree with you that Pocock is a more structuralist historian than I am, although it’s only fair to add that this is a label he has always repudiated. But I am certainly more interested than he is in language as a weapon of debate. I have even made an attempt to classify the different ways in which it is possible for changes in the use of evaluative vocabularies to have the effect of forcing us to reconsider the appraisal of our social world. For example, the more broadly a positively evaluative term is taken to be applicable, the wider the range of actions we can hope to legitimize. And, as I have already said, the more you can hope to legitimize a given range of actions, the more readily you can hope to perform them. Pocock tends to stress the power of language to constrain the imagination, and he is of course right to do so; but I am at least as much interested in the power of language to provide us with new imaginative possibilities.

JFS—Your work has helped us understand that what we have traditionally called liberalism in Spain—a term originally coined in our language—, at least in the most radical sectors, resembles the discourse of civic humanism and classic republicanism. The first Spanish liberals, who promoted the 1812 Constitution in the Courts (Cortes) of Cadiz, did not tire in their constant

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<sup>3</sup>) Quentin Skinner, *Los fundamentos del pensamiento político moderno* (Mexico: F.C.E., I), 10-11. (This is a translation from the Spanish version and not the original.)

appeal to virtue and patriotism. They even maintained a conception of liberty that, despite being within the coordinates of a Catholic country, is sometimes reminiscent of Roman republican conceptions. It is no coincidence that those first liberals were fighting against Napoleon for Spain's independence, and the concepts of liberty and independence were closely associated in their discourse. In fact, these two concepts were referred to in a rather vague sense by these liberals—liberty had a more individualistic connotation and the independence a more collective one—but both were semantically close to non-dependence on either a king or a foreign power. And it does not seem accidental to me that, in the language of the 1810 revolutionaries, the so-called liberals branded their adversaries servile, just because they submitted themselves voluntarily to somebody else's will, that is, to the absolute power of a monarch. In this respect, I would like to know whether you have come across texts comparing the concepts of liberty and independence in your study of political discourse in seventeenth-century England. I am referring specifically to whether the theorists you have denominated "neo-Romans" ever suggested some kind of equation between the notions of "free state" and "individual freedom." To what extent can the concepts of liberty and independence appear to be not only Siamese twins but also synonyms or quasi-synonyms in certain contexts?

QS—What you say about the Spanish "liberals" of the early nineteenth century, and how they look like "classical republicans," interests me very much. When one reflects that the liberation of Spain from foreign conquest was one of their primary aims, it is not surprising to find them making a contrast between freedom and dependence, and branding their opponents as slavish. This was exactly the vocabulary in which the American colonists likewise legitimized their split—their Declaration of Independence, as it is worth remembering they called it—from the British crown at the end of the eighteenth century. Wars of national liberation have often, perhaps always, been characterized as wars of independence, and thus of liberation from conditions of servitude. The use of this vocabulary evokes one of the mostly distinctively "republican" ideas, the idea that freedom should be defined essentially as absence of dependence.

The more that the intellectual history of modern Spain begins to be written, the more fascinatingly does Spain appear to relate to, and contrast with, the political assumptions more familiar to those of us who live in

northern Europe. I remember when, in volume 2 of my book *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, I took the School of Salamanca to be the most important voice in early-modern Europe in debates about natural rights and the ethics of Empire, several of my early reviewers considered this to be an absurd piece of revisionism. From their point of view, Spain seemed marginal to “Europe.” But I hardly need to remind you that Spain was the centre of the greatest of the early-modern Empires, and I wish that Spanish scholars would tell us more about the intellectual history of that extraordinarily important era in the history of the Peninsula.

Your associated question as to whether, in early-modern Anglophone political writing, one hears about an equation between “free states” and individual freedom is a very interesting one. Until Hobbes managed to persuade the English that liberty signifies nothing more than absence of impediments to motion, I would say that most people took there to be a close relationship between being free and living in a free state. This was not, however, because they equated the two concepts; rather they put forward the causal claim that it is possible to live and act freely if and only if you live as a citizen of a free state.

The reason for this commitment was that, before Hobbes, freedom was generally understood in Anglophone discourse to be the name of a status, not merely a predicate of individual actions. To be free meant to be independent of the arbitrary will of others, and hence to be “your own man” rather than being the servant or creature of anyone else. But if, it was argued, you live under any form of government other than one in which the laws alone rule, and in which the people as a body make those laws, then you will be living subject to discretionary or arbitrary powers held by a ruler or a ruling group. To live under such a system, however, is to live in part at least in dependence on the will of others. And to live in such dependence was taken to be what it meant to have the status of a slave. For these writers, it followed that to live in freedom it is necessary to live in a state in which the apparatus of power remains wholly in the hands of the people. This was the form of government they designated a free state—because it will be free from subjection to the will of tyrants and foreign conquerors alike. And this is how they came to arrive at their central claim: that it is possible to live freely if and only if you live in such a state.

As I say, it was Hobbes—arguing that the extent of your freedom depends not on who makes the laws, but simply on how many laws are

made—who persuaded the English that forms of government are irrelevant to the extent of the liberty enjoyed by subjects. As he puts it in *Leviathan*, “whether the commonwealth be monarchical or popular, the freedom is still the same.” This remains a defining distinction between the proponents of a “republican” by contrast with a “liberal” view of politics. Liberals are democrats, as it were, in a secondary sense: what they care about is the extent of freedom, whoever provides it. Republicans are democrats first and foremost: they believe that freedom depends on self-government.

JFS—Throughout the 1990s it is possible to observe in your works that there was a sharp increase in the methodological use of the notion of rhetorical redescription, a technique described in great detail in chapter 4 of your *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes* (1996). Could you briefly explain how rhetoric is related to conceptual change, how you came to believe in the essential role of rhetoric in political philosophy and in what sense the new rhetorical perspective changed your previous vision of political and intellectual history?

QS—I am particularly glad to be given the chance to say something about my increasing preoccupation with the place of rhetoric in philosophy. This interest originally arose when I was writing my first book, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, in the 1970s. I opened the first volume with a survey of the rhetorical culture of early Renaissance humanism. Studying the classical Roman origins of this culture, I became increasingly fascinated by the importance for Cicero and his followers of the idea of dialogue. This went with their belief that, at least in what Cicero called the moral sciences, there will always be two sides to any question, so that it will always be possible for a skilled orator to argue *in utramque partem*, on either side of the case.

I came to see that, in the early-modern philosophy I had begun my career by studying—that of Descartes, Hobbes, Locke and other luminaries of the so-called New Philosophy—there was a highly ambivalent attitude towards the rhetorical arts. These philosophers basically detested classical and Renaissance rhetoric as an affront to rational argument, and to their aspiration to produce demonstrative systems of thought. But they were keenly aware at the same time of the power of rhetoric, and I came to see—

especially in the case of Hobbes—that they were not in the least averse to the use of the rhetorical arts in their own philosophical work.

I eventually arrived at a view which had by then become commonplace among post-modern commentators, namely that the very idea of a categorical distinction between “rhetoric” on the one hand and “rational argument” on the other is itself a rhetorical construction. Rather, I came to feel, we need to think of all argument as having rhetorical components. This led me to feel that we ought to be making an examination of the rhetoric of argument one of the subjects of our historical research. This is what I eventually tried to undertake in my book *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes*.

One of the questions that particularly interested me in that book was what rhetorical techniques Hobbes employed to bolster what he claimed to be his “scientific” arguments. One of the most prominent was sheer ridicule of his intellectual adversaries. This led me to examine more closely the role of satire as a weapon of philosophical debate, and eventually prompted me to write in a more general way about the place of laughter in philosophy. But the point of more general importance that eventually struck me as I looked at Hobbes’s philosophy from a rhetorical point of view was that, in the New Philosophy of the seventeenth century as a whole—and indeed in the idiom of analytical philosophy that descends from it—the concepts of “reason” and “rational argument” are constantly deployed rhetorically. There is, if you like, a rhetoric of reason: the prestige of certain forms of argument continues, it seems to me, to be buttressed by essentially rhetorical means, although this is something that analytical philosophers remain unwilling to accept.

JFS—Traditionally, in the history of ideas we often come across categories created by the interpreter or analytical concepts constructed by the historian, which are intended to pass for “objective descriptions” or structures of reality itself: Wittgenstein warned that at times “the predicate of the thing lies in the method of representing it.”<sup>4</sup> I believe this often happens to certain -isms and intellectual movements, such as the Enlightenment,

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<sup>4</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophische Untersuchungen*, § 104, Spanish version by A. García Suárez and U. Moulines, *Investigaciones filosóficas* (Barcelona: Crítica, 1988), 118-121.

Liberalism, Romanticism, etc., historiographical objects that many practitioners of intellectual history often use as if they were “objective” entities, obvious enough by themselves. Nevertheless, we know that these and other similar labels are, to a certain extent, the result of historical narrative and certain historiographical practices. Your work, alongside that of P. Laslett, J. Dunn, J.G.A. Pocock, among others, has contributed towards questioning and challenging some of these distorted visions. I have the impression, however, that the trivialization of some of the Cambridge School postulates is giving rise to new distortions that are not so different from those that you so rightly criticized in the past. Don't you believe that, in recent times, the success of your work has caused an increase in the use of labels like “civic humanism” and “classical republicanism” in the intellectual world, labels that are often used too hastily? The abusive use of such labels may be causing a more superficial than profound change in academic (or even journalistic) jargon. The consequence of this trend is that more than a few authors, having abandoned the old clichés of “bourgeois ideology,” “liberalism,” etc., have now embraced new labels such as “the language of virtue” or “classical republicanism” in a way that is hardly reflexive or critical. Do you think there is a risk that such labels will become part of our historical narrative and will impose themselves on scholarly work “from the outside”? In this case, wouldn't theoretical and axiological perceptions equally detached from the awareness and concerns of the various agents involved in the different times, contexts, and circumstances they lived in be projected onto the past?

QS—The warning you issue here seems to me an extremely salutary one. One target of my polemics in my early methodological writings was the tendency to treat our heuristic categories as if they are things. From a different angle, and more profoundly, Lyotard made some of the same points in his brilliant attack on *Grands récits*. But you are absolutely right that the fault keeps creeping up on us unawares, and I am myself a culprit. My first book, which I have already mentioned, employs in its title the dangerous metaphor of foundations, as if there is such a thing as modernity, which can even be figured as an architectural structure. The danger, as you imply, is that cultural materials that don't readily fit into the structure get cast aside, with inevitably unhistorical results. Furthermore, in some of my more recent work on the Renaissance I have continued to speak—for want of a better term—about “pre-humanism.” This misleadingly implies that

there is a clear structure of humanist thought, and that its elements can confidently be sought in earlier periods. None of these assumptions is wholly mistaken, of course; it's just that they are all too liable to trap us into writing teleological histories of entities which are themselves merely constructs. You can't be too careful.

You are quite right to say that some of the categories introduced by those of us interested in "republican" traditions of thought are beginning to be misused in a similar way. The vocabulary of "civic virtue" in particular has become all too easily detached from its original Renaissance context, and is now being used as a tool with which to open up texts that formed no part of the debates in which these concepts were originally forged.

JFS—Let us change the subject. We would now like to explore your point of view on the possibility of harmonizing your own methodology with other approaches, especially with *Begriffsgeschichte*. For some years now, a number of academics such as Melvin Richter, Kari Palonen, and some of us in Spain have been trying to combine these two methodological perspectives in our work. In fact, we are currently overseeing an ambitious project of comparative conceptual history of the Ibero-American world (Iberconceptos), which brings together over 50 researchers from Spain, Portugal and Latin America. The basic questionnaire includes suggestions we consider to be useful from both German conceptual history and the Cambridge School. Faced with certain positions that tend to regard concepts as real, you have stated with very sound reason that, rather than a history of concepts, we could be dealing with a history of the successive uses of one or another concept in arguments posited by agents at different times (you yourself have written some excellent works on the varying use of the concept of State by political theorists during the early modern Age, or on some of the crucial debates about the concept of liberty). But on the other hand, Koselleck—who we were lucky enough to interview a year ago—insists that even the most surprising and innovating uses of a concept at a given time are only possible due to old usages; that is, due to repetitions occurring diachronically and the temporal depth inherent to that concept. No author could say something truly new without basing himself on the historical corpus of the language, including all kinds of linguistic resources often used and repeated during a more or less long tradition. Now, if all pragmatics presupposes a semantic history, and conceptual changes can be examined, not only at the micro level of specific

rhetorical re-descriptions, but also at the macro level of long-term transformations, doesn't Palonen's position seem reasonable to you, when he defends the combination of the pragmatic, intentionalist, and contextualist perspective you represent with Koselleck's semantic perspective, more closely related to the strata of meaning (time-layers) and the temporary internal dimension of concepts?

QS—I feel cautious about saying anything about the relations between my work and that of Koselleck, as I have come to see that this is a minefield. But let me risk three remarks about what you have said. First of all it seems to me misleading to speak of Koselleck as writing about the history of concepts. This is not what he ever did: what he wrote about was the history of words. I doubt if this is the best approach for an historian to adopt. For example, I have been much interested, as you rightly note, in the concept of rhetorical redescription—the idea that it may be possible to redescribe certain vices as virtues. At one point I tried to write a history of the term (*paradiastole*) used by classical and Renaissance rhetoricians to express the concept involved. I now feel that I would have done much better to try to write a history of the concept, and not a history of the vocabulary used to express it. Many ancient writers, from Thucydides and Plato onwards, were deeply interested in the phenomenon that later came to be known as *paradiastole*, but in no surviving Greek text does the word ever appear. A history of *paradiastole* ought therefore to be a history of the discussion of the rhetorical technique involved, not a history of the term by which the concept eventually came to be expressed. If instead we follow the latter course, the result will be a misleading as well as an impoverished narrative. Many writers will be excluded simply because they did not use a particular vocabulary, and not because of any lack of interest in the concept concerned.

Besides this doubt, I have two other worries about Koselleck's project as it has so far been conducted. One is that Koselleck himself seems to have strongly felt that, in the case of many of the semantic histories he traced, there was a major rupture to be noted around the time of the French revolution. This may be so in the German language, but I seriously doubt whether it is so in English. I sometimes feel that the presence of this assumption pulls out of shape some of the articles in Koselleck's great Dictionary.

My main doubt, however, arises from the fact that Koselleck presided over the production of a Dictionary. I still feel that there is something unhistorical about the lists of meanings and alleged changes of meaning that make up most of the entries. This approach is insensitive to the fact that some concepts (or rather, some terms used to express them) have gone in and out of use, and have been more or less widely used at different times. Koselleck's approach is not well attuned to capturing such gaps and alterations of emphasis. More important, it is hard to gain any sense from these dictionary entries of why these concepts mattered at particular periods, why they were discussed at all. This is perhaps a roundabout way of saying, once again, that the properly historical task seems to me that of studying not the histories of words but the history of the uses to which these words were put at different times in argument.

JFS—I would like to suggest shifting our discussion now to some aspects of your work on the concept of liberty.

According to your analysis of certain political thinkers from the time of the English Revolution in the seventeenth century, the neo-Roman theory conceived civil liberty as being essentially non-dependence; obviously, in purely logical terms, the opposites of dependence, interference and domination are independence, non-interference and non-domination. Thus, depending on the circumstances, both interference and dependence can be legitimate or arbitrary, and they can be experienced or exercised in multiple forms and even alternatively by agents (we only have to remember Foucault's approach to the microphysics of power as a generalized phenomenon, immanent to society itself). And, going one step further, if present-day democracies try to learn lessons from this analysis, are we not before a question of degree—more or less obstruction, more or less dependence—, rather than a radical dichotomy between free and non-free States, societies and individuals? Moreover, assuming this dilemma cannot be dealt with in exclusive terms—liberty *or* submission—, wouldn't we be facing what Pierre Rosanvallon has described in several of his works as an aporia of democracy.

QS—I must confess that I want to hold fast to a rather sharp distinction between freedom and dependence. Certainly it is the view of all the seventeenth-century English writers you mention that, if you depend on the

arbitrary will of another, this wholly takes away your liberty, because it reduces you to the status of a slave. This is not in the least to deny, however, that some forms of dependence may be benign. Perhaps the most central claim of the anti-royalist writers of the seventeenth-century English revolution was that, if in a civil association you depend only on the law, and if you have a voice in the making of the law, then you are not only free but remain free even in the act of obeying the law itself. This is because the law will be an expression of your will (or at least your represented will), and to act according to your will is to act freely. Nor am I denying that some forms of interference may likewise be benign. For example, it is clearly a restriction of freedom that we are not allowed to choose on which side of the road to drive. But this merely reminds us that freedom is not the supreme social value. It will often be trumped by other values—sometimes by considerations of general welfare; sometimes, as in this example, by simple notions of safety and security.

JFS—Now that we have mentioned Rosanvallon, comparing your work with his (methodological aspects aside), I have the impression that both perspectives are opposed to each other, though also complementary to some degree. Your works, and those of some of your Anglophone colleagues, tend to criticize certain premises of liberalism; at the same time you bring long lost republican traditions to light in such a way that they gain value. Meanwhile, Rosanvallon's claim apparently added a little more liberalism to his country's republican-statist tradition through his critical analysis of the French political model (above all looking for the reinforcement of civil society). Thus, I would like to know what are your main criticisms or reproaches regarding liberal democracy? Furthermore, in your opinion, what are the useful lessons to be learnt by present-day European citizens from the neo-Roman concept of liberty and republicanism in general?

QS—Your mention of Pierre Rosanvallon's work does indeed bring out a contrast between his sense of a "usable past" and that of some Anglophone writers about republican thought. Like the late François Furet, Rosanvallon is critical of the Jacobin vision of popular sovereignty that has formed one strand of the French political tradition ever since the Revolution. He pleads, one might perhaps say, more in the manner of Montesquieu for a mixed constitution with power checking power, and for a strong civil soci-

ety as a buffer against the state. By contrast with this picture, protagonists of republicanism tend to be more worried about the eagerness of modern states to accrue more and more discretionary powers upon which the notionally sovereign people then become dependent, to the detriment of their civil liberty and rights.

You ask what might be the most useful lesson to be learned by present-day European citizens from reflecting on republican ideas of liberty. I have stressed that what is distinctive about the republican understanding of liberty is that it contrasts the freedom of citizens not so much with actual governmental interference, but rather with conditions of domination and dependence. The republican wants to insist that, if your civil liberties are held merely at the discretion of the executive, then you are not free at all. You are free if and only if you depend exclusively on a known set of laws, and not on anyone's discretionary powers. If you live subject to the discretionary powers of an executive, then although you may remain in *de facto* possession of your rights, you have no knowledge of what might or could happen to you if you were to challenge these powers. As a result, you will be prone to self-censor, restricting your criticisms or, to put the same point another way, curtailing your own liberty.

JFS—I include myself among those who believe that one of the most valuable contributions of your work is precisely your approach to past thought in strictly historical terms (which has also made a decisive contribution towards a rapprochement between intellectual and political history). Regarding this subject, contrary to those who have at times accused you of “antiquarianism,” it has always seemed to me that recovering past intellectual worlds is in no way a banal exercise in archaeological erudition or antiquarianism. I fully support your apparently paradoxical claim that the current importance of certain texts and certain political speeches may in fact derive more from the alterity or “foreignness” of such texts in relation to the present day than from its similarity or familiarity with current ideas.<sup>5</sup> Undoubtedly, we have a lot to learn from the study of the past *qua* past, and the work of the intellectual historian can be of a great help in this

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<sup>5</sup> On this matter, some years ago, while commenting on liberty in Machiavelli, Skinner remarked that projecting our current concerns about the study of the history of ideas

sense, even in the sphere of political praxis to a certain extent. However, I have the impression—and please correct me if I am wrong—that, ever since the lectures you delivered in the Collège de France in 1997, you have become increasingly engaged in public political debate. It could be said that Skinner the philosopher is, at least to a certain extent, little by little eclipsing Skinner the historian in your more recent works, especially in your work on the neo-Roman theory of liberty. On the other hand, you have often claimed that writing political theory is also a way of making politics. But what about intellectual history? Do you think that writing history of political thought is also a way of making politics (or better said, a form of civic commitment)? Does it not worry you that this inflection towards the normative field might end up making you seem more a political philosopher than a historian? Do you not think that you could be accused of losing the neutrality that all historians aspire to? Aren't you afraid that future scholars may regard you as an innovative ideologist and apply analytical tools for the study of rhetoric in your work, the same way you yourself have so keenly applied to authors of the past?

QS—You are quite right to issue a warning to me here, I think, but the dilemma you identify is one that besets all students of the humanities. On the one hand, we want our studies to be as scholarly as we can make them. Otherwise they will be little better than works of propaganda. But on the other hand, we surely want our studies to be of some value to our societies. I sometimes worry that the purity of our scholarly intentions can result in work that risk having little such value. The answer that scholars often give to this dilemma is that natural curiosity is always worth satisfying, and that this justifies scholarship of every kind. But this has never seemed to me enough. It seems to me that our students ought to be able to ask us what value our scholarship can add to their lives, and that we ought to be able to give them a convincing response. I hasten to add that, if we answer that

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back into the past is not necessarily the best way of “understanding it,” as “it could well be the aspects of the past, which at first sight seem to lack contemporary relevance, that when examined more carefully, turn out to possess a more immediate philosophical significance” (Quentin Skinner, “La idea de libertad negativa: perspectivas filosóficas e históricas.” In *La filosofía en la historia*, edited by R. Rorty, J. B. Schneewind and Q. Skinner (Barcelona: Paidós, 1990), 237.

our studies may help them to gain a more informed appreciation of their cultural heritage and their current culture, then this is the kind of value I most of all have in mind.

Faced with the dilemma I have outlined, the distinction I have always sought to draw for myself is as follows. I think that our choice of what to study should be motivated by our sense of what matters here and now. We should select the subjects we study in the light of their having some kind of general social significance. But having selected them, we should be as rigorous in our scholarship as we can possibly manage to be, for otherwise our findings will lack any integrity and authority. The problem is that this distinction between motivation and execution is very hard to sustain: our motives are always liable to contaminate our results. I can offer no solution to this dilemma, beyond saying that we need to be as self-aware about it as possible. We must also take care not to deny that it really is a dilemma, either by becoming too purely instrumental or too purely antiquarian in our studies, which I see as the equal enemies of valuable scholarship.

Perhaps I should add a purely autobiographical footnote. Of recent years I have become increasingly anxious about the anti-democratic direction being followed in the politics of my own country. As a result, my recent work has, as you rightly note, probably slipped in the direction of becoming more political and perhaps too political in character. But in my latest work I have changed direction. I am returning to my earlier studies of rhetoric, focusing this time on the place of rhetoric not in philosophy but in the dramatic literature of the early-modern period. I certainly think that this work, if I can manage to complete it successfully, could have some cultural value, for I am focusing on Shakespeare's use of the rhetorical arts, and this needs no apology. But my work will be as scholarly as I can make it, and will be altogether removed from the current political scene.

JFS—Concerning what is commonly known as “republicanism” or the “republican paradigm,” especially in the Anglophone academic world, there is another matter that I would like you to clear up for us. As a result of not only your works but also those of other authors, such as John Pocock, Philip Pettit, Maurizio Viroli, Michael Sandel, Cass Sunstein, Will Kymlicka, etc., in the last few decades the adjective “republican” has been used in an increasingly more vague and broad sense. Now, doesn't the idea of a republican theory or practice of liberty lasting so many centuries presuppose the

very dubious assumption of a semantic continuity in the use of this terminology by authors from the sixteenth (not to mention republican Rome) to the twenty-first century? Isn't a succession of quite different meanings, contexts, questions and answers from the different agents involved being left aside? Wouldn't this alleged continuity imply an acceptance of the existence of a number of perennial problems, which once expelled from the history of political thought through the door have come back in through the window? Furthermore, wouldn't this help in creating a "Machiavellean myth," symmetric to that of Locke, which John Pocock so masterfully dealt with years ago? In short, wouldn't we be running the risk of creating a mythology of republicanism parallel and opposite to the old mythology of liberalism?

QS—Here too you seem to me to issue a very salutary warning. The term "republican" has certainly begun to be used with unhelpful vagueness. Nowadays I try to avoid it altogether. This is partly because what interests me is primarily a distinctive view of liberty rather than the general idea of a republican constitution. But my main reason is that the theory of liberty that interests me—the one I have been outlining in answering some of your earlier questions—is not specifically "republican" at all. Within early-modern political philosophy, it was a deep question as to whether it might be possible to assure the independence of citizens from arbitrary or discretionary power under a monarchy as well as under a republic. The British even came to believe—and in turn succeeded in persuading Montesquieu—that the constitution established after our so-called Glorious Revolution of 1688 was in substance that of a republic, although in form that of a monarchy. The reasoning underlying this commitment was that a monarch without discretionary or prerogative powers can properly be said to preside over a republic or free state.

It is true that this contention has always seemed to me self-deceiving in the British case. Although the Royal Prerogative is nowadays exercised by the executive, it remains extensive and continues to include, for example, the right to declare war and peace. This explains why our present Prime Minister was under no constitutional obligation to seek a mandate from Parliament in order to commit the British people to fighting a war in Iraq. However, the general point stands: it might be possible, under a monarchy without prerogative powers, to claim that 'republican' liberty had been

granted to the people. This explains why, in my own writings about freedom, I have preferred to speak of the neo-Roman theory stemming from the Roman law distinction between freedom and servitude, and not of a “republican” theory of liberty at all.

JFS—To conclude, allow us to refer summarily to how your works and, more in general, the school of thought in moral and political philosophy known as “republicanism” have been received in Spain. To begin with, I would say that it is at least surprising that such a widely known author has never been invited to our country by an academic institution before. It is true that among your books only *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought* and *Liberty before Liberalism* have been translated into Spanish (both edited in Mexico, if I am not mistaken). Nevertheless, I believe that all Spanish political historians, philosophers, and well-informed political scientists are familiar with your work and your career, at least to a certain extent. However, I have the impression that your name is being more and more associated with militant republicanism, which has been embraced by certain groups of intellectuals linked to the Socialist Party (PSOE). Just a few months after his victory in the general election, President Zapatero received Philip Pettit and publicly acknowledged that the work of the Irish political theorist was one of his basic intellectual references.<sup>6</sup> Certainly, the reading of republicanism by many socialists is rather instrumental and is restricted to searching ideological grounds for new arguments that strengthen the welfare State and respond to the “excesses” of liberalism. In the case of Spain, however, various authors have often highlighted the weakness of the individualistic component of a political culture that was too closely pervaded by Catholicism in the past and until the present day has given rise to several forms of collectivism (from scholastic thought to Marxism and different varieties of nationalisms). Even in the early stages of modern constitutionalism at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the predominant discourses revolved around the nation and the common good (*bien común*) rather than around individual rights. At a later date, during the long Franco dictatorship, the national-Catholic rhetoric of “the common good” and the rejection of liberalism and capitalism were always

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<sup>6</sup> *El País*, July 25, 2004.

present in political discourse. Therefore, if Spain, for historical reasons, lacks the individualistic basis of classical liberalism, it is easy to forecast that the land is well-prepared for sowing the republican discourse of civic virtue. Don't you think that an eventual reception of "republican" ideology in the modern world should mold itself according to each country's political culture? For instance, doesn't it seem to you that one type of discourse expected to obtain possibly optimum results in the Anglo-Saxon world might have less beneficial consequences in other contexts?

QS—Let me first say that, although it is true that I have been invited to speak in Spain only late in my career, I feel greatly honored and delighted that I have been invited at all. I have been received with the utmost graciousness, and my work has been very seriously and learnedly discussed. Besides, I do not speak Spanish, which is a source of great shame to me. (While I have been here I have been reduced to speaking Italian in museums and restaurants and hoping to be partly understood.) This in itself is surely enough to justify my not being invited to Spain. It is an astonishing privilege to be allowed to come to the land of Cervantes and speak to you in my own language. This is a privilege that Anglophones most of all need to acknowledge with grateful thanks.

I am fascinated by what you tell me about President Zapatero's willingness to embrace republican arguments and make them part of his new policies for the country. But I agree with you, of course, that one needs to be very careful about transplanting ideas that were designed to cope with the problems of one country in the hope that they will flourish equally well in very different soil.

I do not know enough about current Spanish politics to comment further on your anxieties. But there are surely some grounds for optimism. It seems to me that one crucial way to limit the capacity of contemporary states to oppress the people is to place more power in the hands of the people themselves. The most obvious way of doing this is to devolve some of the centralized powers of the state to more local levels. In my country, this policy will I think prove to have been one of the benign legacies of our present government, and it seems to be a policy to which President Zapatero is likewise committed.

A further policy to which any republican is committed, as I have already stressed, is that all citizens should be treated equally under the law, and

that there should be laws to ensure such equal treatment. In my country we still have some considerable way to go in ensuring this basic form of equality. It remains a scandal, for example, that women are so much less well-treated in the workplace than men. In most professions, men in Great Britain continue to hold an overwhelming preponderance of power, and in many professions there is not even equal pay for men and women who are doing the same job. Here too it appears that President Zapatero is taking what I would like to describe as a benignly republican stance, beginning with the equality of men and women in his cabinet—in stark contrast with the position in my own country. However, it is always absurd as well as offensive when foreigners start to pontificate about the countries they are visiting on the strength of a few days' acquaintance, so I had better not try to say anything more.